

**DECODING
AFRO-CUBAN JAZZ:
THE MUSIC OF
CHUCHO VALDÉS
& IRAKERE**

**BY
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&
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ABOUT THIS BOOK

“Music is a more potent instrument than any other for education, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul.” – Plato

“I’m hoping that the true creative spirit and artistry of Cuban musicians will be recognized globally.”

– Herbie Hancock

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• **WHAT IS THIS BOOK, WHO IS IT FOR, AND HOW DO I USE IT?**

In the summer of 2014, Chucho Valdés and the newly-minted rendition of his Afro-Cuban Messengers performed an unforgettable four-night run of concerts in San Francisco, including a remarkable afternoon master class on the history and evolution of Cuban music. The long-awaited appearance was a clear example of the Bay Area’s continuing advocacy for Cuba’s top musicians, and was particularly memorable given the fact that Chucho’s sidemen were all nearly half his age, having learned and benefitted from the Maestro’s place in the Afro-Cuban musical canon. We were witnessing the torch not just being passed, but being carried together by two generations: the elder, one of the music’s chief architects, and the younger, a band of extraordinarily talented and capable ambassadors, all of whom were “nurtured” and raised on the music of Irakere, one of Cuba’s most influential ensembles in the post-revolutionary era. Each night was the epitome of musical joy for those of us diehard fans, enthusiasts, aficionados and practitioners, with a level of artistry and technical brilliance that seldom achieves such heights.

During one of those summer days in San Francisco, Chucho and I proceeded to gather the members of his band in the dressing room on the morning before the master class, and agreed that somehow we would trace several hundred years of Cuba’s musical evolution in a fluid way, combining demonstration and conversation, and open things up to audience Q&A at the end. The first time we attempted anything like this together was in 1993 in Havana at the National Art School (La Escuela Nacional de Arte, or “ENA”). Fast-forwarding to 2012, we invited Maestro Valdés to present a similar master class for an advanced group of high school jazz musicians, this time focusing on the repertoire of Irakere and the band’s use of traditional Cuban musical forms, culminating in a jam session between Chucho and some very lucky young players.¹

More recently, 2015 would mark a turning point in Chucho’s trajectory as he set out to honor the legacy of the band he launched forty years before, Irakere. It was, in fact, a request from his Afro-Cuban Messengers band members, who suggested creating a tribute to the band whose repertoire had shaped and inspired them during their years of study at Cuba’s art schools and conservatories. What began as a tribute concert would eventually lead to a successful international tour (including another marvelous stint at the SFJAZZ Center in October), and yet another GRAMMY-winning recording for Maestro Valdés.² It was this momentum that led to the idea for this book. In Chucho’s mind, it was clear that the body of work he had developed decades before was not only relevant to the younger aspiring

¹ The students in question were members of the SFJAZZ High School All-Stars, which is a high-level training program for advanced jazz musicians from the San Francisco Bay Area.

² Valdés won a GRAMMY Award for his 2015 recording *Tribute to Irakere: Live in Marciac* (Comanche Music). To date Chucho has received 6 GRAMMYs and 3 Latin GRAMMYs.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

includes her role as Director of Education at SFJAZZ (San Francisco Jazz Organization), as professor at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, City College of San Francisco, and visiting professor at Mills College, in addition to serving as a clinician specializing in Afro-Caribbean and Latin jazz music. She is a fierce advocate for arts education equity and access, and continues to draw inspiration from those committed to making the world a better place through music.

Rebeca would like to thank the many artists, educators, researchers, scholars, colleagues and musicologists whose tireless efforts in documenting this all-important history have contributed to this book. To my teachers, including Lázaro Ros, Guillermo Barreto, Amelia Pedroso, Juan Formell, Librada Quesada, Emiliano Salvador, Gregorio “Goyo” Hernández, Enrique Plá, Merceditas Valdés, Tito Puente, Israel “Cachao” López, Bebo Valdés, Pauline Oliveros, Anthony Braxton, Jesús Blanco, Tomás Jimeno Diaz, Regino Jiménez, Zenaida Armenteros, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Changuito, Carlos del Puerto, Miguel “Angá” Díaz, Teresa Polledo, Juan de Dios Ramos Morejón, David Bernstein, Maggie Payne, Chris Brown, Madeline Mueller, Mark Levine, Carlos Federico, Ellen Hoffman, Alvin Curran, and many, many others, for guidance and motivation along the way. To my family, for unconditional support, love and encouragement. To my proofreader Rusty Aceves, and colleague Michael Spiro, for literary and musical fact-checking. To the Lick-Wilmerding High School computing students, for indexing software. To Lindsey Frank, for legal and professional expertise. To Rick Swig, for his lovely photos. And finally, to Maestro Chucho Valdés, my deepest gratitude for countless years of inspiration, and for his trust in allowing me to collaborate in the publication of this book.

Dedication

We dedicate this book to all of those whose music has in some way shaped, transformed, inspired and contributed to the landscape of Afro-Cuban jazz. With gratitude to the ancestors, pioneers and innovators from continents near and far, and to those who continue this journey with us.

...

“La música es el alma de los pueblos. (Music is the soul of the people).” – José Martí

“What really swings is the music of the United States, Cuba, the Caribbean...and, of course, Brazil. The rest is all waltzes.” – Antonio Carlos Jobim

...

There is something about the music of Cuba that seems to penetrate the soul. Certainly not every person, musician or not, has the same reaction, of course. An assumption can be made that you, the reader, are motivated by your admiration for our principal protagonist in this endeavor (Chucho Valdés), and that your interest in the subject matter is already informed by a deep respect for and awareness of Cuban music. Or, you may be a musician or educator seeking to broaden your knowledge of the musicological aspects pertaining to this music, or Afro-Cuban jazz in particular, and your motivation might have more to do with the application of this material to your own creative process. Whatever the reason may be, we welcome you into this exciting world, and hope you will find the information contained herein useful.

As with many projects of this nature, it is important to acknowledge that there is much more information available than could possibly be synthesized down to just one method book or musicological guide. Any attempt here to simplify or encapsulate the extraordinary history, evolution, and diversity of Cuba’s music would be ludicrous; instead, we will offer a glimpse at some of its most poignant and essential aspects, with a goal to frame the contributions of such an influential artist as Valdés and his groundbreaking ensemble, Irakere. Of course, it is also significant to understand how Cuban music relates to that of other cultures, and how it has both shaped, and been shaped by, its neighbors near and far. What follows is a brief synopsis of Cuba’s musical legacy, highlighting both cultural as well as historical events, and an endeavor to contextualize the music represented in this book so it can not only be understood, but widely disseminated.

- **WHY “AFRO-CUBAN JAZZ”?**

Cuba’s music is largely a mixture of African and Spanish origins, with traces of indigenous elements, (namely percussion instruments). So why, then, is the term “Afro-Cuban” used to describe a music that is already inherently mixed? Simply put, the semantics have more to do with an anthropological “acknowledgement” of sorts, highlighting the inordinate amount of African influence that has clearly permeated virtually all music on the island. While vehemently rejected by some musicologists and historians even up through the early 20th century, afrocentricity in Cuban culture is undeniable, having penetrated all aspects of the arts, including music, dance, and vernacular theater.¹ The imprint of the Diaspora is manifested in all aspects of life in Cuba, no matter the outcome or outlet, and no matter the racial makeup of the Cuban person in question. As a multiethnic society, Cuba experienced a musical evolution resulting from the contributions of all races and classes of people, and over time, each genre or stylistic tradition eventually became accessible to all, regardless of their race or class, although that process has certainly been long and complicated. This said, it is clear that while the term “Latin jazz” may be more commonly used, it doesn’t really describe the **lineage** that is represented in

¹ Ortiz, Fernando. *La Africanía de la Música Folklórica de Cuba*, and *La Música Afrocubana*; and The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, “Iberian Roots of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1640.”

And here is a classic melody composed by Arsenio Rodríguez and covered by just about everyone, including Irakere, that contains a *cinquillo*-like phrase emphasizing the 3-side of the *clave* in the second bar (fig. 2.11):

2.11 - Chorus from 'Dile a Catalina' by Arsenio Rodríguez (as played by Irakere)

Clave 2-3

Di - le a Ca - ta - li - na que se com - pre un gua - yo que la yu - ca se me es - tá pa - san - do.

One of the most important concepts in playing Afro-Cuban music has to do with the notion of a **common pulse**, regardless of the meter or style being played. Whether playing in 4/4 or 6/8, it is vital to lock into the pulse of a given rhythm, and in Cuban music, the pulse is felt on beats 1 and 3. It is vital to feel the *clave* against this half-note pulse when playing, as well as to **maintain a sense of the pulse regardless of your particular instrument or part** (fig. 2.12):

2.12 - Clave + Pulse

Son Clave 3-2

Son Clave 2-3

Rumba Clave 3-2

Rumba Clave 2-3

6/8 Clave (forward)

6/8 Clave (reverse)

Whether or not a musical phrase begins “three-two” or “two-three,” it is expected that the *clave’s* direction will remain **fixed** within a song, and that the only way to change *clave* direction is to play a musical phrase consisting of an odd number of measures, thereby “turning the *clave* around” so that the next phrase begins on the other side (fig. 2.13):

5.2 - Bariba Ogé De Ma for Babalú Ayé (Clave 3-2)

This toque follows an AAB, 12-bar form (1st X only)

5.3 - Chachálokpañ for multiple Orishas (clave 3-2)

5.4 - Iyesá for multiple Orishas (Clave 3-2)