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FOR DECADES, IT HAS BEEN A

commonly held opinion that Chucho Valdés is one of the greatest jazz pianists out of Cuba. In the musical world at large, he's revered as a versatile virtuoso and as a founding conceptualist behind the iconic Cuban band Irakere, launched in the early '70s. Apparently, the veteran band-leader didn't get the memo about slowing down during his "golden years." Valdés, 71, is doing anything but resting on laurels or taking an easy route: His formidable creative imprint on the 2013 jazz scene, one of the more intriguing musical stories of the season, represents yet another new high in a varied and artistic life.

It has, in fact, been a year of highs and lows in Valdés' life, with the release of one of his finest albums yet, the aptly named *Border-Free* (Jazz Village), with a striking version of his band the Afro-Cuban Messengers, but also the passing of his legendary Cuban musician father, Bebo, who died of complications of Alzheimer's disease on March 22 at age 94. *Border-Free* is the latest of Chucho's acclaimed albums since leaving Irakere in 2005, including the duet with his father, *Juntos Para Siempre* (Calle 54) in 2008, and 2010's *Chucho's Steps* (Four Quarters), both of which won Grammy awards. *Border-Free* ups the ante of artistic breadth, featuring songs written in tribute to his father, mother Pilar Valdés and grandmother, while also exploring multiple global byways.

A summer tour, leaving a wake of critical acclaim and happy audiences, took Valdés and his percussion-enriched Afro-Cuban Messengers through the Canadian and European jazz festivals, and select stops in the United States, culminating in a show at the Hollywood Bowl on Aug. 14. Before 12,500 listeners on a balmy night, Valdés' mighty band delivered the unique, idiom-stitching message put forth on *Border-Free*, which blends strong Afro-Cuban traditions with jazz, flamenco, Gnawa music, Yoruban rituals and swatches of the classical music that Valdés studied as a child prodigy in pre-Castro Cuba.

Converging forces of family, cultural history and his own new momentum in his musical life coalesced during his 45-minute Bowl set, opening for Natalie Cole, who was promoting her new Spanish-language disc, *En Español* (Verve). There was a strong personal link to the booking: When she invited the pianist to sit in with her massive ensemble on the tune "Quizás, Quizás, Quizás," Cole mentioned to the audience that her father, Nat King Cole, and Valdés' father had worked together in Cuba in the late '50s, and

DownBeat: That was a powerful show at the Hollywood Bowl, and there was an intriguing moment when you sat in with Natalie Cole. What was the connection your fathers had in Cuba?

Chucho Valdés: It was beautiful. Nat King Cole recorded in Cuba in 1958, but he had come a previous time [in 1956]. When he first came, my father was the pianist at the Tropicana and they made a very strong connection. My father was also a big jazz artist. [Cole] had a big influence on him, and so did Art Tatum and Bud Powell, and he would accompany Nat King Cole on his shows.

When he came in '58, my father had left the Tropicana [where Bebo was long the musical director]. One of the requirements Nat King Cole had was that Bebo would be his pianist. And then my father wrote four arrangements for him. I was in the recording sessions, at 16 years old. I was already playing piano and had been for a long time. For me, it was unforgettable.

After more than 50 years, this situation came that his daughter was going to sing and that I could accompany her on one of the songs—this was unbelievable. I was in heaven.

DB: Was Nat King Cole's piano playing influential for you?

CV: I think it was to everybody. For me, for Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson and to my father, he was huge. He was a fantastic pianist.

DB: Do you appreciate a situation like the one at the Hollywood Bowl, where you are bringing sophisticated jazz to a large audience, which might not be familiar with jazz, per se, or Afro-Cuban music?

CV: I think, for us, it was a challenge, because it wasn't a specific jazz festival, for an audience accustomed to hearing that type of music. But we viewed it as our job and I think that they liked it a lot. We were lucky.

DB: Your new album, *Border-Free*, is very ambitious in that it is personal and family-related, but it also reaches out into the world. Did you start this project with such an ambitious concept, or did it expand as you got more involved in making the album?

CV: This concept really started with Irakere. With Irakere, I was working with a lot of elements and I fused them. This is a second phase, and it is in a deeper and different sense, maybe more mature because of my age and my experiences. There is a mix of emotions.

I have been very sensitive, because a year before my father died, my

CHUCHO

were mutual fans.

Two days after his Hollywood Bowl triumph, an affable and open Valdés—a tall, commanding yet friendly presence—sat down for an expansive interview in the comfy, pool table-equipped "Library" bar in Hollywood's Redbury Hotel. He spoke through a translator, Humberto Capiro, but managed to convey much non-verbally, as well. Extra-linguistic communication is a specialty of his, needless to say.

Coincidentally, the iconic Capitol Records building was just across the street, with Nat King Cole's face beaming down from the vast mural on an outer wall, and Cuban music royalty Celia Cruz's star on Hollywood Boulevard just a block away. Fateful connections and converging lines are part of Valdés' story, a continuing saga moving healthily into its eighth decade.

mother passed away. This created a very sensitive state. When my father started becoming ill, it became even more sensitive. When I wrote that song for my father, "Bebo," he was still alive and I had no idea he was going to pass away. But I wanted to honor him and my mother, because they were the ones who formed me, musically, and also my character and my person. And there was my grandmother, who was a queen, who formed my father.

I started to develop my ideas and went beyond what I had done before. There is a very strong Cuban rhythm called the conga. But a previous rhythm was called the contradanza. So I took elements of the contradanza and elements of the conga, and I united them. It was a very symbiotic link, which became the "congadanza." It's incredible how well they work together, and rhythmically, how they fuse together.



WALDES

CHIEF MESSENGER

BY JOSEF WOODARD

Photography by Paul Wellman

at Redbury Hotel, Los Angeles

CHUCHO VALDÉS CHIEF MESSENGER

Also, I took elements of the North Africans, of the Moroccans, the Gnawa, and Spanish flamenco, which has the origins of those rhythms. I made a tribute to a certain percussionist from Morocco, Abdel. That's why there's a song called "Abdel." I called on Branford Marsalis to help me with the Arabic scales on the soprano [saxophone]. Then I did a flamenco theme, called "Santa Cruz," to say that this was born from Arabic influence. There is a relationship there.

For the "Afro-Comanche" piece, we were going to use two Comanches, who played flute and a percussion instrument. Because of the problems of time and distance, it couldn't happen. So I took the elements and indigenous melodies. The story is that toward the end of the 19th century, they sent about 700 Comanches to Cuba. They lived in the eastern part of Cuba. They knew the Africans and the Afro-Cubans, and in time, they had children together. Some of the Carnival parties were the same as what happened in New Orleans, with the American Indians. The Africans would dress like the Indians in the Carnivals, and they would dance together.

I took a mix of the roots of Afro-Cubans. I haven't, musically, found proof of that, so I created a piece called "Afro-Comanche." It's one of the songs that they liked the most in the concert.



DB You tell a lot of stories on this album. There is a narrative layer to the project, weaving through the music. Was that something that you consciously wanted to pursue?

CV At the end of one part of my life, this album is a case where I am doing something to start a new one. It's like a frontier, to go into another one.

There are also classical elements in it. For example, "Caridad Amaro" is for my grandmother. When I studied piano, my grandmother would always ask me to play the second movement of Rachmaninov's concerto. As a tribute to her, at the end of the song, I play a little bit of the second movement.

As for my mom, when I would study Bach, she would ask me to play the prelude, many times. She said, "Chucho, give me the prelude." She also loved

Miles Davis and her favorite was "Blue In Green." Mom was also a singer and she would accompany herself on piano. She understood jazz very well. She loved Miles. She said he was a poet. So I included the prelude and a piece of the Miles tune on the song "Pilar." It's a very personal thing.

To my father, I dedicated the song "Bebo," which I wrote in his style. My father heard that piece, in December 2012. He died in March of 2013. He heard it many times; he loved the song.

DB Can you describe how your father influenced you and helped you form your musical voice?

CV I was a very privileged child—privileged in the sense that my father was a great musician. I started to play the piano at 3 years old, according to my father. When I was 7, we would hear Art Tatum. He would bring me to the Tropicana, where he worked, and there, I saw many people, including American big bands. I saw Woody Herman, Glenn Miller, Ray Brown, Buddy Rich, Nat King Cole, Roy Haynes . . .

I loved jazz as a kid. This was a big impression on me. My dad would say, "Now we're going to hear Nat King Cole, now we're going to hear Sarah Vaughan . . . Learn how to play the blues, learn how to play some of their rhythms." I had that kind of school at home. I couldn't have had it any closer. And then he sent me to play classical music, so I had classical music training, and, of course, the Afro-Cuban music. That's why, when I write, all these things come out.

DB With Irakere, which you started in the early '70s, you were talking about how you would bring together many musical pieces in that group. This was a trailblazing Cuban band at the time. Were you trying to fill a void with that group, in a way?

CV We weren't trying to fill anything. We were trying to build something we felt. I didn't have a lot of support, because people didn't understand what I was trying to create. They would say, "How can you have jazz with batá drums? Why are you saying Yoruba chants? This is not jazz." This is Afro-Cuban jazz. I didn't have much support at that time.

There was a man who helped me a lot. I composed something called "Black Mass," before Irakere. It had similar elements, with a quartet. In 1970, I had the opportunity to play at the Jazz Jamboree in Poland. They would tell me, "Don't play that music in Poland. This is craziness." But I wanted to stick with the idea.

I presented that piece in the Jazz Jamboree and I was given the chance before Dave Brubeck. When I finished my piece and it was his turn, I stayed behind so I could hear him play. He's one of the pianists I admire the most, because of the influence of the French Impressionists. When he finished, they came to my dressing room and asked for me. He wanted to talk to me, and also with the musicians. He said, "This was very good. You were doing something very different. This is the new road within the Latin jazz world."

I cried with a lot of emotion because he told me, "Don't ever stop." And I'm never going to stop. I give thanks to him, because I knew who he was and what musical power he had. After he gave me

that opinion, I didn't care what anybody else said.

DB Now that you have been out of Irakere for eight years, how do you look back on it? Do you feel that you are in a new, post-Irakere chapter in your musical journey now?

CV I felt the necessity to play the piano. With Irakere, which was a band that I loved, you lost the piano. The work was spread out between all the instruments, and the piano was at a disadvantage. In Irakere, I worked a lot with composing and directing and I forgot a little bit about the piano. I talked to a friend in 1979, Joe Zawinul, and he said, "The orchestra is great, but you also should have a trio or a quartet so you can play more of the piano."

DB Zawinul was another musician, like yourself, with wide open ears and who pulled ideas from around the world, and so naturally.

CV For me, he was a genius.

DB On your album *Chucho's Steps*, you pay a nod of respect to the Marsalis clan, with "New Orleans (A Tribute To The Marsalis Family)."

CV They are also important to me. I met the father [Ellis] first. I love the way he plays piano. Then I was introduced to his sons, who are wonderful.

DB Obviously, there is a connection with the idea of musical family, extending into next generations. Your son, Chuchito, is a pianist, for instance.

CV Yes, and there is another one on the way. He is 6 years old. His name is Julian. He has already started to play a little bit.

DB How much did the Cuban music scene change in the early '60s, when the political barrier took effect in society? Was there a dramatic shift at that point, for musicians and fans?

CV It was very difficult to connect with jazz, until we discovered something—the "Voice of America Jazz Hour" show. The DJ was Willis Conover. The program was heard at 3:15 in the afternoon and it would repeat at 8:15 in the evening. It was through that program, in 1963, that I first heard the John Coltrane Quartet. After a gap of three years, I thought it was musical science fiction. When I heard McCoy Tyner for the first time, my hair stood up.

I had a little tape recorder and I would record all the programs. [The recorder] had some static, and it was sometimes a disaster. But we started to hear things. We heard Coltrane, Miles Davis with Herbie Hancock . . . Wow.

In Cuba, a Canadian attaché brought a collection of everything that was happening in jazz. We met. On Sundays, we would go to his house to listen. When he finished his diplomatic work in Cuba, he gave us his whole collection. That was it [claps his hands]. Through that, we had more contact with what was happening in the U.S.

DB Was that the way you learned jazz, through "Voice of America" and from records?

CV Yes. It is because of "Voice of America" and his records, and also, the sailors would bring in things they had bought abroad. But it was very difficult.

DB At that time, was there any jazz education in Cuba?

CV No, no.

DB You mentioned John Coltrane's game-changing quartet in the '60s. Back then, were you open to avant-garde sounds?

CV In the beginning, I didn't understand it. It was a very strong shift, but as we got to hear it more, we started acclimating to it. I wanted to play like McCoy, but at first I didn't understand it. But it fascinated us. And there was Bill Evans. His *Live At The Village Vanguard* is my favorite album. It's the first one I heard. It left me with my hands up.

DB At that time, were you focused primarily on jazz, putting other styles of music to the side?

CV No, I was doing two things. Cuban music was our music. I just didn't have jazz, and we would be interested in things that we didn't have.

DB There has always been such a natural connection between Afro-Cuban music and jazz. They belong together, wouldn't you say?

CV Yes. They are like family.

DB And your father helped to make that connection stronger.

CV Yes. I will tell you who my father's idols were: Art Tatum, Monk, Bud Powell, Hank Jones—who was very special to my dad—Billy Taylor, and Ellington. For me, I liked other pianists who a lot of people didn't listen to. I liked Lennie Tristano, who hasn't been given his due. He was on a road that was very unique. In 1946, I heard Brubeck. Oh, my God. And I also liked George Shearing. He played more Latin stuff. And Cal Tjader.

DB What about Keith Jarrett? Are you a fan?

CV Yes. From the time I heard McCoy, in that moment, my main idols were McCoy and Bill Evans, two different roads. For me, they were the ones who changed the concept. I heard Herbie Hancock, who's fantastic, and Chick Corea, and Keith Jarrett. I first heard him with Charles Lloyd, on the album *Forest Flower*. At that time, he was more avant-garde. I liked that.

There is another pianist who is a phenomenon: Cecil Taylor. He's a real monster.

DB And he is from the abstract perspective.

CV Totally abstract. It's like he is up in space.

DB But you like him?

CV Yes, just as I liked Lennie Tristano, because he is also more abstract.

DB Tell me about your band, the Afro-Cuban Messengers, and how you view it.

CV It's a formation which is atypical. I have several percussion instruments—drums [Rodney Yllarza Barreto], congas [Yaroldy Abreu Robles], and a guy who plays three batá drums [Dreiser Durruthy Bombalé] who can also sing in the African language. There is the bass and the piano, the only polyphonic instrument. It's interesting to me to mix polyrhythms, like with the drums, with the jazz drums mixed with the

COMBINED AFRO-CUBAN ENERGIES

As much as Chucho Valdés is certainly the central, conceptual and otherwise driving creative force in his current band, the flexible dynamic in the Afro-Cuban Messengers plays a vital role in the overall success of this complex musical venture.

"Chucho is the figurehead of the group," drummer Rodney Yllarza Barreto said. "And he always will be, but he gives us a lot of liberty to show him what we have inside. At the same time, he shares what he has in his head. It's a series of combined energies. It's all very positive."

While in Hollywood recently, the afternoon after playing the Hollywood Bowl, the four band members making up the present incarnation of the Messengers spoke in roundtable fashion (in Spanish, alongside translator Humberto Capiro). In this group, the musicians recognize that there is something unique afoot in the project, beyond purely musical objectives.

"Our name is Afro-Cuban Messengers," commented batá player and vocalist Dreiser Durruthy Bombalé, "and we always bring two messages—musically and spiritually. We always try to make sure the public is satisfied with what they hear and what they feel."

Bassist Ángel Gastón Joya Perellada added, "This is the type of world we believe there should be: one without borders. We don't think about starting a project or just writing a song. We're trying to integrate ourselves with the world, with the music."

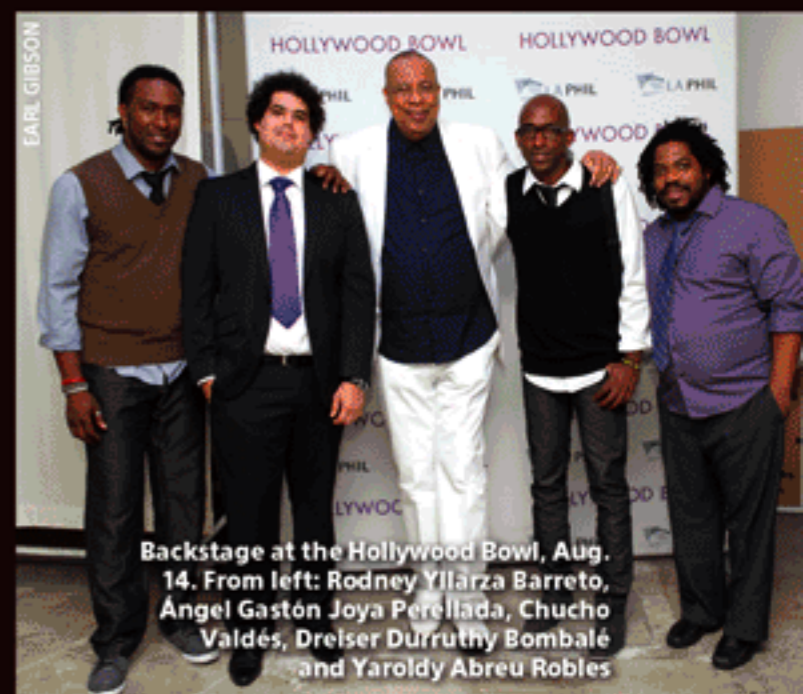
"Our music has evolved," says Barreto. "It's not just the influences of Cuban music and it's not just the traditional Afro-Cuban roots. It's also the influence of American music—jazz, funk and other genres—so when you mix all of those things, it's a lot of information. If you don't know how to organize it, it's too much for the public to understand. So it is a challenge. At the same time, how do you use all of those elements without bothering the music? This is our challenge. We've been able to do that."

The players hail from various places and musical backgrounds: Bombalé, from Guantánamo, started in classical dance before settling on music, playing the batá drums and singing; Perellada and Barreto are from the Guanabacoa township in Havana, known for its Santería spiritual practices; and percussionist Yaroldy Abreu Robles is from a small town in the east, Sagua de Tánamo. Together, they create a collective voice. As Barreto explains, "I have played with Yaroldy in other projects for almost 10 years. With Dreiser, we have just played a couple of times. Gaston and I studied together. We played together since we were little. In the end, it's just the good energy we all have together. It makes a big difference."

And, of course, the commanding epicenter is the iconic bandleader, whose eminence is not lost on the musicians. Robles comments, "In what we know as Cuban music, Chucho has been an influence not just for us, but for the world. It's not just him, but through his father, as a pianist, composer and arranger. From the beginning, the work that got the world's attention was Irakere. And it is not only in jazz. With Irakere, he was the creator of current popular music, which is timba. You hear Irakere in the '70s and you realize that, in actuality, it is the essence of what became timba. With Chucho, everybody focuses on such a huge talent."

"Chucho is the heart of Cuban music," says Barreto. Reflecting on the band's tradition-meets-progressivism approach, he adds, "We're moving forward, but respecting everything that is behind us."

—Josef Woodard



Backstage at the Hollywood Bowl, Aug. 14. From left: Rodney Yllarza Barreto, Ángel Gastón Joya Perellada, Chucho Valdés, Dreiser Durruthy Bombalé and Yaroldy Abreu Robles



Chucho Valdés and the Afro-Cuban Messengers

CHUCHO VALDÉS CHIEF MESSENGER

Afro-Cuban drums, and the polyrhythms of the batá. I also use the piano as a percussion instrument. It is a melodic and percussion instrument. There is a whole world of really interesting things going on there.

The bass player [Ángel Gastón Joya Perellada] is 26 years old and he's one of the best Cuban bassists around. This kid is going to play double bass in the symphony, but he can play whatever style is needed, from ragtime to free-jazz. He knows all these phases and rhythms. He's very creative and is a composer and arranger, as well.

[Dreiser Durruthy Bombalé] is a classical ballet dancer, and he can dance the Afro-Cuban

dances, and can also write music. The conga player can also write music, and the drummer is another composer. There is a lot of creativity in this group. Even if we play the same songs every day, every day, it's different. They inspire me a lot.

DB Regarding the band name, the Messengers, I assume there is a connection to Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, correct?

CV Yes, 100 percent. When I was very young, I had a passion for the Jazz Messengers and Art Blakey. That was very important to me. The young talents all passed through Art Blakey's group. It was like a school. I am not trying to imitate that,

but after Irakere, I realized all the generations that ... have passed through my hands. Now, these are the most talented musicians in Cuba and they want to work with me again [laughs]. And I want to work with them. That helps me a lot. That's why I wanted to call this group the Afro-Cuban Messengers.

DB Do you have a message that you're trying to convey with this group? You titled the album *Border-Free*. Are you thinking about the grand idea of music as universal language?

CV I had a professor who would say, "Music is a language. It's the language of sound. But there is also spoken language. But the music has its own rules." She would tell me, "If music is the language of sound, the most important part is the sound. If music has the same rules as spoken language, then the most important part is the diction." How do you say it? You can say it right or wrong. If it is sound, you should say it right, because it still goes through the ears.

There is the speed and the technical part, but it has to be spoken well and have a beautiful sound.

DB Cuba is one of those hot spots in the world where cultures come together, like New Orleans and Brazil. Do you feel that Cuba has a special quality for bringing together cultures?

CV Before Afro-Cuban jazz, before Chano Pozo and Mario Bauzá, there was another phase between Cuban music and American music. Jelly Roll Morton felt like there was a "Latin tinge." There was a French community in New Orleans, but in Cuba, there were a lot of Haitians who came with their French roots, because Haiti was a French colony. In 1804, a lot of Haitians came to Cuba, and came with the cinquillo and the French contradanza. Cinquillo, they left in Cuba, and the contradanza led to the *son*.

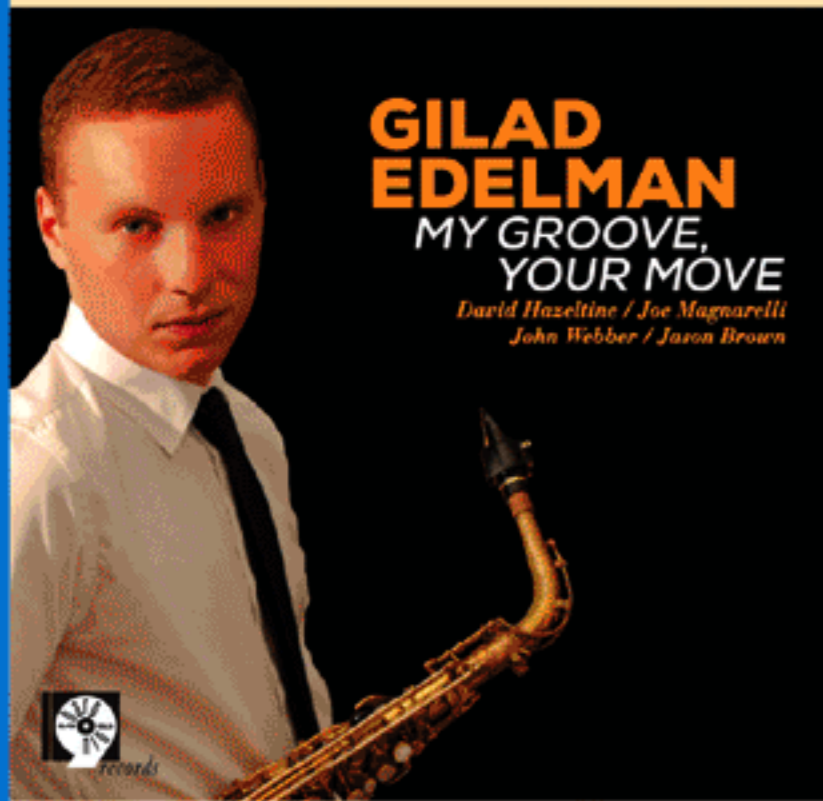
There is a big French influence in Cuba, and African influence. In New Orleans, there is also a French community that had the same roots of the contradanza, mixing with the slaves from the same tribe as in Haiti. We have this thing in Cuba called the habanera. It is in the contradanza. In New Orleans, there was another thing called ragtime. When you hear habanera and ragtime, you feel there is something that is very similar. The ragtime and habanera are family.

There is a Cuban trumpeter named Manuel Perez, who went to live in New Orleans, and he worked with all of them. He returned to Cuba with musicians from New Orleans, to Santiago, and mixed with Cuban musicians. They formed the first ragtime orchestra. So you can see the relationship goes way back. Then in the '40s, Dizzy and Mario Bauzá connected. The story between the two is very beautiful.

DB Buena Vista Social Club had such a huge, global impact. Did the sensation actually help Cuban jazz get out into the world? Did its success open the door for greater appreciation for what you do, for instance?

CV The Buena Vista phenomenon was a big help for us. It helped people to focus, both inside and outside of Cuba. It was a boom of Cuban music. It wasn't the current music of Cuba, but it was the

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most important interpreters of their time, and they maintained a high quality. That type of Cuban music has always been popular. It is dance music, but it is more difficult to comprehend, because it's more complex to dance to. Also, rhythmically, it's more complex.

That type of Cuban music, the *son*, came back to take its place. I always felt a big admiration for that. I was very lucky that I knew most of them when I was a child. [Pianist] Rubén González would also come to my house and talk to my dad. I have to give thanks to Buena Vista.

DB Do you find that the music you're making is being accepted more around the world in the last few years?

CV I think so. I notice this in the concerts, and in the public's reaction. The public is more understanding of what we're doing, and this is a good thing.

DB Has it been more than 50 years now that you have been professionally involved in music?

CV Yes, it's amazing. The first time I played piano in public was at 9 years old. I played Mozart and Beethoven, and [the] music of my teacher. I had my first contract to play at the Tropicana at 10 years old, where my father used to work. They contracted me to work with a child prodigy from the U.S., from Chicago, with the last name Robinson.

He was a child playing boogie-woogie. This is about 1951. He was really good at playing boogie, and he was a showman. He had everybody excited about him in Havana and was playing the Tropicana. Everybody was praising him. My father said, "Put your suit on so we can go to the Tropicana, and you can meet someone who is playing there." So he took me to the dressing room. They call this kid Robinson and they introduced us. We talked. We never really understood each other, because I didn't speak English.

Then Robinson played, very well. The orchestra was all there. Dad said, "OK, Chucho, why don't you play us the second sonata of Mozart?" I didn't understand what he wanted. I just played it. I wanted to play what Robinson was playing. Then he asked me to play a Cuban *danzón*, and I didn't understand why. Then he said, "Play a boogie-woogie." This fat man came out and said, "That's what I want. The next week, it's going to be the two kids."

That night, I came home at 4 in the morning. When I came in, my mom was sitting with her arms crossed, pointing at her watch. My father said, "He's contracted at the Tropicana, in a duo." And then Mom said, "At 7 o'clock, he has school. He's going to sleep now. And there is no show at the Tropicana because when kids start playing places like that, they never learn. They start paying them, and they don't want to go to school, so it's not going to happen."

DB Did your dad win out?

CV No, my mom won. Dad was just happy. He just wanted to show me off.

DB After these 60 years in music, do you still feel that burning passion, a sense of energy and curiosity about music and where you can take it? It seems that way, that you keep moving forward.

CV It's because there is always something to do. When I was 17 years old, I was a pianist for the theater. I had to learn how to play as a real pianist, reading sheet music. There were two theater shows on Sunday. One stopped at 6 and the other one started at 9. But on Sundays, they had jazz sessions, and me and the drummer from the orchestra would run over to the jam sessions. We would return, without eating, at 9 o'clock.

The old guys in the orchestra said, "You can do that because you're young. But when you are our age, you won't be able to do that." That scared me, because could you lose the love for music, lose the desire just because you're old? But now I'm lucky. I'm going to be 72 years old and I have more passion to play than when I was 19, and more passion to learn, to see and to feel more. So I lost that fear.

For the real artist, age doesn't have anything to do with it. You never reach an end to learning.

DB Especially in jazz.

CV Especially in jazz, since it's always evolving. After *Border-Free*, I realize that I'm becoming an adolescent again [laughs].

DB You're forever young?

CV Yes. Because of the music.

DB

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