

### Episode 3. Bebo Valdes: The Flavor of Cuban Jazz

On the public health front, we have been told recently to expect tough news over the next two weeks. I remember thinking when I heard this that if it's only two weeks of tough news, I'll be pleasantly surprised. In any case, the warning prompted me to send everyone a link to the most joyful and uplifting recording I can think of, *El Arte del Sabor* (The Art of Flavor). The CD was given to me about ten years ago by my friend, Alan, and I can confidently state that it's the CD I've listened to more often than any other jazz recording I've owned (a number exceeding 3,500). I've made copies of this CD for a few friends, family members, and for people recovering from illnesses. I'm convinced its effects are salubrious, among its other benefits.

Before you rush to buy a copy, *caveat emptor*:: Recorded by Blue Note Records in 2000, it has long (and unjustifiably) been out of print. The price for a new copy on Amazon is \$975; but having checked Amazon just yesterday, the good news is there are 4 used copies you can snag "cheap" — at \$150 each,

In this episode of One Track Mind, I will try to give you an idea of what makes this album so uniquely captivating, and then I will provide a (free and legal) youtube link to all the tracks on this gem of an album.

But first, the musicians: The trio is led by Bebo Valdes, a Cuban pianist, arranger and composer who had an established career as a journeyman musician in Havana when he fled Castro's Cuba in 1962.. (He is also the father of the prominent jazz pianist, Chucho Valdes.) On a tour of Sweden, Valdes fell in love with an 18 year old in Stockholm, remarried, and settled there. He played exclusively in Sweden for three decades. In 1994, saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera, another Cuban ex-pat 30 years his junior, coaxed him out of retirement.

When he recorded *El Arte Del Sabor* in 2000, Valdes was 82, the bassist, Israel "Cachao" Lopez, a childhood friend, was also in his 80s; the *conguero*, Carlos "Patato" Valdes (not related to Bebo) was in his late-70s. All of them had left Cuba because the government disapproved of their jazz influenced music. The connection between these men was deep, personally and musically. D'Rivera, who appears on only 3 tracks of the album, has impressive jazz credentials and also grew up in Havana. Classically trained, he played in the Cuban National Symphony beginning at age 17.

What makes this album so special? The first inviting characteristic is the "groove," a term in jazz criticism that roughly speaking refers to its rhythmic feeling. For example, R & B has a very danceable and soulful groove; rock 'n roll is also danceable but tends to be more intense with less of a blues feeling; big band jazz has an upbeat groove (lots of off-rhythm, syncopated, accents) and a full, ebullient feeling. The groove of *El Arte del Sabor*, is relaxed, laid back, but draws you into its polyrhythmic feeling. Imagine the click-clack of a train but one that has an odd number of wheels and runs on three tracks made of different materials. This rhythmic groove keeps you moving, but

internally. Its relaxed feeling enables this music to fill the background -- I've often played this CD when we have guests for dinner -- but richly rewards careful, focused listening.

Another unusual aspect of this music is that it reverses the emphasis of the genre known as "Latin jazz." Usually Latin jazz implies American jazz material played using African or South American instruments and conceived in Latin rhythmic patterns — most of which are based on the "clave" such as the danzon, the rhumba, mambo, and so on. But the 17 tracks on this album are traditional Cuban songs, rendered authentically at the outset, and then infused with jazz harmony and improvised "licks." The authentic Cuban music gives the album a very different, yet accessible melodic language, as well as a unique rhythm feeling.

Finally, the musicians are obviously in love with their repertoire which they first learned as young musicians. They are masters of the material radiate their delight in playing and improvising on these tunes. While none of these lifelong players is at the peak of his virtuosity, they don't need to be. The technical skill they have is fully capable of providing a joyful and loving tribute to the music they grew up with.

Link 1: [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=bebo+valdes+trio+universal+music+group](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=bebo+valdes+trio+universal+music+group)

"Lamento Cubana" (3:30) is the opening track of the album and typifies the laid back yet rhythmically energizing groove of most selections. *The album cover you see here was not the original.* There was evidently a reissue of the original some time ago by the Universal Music Group, which now owns the Blue Note catalogue. Every track of the CD is shown on this web page in this alternate (yellow) cover with the track title beneath it. I was unable to find the reissued CD for sale anywhere on line (If anyone else can find it, please send me a link to the web site.) I suggest listening to links 2 and 3 before exploring all the tracks shown on this page.\*\*

Link 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4bT1fQ4984>

"Piquitin Pin Pon" (4:25) is the most extroverted of the tracks and includes Paquito D'Rivera on alto saxophone. I liked this one so much that I transcribed it so I could play it with the musicians who come to my jam sessions.

Link 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2crdplXyd1g>

"Romance en la Habana" (4:30) the most romantic of the tracks involving the quartet, with particularly lyrical and virtuosic solo by D'Rivera on clarinet.

For your reference, the 17 track titles are as follows: Lamento Cubano, Son de la Loma, El Maranon, Bolero Popurri, Piquitin Pin Pon, Negro de Sociedad, Buche & Pluma - Na Ma, El Reloj de Pastora, Conga Popurri, Oguere, Pare Cochero, Cumbanchero, Si llego a baserte, Guracha Popurri, Romance en La Habana, Route 66, Adios Panama - Para Vigo Me Voy