

Musicians for All Times

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Bebo Valdés, genius and flavor

Composing eight musical pieces in 36 hours is an achievement not too often repeated. For Ramón Valdés Amaro, better known as Bebo Valdés, it may have been a fun task, possible only because of his genius, good taste, inspiration and other attributes typical of extraordinary human beings. To do this at 76 years of age implies an additional vigor that inspires admiration upon considering a man that exile was unable to strip of his Cuban roots. It was also unable to cause him to abandon his commitment to articulating matchless, indestructible harmonies with the instrument he chose to use in captivating the world: the piano. *Bebo Rides Again* (1995) is an album produced at the Messidor studio (in Germany) with 11 recordings. It is considered the musical resurrection of this Cuban who was born on October 9th, 1918, in Quivicán, 40 kilometers south of Havana. After leaving Cuba in 1960, because he disagreed with the policies implemented by Fidel Castro, Bebo decided never to return.

He never silenced his criticism of the Cuban government, a position that kept him outside the music history written by the commissars of high culture. This has mildly attenuated today because of the stardom he achieved in the most prestigious, international forums. His participation in the jam



sessions recorded in Cuba in around 1952 by United States (U.S.) producer Norman Granz, and his influence on Latin jazz, is just a tiny part of his ample production.

Bebo was an arranger and pianist (1948-1957) for the Tropical nightclub's orchestra. This is yet another of the many glorious chapters in a career that was able to achieve much more than he may have thought possible, despite the challenges. This is particularly true if one considers he lived outside Cuba for so long, and was more than 70 years old. He recorded with celebrated African American Nat King Cole and with incredibly talented Cubans such as Rita Montaner, Rolando Laserie, Miguelito Valdés, Beny Moré and Israel "Cachao" López.

Sweden was his other homeland as of 1963. It was in Stockholm that he met his wife Rose-Marie Pehrson. The couple had a number of children and Bebo limited himself to playing the piano in a hotel hall, with almost no publicity.

Decades of isolation were broken by a phone call from Cuban clarinet player Paquito Rivera, who was exiled in the United States. He offered him a chance to participate in a project with him. Since then, the harvest of prizes and acknowledgment has not stopped. His production includes eight records and participating in three documentaries in which both his music and wonderful personality, humility and unconditional commitment to his Afro-Cuban roots stand out. Bebo could not imagine a renaissance of this magnitude. Perhaps he did not calculate all the value his aged hands created on a piano keyboard.

At age 94, he wins two Grammys for his albums *El Arte del Sabor* (2001) and *Lágrimas Negras* (2003), the latter with flamenco singer Diego el Cigala. Yet, the honors he has received have not changed his modesty. His is the same as always: an out of this world musician, but a man who has never needed lots of money to be happy. He is only adamant in his direct rejection of dictatorships, which is why he insisted he would never return to his homeland.

From Stockholm, he went to live in Bernalmádena, in Málaga, Spain. He would only go to Cuba if a democratic government took over. Perhaps he lacked the time to walk the streets of Havana and remember the good times he had till he definitively left, but he will be remembered not only for his musical contributions, but also for his moral rectitude, which reinforces his transcendence.

Ramón "Mongo" Santamaría, talent in human form

One could say he is a master of versatility. During his long life, this Cuban, who was born on April 7, 1917, in the Jesús María neighborhood, one of the poorest in Havana,

managed to insert the special sound he got out of conga drums and bongos into soul, rhythm and blues, jazz and rock n'roll. His integrity as a percussionist places him among the greatest interpreters of the twentieth century. There was no rhythm with which he couldn't create.

In addition to his contribution to African-American genres, he experimented with notable success in almost all those originally from Cuba and in others from Colombia, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Brazil.

His value as an instrumentalist was well accredited in the 1960s when he participated in musical projects with famous African Americans like Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Charles and Herbie Hancock, as well as pianist Chick Corea and Chicano guitar player Carlos Santana, renowned representatives of jazz fusion and Latin rock, respectively.

Mongo Santamaría began to learn to play drums at Yoruba religious ceremonies, which he attended with his maternal grandmother, who was in charge of making food for the guests. In Jesús María, which is basically inhabited by blacks, these rituals with drums and songs in ancestral languages were and still are extremely common.

In addition to these festivities, one must add the influence of *guaguancó* and *rumba*, two genres with rhythmic patterns based on the use of numerous percussion instruments. These rhythms are played regularly in tenement yards and housing, where the black population is still in the majority. Although his mother insisted he take violin lessons, Mongo Santamaría decided that the way to channel his talent was on the dried skins of drums, and not playing the instrument with which José White and Brindis de Salas triumphed on the most famous stages of the nineteenth century.

A notable bongo player, Clemente Piñero (alias Chicho) is inspired by percussion.

His professional debut took place in 1937: he played the bongo for a group directed by Alfredo Boloña, in the Eden Concert, Havana nightclub show. He later participated in recordings with the Lecuona Cuban Boys and Antonio Machín, an excellent, Cuban, *bolero* singer of Spanish and African parentage.

The excessive availability of instruments and diminished number of places to find jobs caused Mongo to work as a mailman between 1939 and 1947. The time he devoted to music during this period is irregular. He occasionally played for the Sonora Matancera, recorded with Miguel Matamoros's group, and distinguished himself as a bongo player with the Mil Diez radio station orchestra. He also participated in a musical project led by blind *tres* player Arsenio Rodríguez, an unabashed defender of African elements in Cuban music.

In 1947, he traveled to Mexico with the Conjunto Clave de Oro. Six months later, he leaves for New York with compatriot Armando Peraza, another percussion expert. In the Big Apple, both bongo players performed at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, the Palladium, and other places of great importance for the dissemination of both Latin and African-American culture. Mongo also appeared on the stage of the Hotel Park Plaza, with Johnny Seguí's Los Dandys Orchestra, before creating a *charanga* together with Cuban flute player and composer Gilberto Valdés, in order to present the Tropicana Club in the Bronx.

After playing congas in a recording session with Dámaso Pérez Prado's orchestra, he joined the genial, Cuban director's group and delighted his audiences with the *mambo*, a rhythm that marked all musical production at that moment. Between 1952 and 1957, he is at recording sessions for a series of records with Puerto Rican-U.S. percussionist Tito Puente's orchestra.

Mongo Santamaría ascends in the jazz world with Cal Tjader, a vibraphone player and composer living in San Francisco. He composes a number, "Afro Blue," which would forever be part of the repertoire of many a well-known jazz musician. This piece was recorded six times by lauded saxophone player John Coltrane, and also popularized by drummer Max Roach and vocalist Oscar Brown, Jr.

Mongo Santamaría's experience with virtuoso pianist Herbie Hancock is memorable. After taking over for Chick Corea, the young Hancock presented one of his most recent compositions, "Watermelon Man," which achieved great popularity and made of Mongo Santamaría's distinctive drumming, an enriching contribution to U.S. pop music. During the 1960s, Mongo Santamaría is awaited in the most important, late night jazz centers in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

His long-lived acceptance is evidence of his talent. With great mastery, he was as much able to give his special touch to a *rumba*, *son* or *guaracha*, than to variants of jazz, even soul, and other forms from the rich array of African-American music styles. In 1971, he participated in the famous Montreal Jazz Festival, where he was acclaimed for his interpretive skill. He would return there in the 1980s, in the company of trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie, to interpret Gershwin's *Summertime*.

Two cardiac incidents and two hip operations, necessary to correct damage brought about by a car accident in 1950, caused Mongo Santamaría to decline and, on February 1, 2003, he died in Miami at eighty years of age. He was considered the Latin percussionist who most contributed to the development of jazz. Yet, he tended to identify himself simply as a *sonero*. Everyone who met him says that he was a humble, gentle man always ready to

celebrate African cultural values he inherited from his slave grandfather and his parents. His musical legacy solidly establishes his passion for his roots, and universalized his origin any time he got sounds out of his congas or bongo drum.

Brindis de Salas, the King of the Octaves

“The history of this lyrical bohemian is like a story, yet it is true. He died on June 2nd in our city. He had arrived from Europe on the steamer *Sastrústegui*. For what reason, no one knows. After having been a millionaire, having lived the life of a monarch, having made women’s hearts tremble, having been all over the world with his soul, which was his violin, after so much love, so much fire, so much sun, melody, glory and laurels, he collapsed undone. Old, poor, dirty, suffering from consumption, and alone. Alone! All alone! At the moment of his death, he even lacked the violin that had made him so famous.

It was a long life, always full of greatness, greatness even in defeat, the life of an integral artist.”

This is what was written about him in a 1911 Buenos Aires daily, *Cartas y Caretas*, when this great, black Cuban violinist—Claudio José Domingo Brindis de Salas—died. The obituary was extremely revealing of the antagonisms that had played out in the life of this great musician, born in Havana on August 4th, 1852. The so-called “King of the Octaves” died a pauper. The clothing on his body, wracked by tuberculosis, expressed the terrible nature of a destiny that years before would have been unbelievable. Some critics attributed his decline in fame to his bohemian spirit, which competed with his performances in the most revered spaces frequented by the highest European bourgeoisie and Creole elite.

Brindis de Salas was also known as the black Paganini and he had no compunctions about playing at bars populated primarily by sailors and lower class people or earning the applause of an overfilled theater after interpreting Mendelsohn’s *Concerto for a Violin*, or *La Cavatina*, by Raff. His artistic profile allowed him to play the most technically complex pieces.

Beyond his financial gain and earned medals acknowledging his exceptional talent, his greatest satisfaction came from hearing the acclaim of varied audiences who became mesmerized watching the electrifying movements of his bow over the strings. Music was a *raison d’etre* for this Cuban who displayed his genius at the age of eight, when he composed his first musical piece. By December 18, 1860, he gave his first concert in the company of important period musicians such as eminent pianist Ignacio Cervantes. Shortly afterwards, he became a celebrated violinist.

In addition to having been instructed by his father, who directed the Concha de Oro Orchestra, played the violin and also distinguished himself as a bass player and singer of classical music, Brindis de Salas consolidated his training with Maestro José Redondo, and Dutchman José Van der Gutch, who also resided in Cuba. With guidance from the latter, in 1869, he traveled to the Conservatory in Paris, one of the world’s most renowned places for the study and perfecting of musical talent.

Upon arriving, he witnesses the consolidation of a school that beginning with Pierre Gaviniés y Viotti, takes shape and develops talents like Rudolph Kreutzer and Pierre Baillot. It is a time at which important interpreters of the most varied tendencies and latitudes coexist. In 1870, Brindis de Salas wins first prize in violin at the Conservatory

of Paris. Upon finishing his studies, he starts a brilliant and spiraling career as a concert performer. Between 1871 and 1911, he traveled to the world's principal cultural centers, and invariably inspires the greatest enthusiasm from his audiences and critics, alike. With his quintessential style, technical purity, and inimitable he left a favorable impression in numerous European cities, as reported in newspapers such as *Les Temps* and the *Courriere Italiano*. He was decorated with the Cross of Charles III, by the King of Spain; the Order of Christ, by the King of Portugal; the Cross of the Black Eagle, by the German emperor. He became a Knight of the Legion of Honor of the Republic of France, but received his greatest reward in Germany: aside from granting him the highest distinction in his empire, Wilhelm II made him a Baron and violinist of the court.

In 1875, Brindis de Salas returned to the American continent and displayed his enormous talent with a mad flurry of artistic activity in Central America and, above all, in Caracas, Venezuela. Of his time in that city, in 1876, composer and musicologist Rhazés Hernández López wrote: "If Brindis de Salas performed at the historic *Pasdeloup Concerts* (1819-87)—established by Jules Pasdeloup, the great orchestra director—where the Cuban genius was a soloist, and if, next to Patti (Adelina), he presents himself as a high artistic figure; if Mazzacato directs him in Milan, in the regal Turin theater, and at the Fenice at Genoa: if in Berlin the most aggressive critic calls him the king of the octaves; if Parisian critic Oscar Commentant, a celebrated media figure, becomes ecstatic because of the virtuoso and writes that "the violin was created for him": if Leonard, grand master of the bow,

Charles Dancla y David acclaims him, despite him being a black musician from these latitudes, and they admire this great performer, it was because he really was one."

Around 1877, after an eight-year absence, Brindis de Salas returned to Havana. His concerts at the Tacón and Payret theaters were resounding successes. More than a musical success, this visit meant social and personal success for him because he found himself being admired and respected by the most illustrious people in Cuba, a population still under the influence of racist ideology. His later travels to Mexico and Argentina are new triumphs. His overwhelming success in Buenos Aires sharply contrasted with his return, on May 25, 1911, as a passenger on the steamer *Patricio Satrústegui*, from Spain, where he had offered his last concert at the Espinal Theater in Ronda. He disembarked with his lungs a total wreck.

A review published on April 10th, 1885, in the *Musical Times* of London about his concert in Darmstadt, Germany, highlights his virtuosity but minimizes him as an artist. To paraphrase, the critic said the musician placed too much emphasis on technique, to the detriment of a more aesthetically complete presentation. Despite this negative criticism, Brindis de Salas continued to be considered among the best violin players worldwide.

The sordid circumstances of his death do not muddy his legacy, which continues influencing new generations of Cuban musicians. Fortunately, his ashes arrived in Cuba on May 26, 1930. He is resting permanently at the Iglesia de Paula, escorted by classical music concert melodies that are given there by different groups every week.