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TRAVEL

Valle gives jazz broad appeal

by David Cazares
Posted June 7 2002

A new recording seeks to bridge the divide between Cuba's musical styles. It's the kind of CD that aims to cross the sophistication of Afro-Cuban jazz with the popularity of the island's dance music, from traditional son and folkloric rumba to timba, the fiery contemporary party sound.

That's the approach that flutist Orlando "Maraca" Valle has taken with Tremenda Rumba! (Terrific Party!), his new album on Ahí Namá music.

With his new recording, the 36-year-old Valle, a respected bandleader who gets his nickname from the appearance his huge Afro gave him as a teenager, shows how Cuban dance music can appeal to both traditional and contemporary tastes. But he does so without heading in the complicated musical direction of some of his contemporaries, such as the bandleader Issac Delgado, whose music is sometimes so intense that it is too demanding for some listeners.

Tremenda Rumba!, Valle's fifth release as a leader, offers listeners a blend of Afro-Cuban musical genres from the past and present, including classical danzón, rustic son montuno and modern forms such as the songo and timba styles made famous by Cuban dance powerhouse Los Van Van.

He also adds contemporary Latin salsa, cumbia and African-American jazz, funk and rap into the mix.

The effect is an eclectic and stimulating album that satisfies from the start, even if it takes a commercially viable approach.

The album begins with Se Te Acabó La Rumba, a blend of salsa and timba

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featuring the acclaimed percussionist Changuito on a timbal solo. Castígalá is a blend of modern salsa and ragga, itself a mix of dancehall reggae with hip-hop and r&b. El Fuelle takes a Pan-American approach and fuses Colombian cumbia with Cuban son. Caramelo A Quilo uses a guaguanco rhythm as a base for Valle's modern arrangements and features Mario "Mayito" Rivera, who came to fame singing with Los Van Van, on vocals. Pura Illusion, a modern salsa number, features Maraca's brother Yumuri on vocals.

Valle also includes a classic danzón number that relies on a charanga section of violins, viola and cello bass. Obbatalá Ayacuna is a Latin jazz composition that shows how Valle has been able to expand the range of the Cuban flute within complicated musical forms.

But he consistently returns to modern dance music, as he does on La Novela, a timba composition that is certain to lure dancers to the floor.

Valle, who honed his skills during six years with Irakere, the innovative group led by pianist Chucho Valdés, infuses his selections with flute solos and the rapidly changing patterns that have won him fame.

That he does so in an uncomplicated way perhaps explains why he is one of the few Cubans who sells records in the United States -- largely without the help of Spanish-language radio that continues to keep Cubans from the island off the air.

It also speaks to Valle's ability to reach audiences with a multifaceted approach that relies on danceable numbers and innovation.

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