



CHUCHO VALDÉS JAZZ BATÁ 2

Jazz Batá 2, composer, pianist and bandleader **Chucho Valdés'** first album for Mack Avenue Records, marks a new peak of creativity for the artist, even as it revisits the small-group concept of his 1972 Cuban album *Jazz Batá*. That album upon release was originally considered experimental at the time, but the trio project – featuring no drum set and two virtuosos who would subsequently be charter members of Irakere: Carlos del Puerto (bass) and Oscar Valdés (batá: the sacred, hourglass shaped drums of the Yoruba religion in Cuba) – would now be considered contemporary.

Recorded in two and a half days at John Lee's studio in New Jersey, **Jazz Batá 2** is both rhythmic and lyrical at once. The six-hand complexity of the batá repertoire – the deep classical music of West Africa – permeates Valdés' piano solos throughout the album. "I applied to my solos the different rhythms of the batá," he says. "The piano is of course a harmonic instrument, but it's percussive too, and you can play percussion with it."

Valdés set the batá-driven small-group format aside in the wake of Irakere's explosive popularity in 1973, but he's always wanted to get back to it. Now he's done it with **Jazz Batá 2**, "with more resources, in every sense," he says, "with a wider panorama."

It's an exceptionally tight band. All of the three supporting musicians – **Yaroldy Abreu Robles**, **Dreiser Durruthy Bombalé**, and **Yelsy Heredia** – are from the Guantánamo region and have deep roots in Cuban musical culture as well as being conservatory-trained. Yelsy and Dreiser grew up together, went through music school together, graduated together, and have been playing music side-by-side literally all their lives. Yaroldy, who plays a wide variety of drums – congas, batá, bongó, orchestral percussion – has been working with Valdés for twenty years. "He always knows what I'm going to want to do," says Valdés.

Jazz Batá 2 also marks the centenary of Valdés' father and teacher, Ramón "Bebo" Valdés (1918-2013). These two giants of Cuban music shared a birthday – October 9 – so Bebo's 100th will be Chucho's 77th. Between the two of them, they've exercised a massive musical influence since the 1940s. Bebo's 1952 creation of the commercially failed but artistically successful *batanga* – which combined batá drums with a state-of-the-art jazz band – was a direct inspiration for the batá-driven jazz of Irakere, as well as for *Jazz Batá* and its sequel being released 46 years later. This stretch of time reinforces the enduring and magnificent career Valdés has cultivated over the 77 years of his life, with no signs of slowing down and never one to conform or expand the boundaries of his musical inventions.

Personnel:

Chucho Valdés / piano
Yelsy Heredia / double bass
Dreiser Durruthy Bombalé / batás and vocals
Yaroldy Abreu Robles / percussion

Guest Artist:

Regina Carter / violin ("Ochún" and "100 Años de Bebo" only)

Track-by-Track for *Jazz Batá 2*:

Obatalá: A mini-suite evoking Valdés's *santo* in the Yoruba religion of Cuba (santería), with a liturgical rhythm that belongs to Obatalá, the god of wisdom and justice. "Yelsy Heredia's bowed-bass solo has a spiritual dimension," says Valdés, "played as if calling the ancestors. It finishes with all of us singing one of the most beautiful of Obatalá's melodies."

Son XXI: Beginning with a section that Valdés calls "half Cecil Taylor style, half Muhal Richard Abrams style," it transforms into a catchy composition by the late Cuban composer Enrique Ubieta that plays with rhythmic clusters. It's a new framing of a number that reaches back to the first *Jazz Batá* and beyond; Valdés first performed it in 1963 in the Teatro Musical de La Habana.

Luces: Composed only two weeks before the recording session and featuring one of Valdés' most interesting solos ever, this is perhaps the first-ever bolero (romantic ballad) with congas and batá. "It gives the bolero rhythm a different *sabor*," says Valdés of the batá, as do the tune's augmented-chord harmonies.

Ochún: Syncretized with the Catholic saint La Caridad del Cobre, protector of Cuba, the Yoruba *orisha* Ochún represents feminine beauty. She loves sweet music, so she's saluted with a violin. **Regina Carter** was the obvious call; the two musicians have been friends for years. The rhythm is a *merengue haitiano* – another nod to Bebo, who spent quality time working in Haiti.

Chucho's Mood: Another of Bebo's innovations was the *descarga*, or Cuban jam session (1952's immortal "Con Poco Coco"). This is a *descarga*, built on a rhythmic three-note *tumbao* (G, B, C). "It's like a tornado," says Valdés, "it gathers, gathers, builds, builds."

100 Años de Bebo (100 years of Bebo): A tune by Bebo, rescued from oblivion by Valdés, played by Regina Carter, and set as a *danzón-mambo*. "No one's heard this tune," he says, "I'm the only person who knows it. When I was a child, Bebo played it on the piano at home. Just a tune, very beautiful, and as many times as he played it, it always captured my attention. I don't believe he ever recorded it. Since it's his centenary, I added an introduction, I put a *tumbao* at the end, and recorded it."

El Güüje: A *güüje* is a mythical Cuban creature that lives in the river. This tune, which Valdés refers to as a *bembé* (sacred party), is based on a rhythm created by percussionist Dreiser Durruthy, and features him speaking in the Kikongo-derived sacred language of the Afro-Cuban religion known as *palo*.

The Clown: A piano solo, dedicated to Maurice Ravel, that Valdés composed when he was with the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna (of which he was a founder, in 1967). It's a theme-and-variations: "I go impressionist, I go a little avant-garde, I play batá on the piano..."

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For more information on **Chucho Valdés**, please visit: chucho-valdes.com

For media inquiries, please contact:
DL Media · 610-667-0501
Matthew Jurasek · matthew@dlmediamusic.com
Maureen McFadden · maureen@dlmediamusic.com

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