

Latin Jazz

BY:
Raul Fernandez



Latin jazz, also called Afro-Cuban jazz, a style of music that blends rhythms and percussion instruments of Cuba and the Spanish Caribbean with jazz and its fusion of European and African musical elements.

Latin jazz was the result of a long process of interaction between American and Cuban music styles. In New Orleans around the turn of the 20th century, Latin American music influenced the city's early jazz style, endowing it with a distinctive syncopated (accents shifted to weak beats) rhythmic character. A well-known pianist and composer of the time, Jelly Roll Morton, referred to that Latin

influence as the "Spanish tinge" of jazz. Early in the 20th century, several American musicians adopted the Cuban habanera rhythm (a syncopated four-beat pattern) in their compositions; most notably, W.C. Handy used it in his "St. Louis Blues" (1914).

In the decades leading to 1940, Latin American melodies and dance rhythms made their way farther northward into the United States, while the sounds of American jazz spread through the Caribbean and Central and South America. Musicians and dancers across the entire region became familiar with both musical languages, and the large bands of the swing era expanded their repertory to include rumbas and congas, two types of Afro-Cuban dance music. Those developments laid the foundation for the fusion of jazz and Cuban music, a process inaugurated in 1940 in New York City with the establishment of the Machito and the Afro-Cubans orchestra, under the musical directorship of Cuban-born trumpeter Mario Bauzá. For many jazz critics, Bauzá's tune "Tanga," one of the Machito orchestra's hits dating to the early 1940s, was the first true example of the music that is now known as Latin jazz.

Bauzá was born in Havana in 1911 and studied music at a local conservatory. He joined the Havana Symphony at age 16, while already playing jazz with local groups. In 1930 he moved to New York City, where he played with singer and bandleader Noble Sissle. Bauzá became music director for the Chick Webb Orchestra and played saxophone and trumpet in the bands of Fletcher Henderson, Don Redman, and Cab Calloway.

Machito's sound inspired pianist and bandleader Stan Kenton, who began experimenting with a mixture of big-band jazz sounds and Afro-Cuban percussion that led to his recordings of "The Peanut Vendor" and "Cuban Carnival" in 1947. Meanwhile, Dizzy Gillespie, one of the leaders of the new jazz style that

came to be known as bebop, decided to combine Afro-Cuban dance rhythms with bebop elements, relying heavily on the guidance of Cuban percussionist, dancer, and composer Chano Pozo. Gillespie and Pozo's musical synthesis became known as Afro-Cuban jazz or, for a short period, "Cubop." One of their collaborative efforts produced the 1947 hit "Manteca," which quickly became a standard of the jazz repertoire.

The growth of Afro-Cuban jazz continued with vigour in the 1950s. In December 1950 producer Norman Granz recorded the successful Afro-Cuban Jazz Suite, which featured the Machito orchestra along with soloists Charlie Parker on alto saxophone, Buddy Rich on drums, Flip Phillips on tenor saxophone, and Harry ("Sweets") Edison on trumpet, with arrangements by Arturo ("Chico") O'Farrill. Musicians in Cuba, led by pianists Frank Emilio Flynn and Ramón ("Bebo") Valdés, also kept in touch with and contributed to the development of this new style. Valdés's "Con Poco Coco," released in 1952, became the first spontaneously improvised Afro-Cuban jam session known to have been recorded.

As audience preferences evolved and economic incentives for musicians diminished in the 1950s, big bands began to dissolve. Afro-Cuban jazz started to be called Latin jazz, most likely for marketing reasons, and the music, like jazz itself, began to be performed by smaller groups. Pianist George Shearing and percussionist Cal Tjader were the leaders of this trend in Latin jazz on the U.S. West Coast. They both led small combos, produced numerous recordings, and featured other prominent Latin jazz performers, such as pianist Eddie Cano, bassist Al McKibbon, and percussionist Willie Bobo.

Afro-Cuban drummers played a fundamental role in the development of Latin jazz from the late 1940s through the 1960s, giving the genre its seemingly inexhaustible stream of rhythmic patterns, phrasing, and styles. Conga and bongo drum players, such as Cándido Camero, Mongo Santamaría, Armando Peraza, Carlos ("Patato") Valdés, Francisco Aguabella, and José ("Buyú") Mangual became a ubiquitous presence in the Latin jazz recordings and jam sessions of those years. Bandleader and percussionist Tito Puente popularized the use in Latin jazz of the vibraphone and the timbales, a pair of shallow single-headed drums with a metal casing. With players using sticks to strike not only the heads but also the metal rims and sides of the instruments, the timbales added several distinct timbres to the music's rhythmic component.

In the 1960s a new musical style from Brazil—the syncopated, sparsely accompanied bossa nova ("new trend")—arrived in the United States. Many established Latin jazz musicians added the bossa nova tunes of Antônio Carlos Jobim to their repertoire. (Although sometimes included under the rubric of Latin jazz, the fusion of Brazilian music with jazz properly deserves its own designation as Brazilian jazz.)

From the 1970s onward, the development of Latin jazz was characterized by the exploration of diverse national traditions and the bridging of musical borders. New generations of musicians expanded the Afro-Cuban foundation of the music by adding elements from other Latin American traditions. Moreover, as a wave of young instrumentalists—including virtuoso performers on piano, flute, saxophone and trumpet—brought the phrasing and instrumental articulation of Cuban and Puerto Rican motifs and melodies to the music, the style's earlier dependence on percussionists began to diminish. The Cuban orchestra Irakere was among the emblematic ensembles of this decade. Led by pianist Jesús ("Chucho") Valdés (son of Bebo Valdés) and featuring soloists such as clarinetist-saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera and trumpeter Arturo Sandoval, the group was recognized for its innovative fusion of jazz, Western classical music, rock, funk, and Afro-Cuban religious music as exemplified by the collection *The Best of Irakere* (1994).

In the 1980s the Fort Apache Band from New York City, led by percussionist and trumpeter Jerry González and his brother, bassist Andy González, offered listeners a return to Latin-bebop fusions with Latin jazz versions of the music of jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk. Toward the end of the 20th century, Latin jazz instrumental soloists claimed the limelight, and a number of outstanding performers emerged, including pianists Michel Camilo and Gonzalo Rubalcaba; saxophonists Justo Almario and Javier Zalba; and percussionists such as Giovanni Hidalgo and Horacio (“El Negro”) Hernández. Meanwhile, Chucho Valdés became a prominent leader of small ensembles. More recent luminaries include pianists Danilo Pérez and Roberto Fonseca, saxophonist David Sánchez, and drummer Dafnis Prieto.

Latin jazz continued to gain popularity and critical acclaim, and by the early 21st century it had become one of the most dynamic and diverse components of the jazz world. Notable recordings that represent the range of music falling under the Latin jazz rubric include David Sánchez, *Obsesión* (1998); Al McKibben, *Tumbao para los congueros di mi vida* (1999; “For All the Conga Drummers in My Life”); Jane Bunnett, *Alma de Santiago* (2001; “Soul of Santiago”); Charlie Haden, *Nocturne* (2001); Dafnis Prieto, *About the Monks* (2005); Sonido Isleño (with Ben Lapidus), *Vive Jazz* (2005); and Chucho Valdés, *Chucho’s Steps* (2010).