

Hilario Durán Full Bio



A 2003 JUNO Award Nominated Artist for his "Havana Remembered" CD, and a 2005 JUNO Award Winner for his "New Danzon" CD, Hilario Durán, Pianist, Composer, Bandleader and Arranger of the first order, is one of the greatest virtuoso Jazz pianists emerging from Havana, Cuba.

Hilario Durán was born in Havana, Cuba in 1953. He was born into a musical family surrounded by various musical influences. Hilario's grandmother played guitar; his mother studied piano, and his father, Hilario Durán Senior, played guitar and sang throughout his lifetime. Hilario started playing the piano by ear when he was eight years old. He played the piano like it was a toy, and his mother could not get him away from it so - she had to lock it up and hide the key!

In the 1940s, Hilario's father was part of the Cuban musical movement called "Movimiento del 'Feeling'" (The 'Feeling' Movement). Hilario Senior used to meet with a group of musicians in Callejón de Hamel. Some of these musicians included Omara Portuondo, José Antonio Méndez, Cesar Portillo de la Luz, Angel Diaz, Níco Rojas, Frank Emilio Flynn. Hilario's father introduced the singer Elena Burke to this movement. He was very friendly with all of the musicians of this group. When Hilario was a young boy, the great Omara moved into a home across the street from the Durán house and one day she heard Hilario playing his sister's upright piano. A few days later, she knocked on the door and presented him with a gift - his very first copy of a musical lead sheet for the song Debí Llorar, by Giraldo Piloto and Alberto Vera.

As a young boy, Hilario was obsessed with the piano and absorbed himself in the works of artists such as Errol Garner, Roy Eldridge, Harry James, Jachaturian, Tchaikovsky, Gershwin, Ernesto Lecuona, Bola de Nieve, Vicentico Valdés, Adolfo Guzman, and Frank Emilio Flynn. He listened, learned, imitated, and tried to reproduce all of the music he was hearing. His parents decided to give him and his sister private piano lessons with different teachers in Havana including Caridad Mezquda, the aunt of the great Cuban guitarist, Leo Brower.

In 1968, Hilario studied piano part time at the Amadeo Roldan Conservatory of Music, and also took private piano lessons with Andrea Mesa, a well-known Havana based piano teacher. In 1969, Hilario was accepted as a full time student at the Amadeo Roldan Conservatory of Music and was taught by the professor Oscar Lorie, one of Hilario's treasured teachers.

Durán is a genuine virtuoso
Stuart Broomer
The Globe and Mail

Hilario Durán is an unparalleled pianist, as well as being a composer and arranger of the first order... one of the greatest Stone and Spin Cuban pianists of this 20th Century."
Chucho Valdés

"Hilario Durán is the latest virtuoso jazz pianist to emerge from Havana... these were bravura performances, in which Durán made abundantly clear his comfort with all of the extremes that a piano holds, and spanned the distances between them - between the most heavily percussive and the most lightly lyrical - with a roll of the wrists - some roll, some wrists."

Mark Miller
The Globe and Mail

During this period, Hilario became addicted to jazz and listened to recordings by Stan Kenton, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Lloyd, Keith Jarrett, Chucho Valdes, and he also listened to recordings from Eastern European artists from Czechoslovakia, Russia, Germany and Poland. Also during this period, it was difficult to find certain American jazz recordings, so Hilario and his musician friends Justo Gabriel Perez/flautist, Mario Fabian/saxophonist and piano player, and Orestes Urfe/flautist (son of musician Odilio Urfe) listened to whatever tunes they could hear from short wave radio.

In 1970, Hilario started his military service in Cuba and played clarinet with the military band "Estado Mayor del Ejercito". This gave him the opportunity to work with musicians such as Jorge Reyes, Elpidio Chapotin, Carlos del Puerto and Ignacio Berroa, and also to work with the director Remberto Egües.

Hilario visited a variety of clubs that featured jazz bands. Many big band orchestras played in Havana at venues such as The Tropicana, Salon Rojo (Capri Hotel), Palermo Club, The Copa Room (Havana Riviera Hotel), El Parisien (Hotel Nacional), and Caribe Cabaret (Habana Libre Hotel). Hilario recalls, "I was fascinated with the sound created by the combination of horns and saxophones. My dream was to, one day play in one of those orchestras"

Hilario Durán completed his military service in 1973 and began working as a professional musician in Cuba's Los Papa Cun-Cun Ensemble, where he substituted on piano for the late great pianist Freddy Gonzalez de la Maza. This ensemble was directed by Evaristo Aparicio, who was known for his work as a composer for the Cuban legendary orchestra Los Van Van. Hilario says: "To be performing with Los Papa Cun-Cun alongside the great Evaristo Aparicio, was an amazing experience for me, learning about Cuban musical forms such as tumbaos, and montunos". Hilario also worked with The Castellanos Orchestra. (After Beny Moré had passed on.)

In the mid 1970s, Hilario's career took an important new direction when the great Cuban pianist Chucho Valdes decided to leave the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna to work with his legendary group Irakere, and Chucho requested that Hilario Durán be his replacement. This honoured request took Hilario to new and wonderful musical territories under the musical directorship of German Piferrer who introduced Hilario to the intricacies of the big band orchestras. With Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna, Hilario learned and collaborated with many more great musicians that included Guillermo Barreto, El Chino Lam, Braulio Hernandez, Adalberto Lara, and Güajiro Mirabal. This orchestra also gave Hilario the opportunity to travel and perform at festivals and events in Eastern Europe and all over Cuba. The Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna also gave Hilario the opportunity to learn orchestration from performing the scores by arrangers such as Rafael Somavilla, Armando Romeu, and German Pifferrer.

During this same period in Cuba, Hilario was involved in a variety of diverse projects where he was expressing himself more and more as a pianist and also as an arranger. He was an integral part of the Cuban All Stars Orchestra that performed with Oscar D'Leon, at the Varadero Festival. Hilario also worked at the famous Havana EGREM recording studios, first as a pianist, and later on as an arranger, composer and musical director, where he worked with such artists as Omara Portuondo, Miriam Ramos, Amaury Perez Vidal, Donato Poveda, Silvio Rodriguez, and Beatriz Marquez. Hilario also worked as an arranger with German Piferrer, Demetrio Muñiz, (The former director of the Buena Vista Social Club) and Rolando Baró at many of the famous Havana Cabarets such as Caribe, (Habana Libre Hotel); Cabaret Parisien (Hotel Nacional); Salon Rojo (Hotel Capri); the Cabaret Tropicana and the Cabaret Internacional located on Varadero beach.

In 1981, the great Cuban trumpet player Arturo Sandoval invited Hilario Durán to join his band as a pianist & arranger, and to participate in the artistic direction of his band, which he did from 1981 to 1990. This was thrilling for Hilario and gave him the opportunity to develop further and perform at many festivals around the world. With Arturo's band, Hilario shared a stage with Dizzy Gillespie, who joined the band for performances in Umbria, Italy; Trinidad & Tobago; Ronnie Scott's in England; San Juan, Puerto Rico and also at home in Cuba at The Havana Jazz Festival, as part of the All Star Orchestra. Arturo's band also shared a stage with Michel Legrand for a concert in Nice, France. Hilario appeared in the film "Una Noche en La Habana" that featured Dizzy Gillespie, Arturo Sandoval, and Gonzalo Rubalcaba. In 1982, Hilario won the prestigious Cuban musical award, the Premio EGREM, for Best Arranger of the Year. In 1987, Hilario Durán made his first trip to Canada with Arturo's band when they performed at The Spectrum during The Montréal International Jazz Festival.

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In 1990, Arturo Sandoval left Cuba to start his new life in the United States. The musicians remained in Cuba and Hilario reorganized the remaining band members and started working with what he called 'a new perspective' ...Hilario named this band Perspectiva. Perspectiva toured Europe and South America, and performed with the Orquesta Sinfonica Nacional de Cuba (Symphony National Orchestra of Cuba) to a sold-out house at Cuba's Carlos Max Theatre, (capacity 5500). Perspectiva recorded two albums, Tiembla Tierra and Buscando Cuerdas. Also during this period, Hilario collaborated with Chucho Valdes, who commissioned him to do arrangements for Irakere. Some of this work can be heard on the recording Indestructible.

The 1990s marked a decade of changes in Hilario Durán's life. In 1991, the late Cuban drummer Guillermo Barreto, (Hilario worked with Guillermo in the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna) introduced him to the Canadian flautist Jane Bunnett. Jane invited Hilario to perform on her recording Spirits of Havana with Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Frank Emilio Flynn, Yoruba Andabo and singer Mercedes Valdes. Spirits of Havana won the Canadian JUNO Award in 1992. At Bunnett's invitation Hilario came to Toronto, Canada to perform with The Spirits of Havana group along with Mercedes Valdes and others. In 1994, Jane Bunnett once again invited Hilario Durán to Toronto to record Rendezvous Brazil Cuba, with Carlitos Del Puerto Jr., and the Brazilian brothers Filo & Celso Machado.

Hilario continued to work as a pianist, arranger and director with Jane Bunnett & Spirits of Havana. They toured for three years, performing at many international festivals in North America and Europe. In 1994, during one of his visits to Toronto, Hilario met the Canadian bass player Roberto Occhipinti for the first time, and they played some local gigs together. Jane and her husband, the Canadian trumpet player Larry Cramer produced three recordings for Hilario Durán on Canada's Justin Time Records label: Hilario's first solo recording Francisco's Song in 1996, a second recording, Killer Tumbao in 1997, recorded at Cuba's EGREM studios, which featured the great Cuban percussionists Tata Güines and Changuito; and also Roberto Occhipinti on bass. Killer Tumbao was the first time that Hilario Durán and Roberto Occhipinti recorded together. Hilario did a third recording with Jane and Larry called Habana Nocturna which was released in 1999, which featured Jane Bunnett, drummer Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez, and bassist Roberto Occhipinti.

In 1998, Hilario Durán' started a new chapter in his life, leaving Cuba and relocated in Toronto, Canada, with his wife Cristobalina and their daughter Yailen, who is also a pianist, singer, and composer. When they first arrived in Toronto, Hilario immediately immersed himself in the local music community and also worked abroad with different artists. One highlight during this period was a performance at The Drummers Festival in New Jersey, United States – with Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez, John Patitucci, Michael Brecker and Mark Quinones. This concert was also filmed for video.

Hilario continued to work and establish himself in his new country. He volunteered his services as a teacher at Toronto's Humber College Music Department/School of Arts and Technology. He was invited by the Canadian record label Solitudes, to record Havana Remembered. Hilario brought together an A-list of Canadian and Cuban musicians for this recording. Havana Remembered is a collection of traditional Cuban music from the 1920s-1940s. In 2001 Havana Remembered received a Canadian JUNO Nomination for Best World Music Album.

In October 2002, saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera invited Hilario, violinist Regina Carter and legendary Brazilian singer Leny Andrade, to perform in The World Festival Orchestra at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Hilario composed Suite Afro-Cubana for this event.

In 2004, Hilario Durán signed a recording contract with the Canadian jazz label ALMA Records, with president Peter Cardinali. Hilario met Peter through Roberto Occhipinti who is also signed with ALMA. This label is committed to presenting Hilario Durán as a pianist, bandleader, composer, and arranger under his own name. In 2004, Hilario recorded his debut ALMA CD, produced by Roberto Occhipinti. New Danzon featured Roberto on bass and Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez on drums. New Danzon won the Canadian JUNO Award for Best Contemporary Jazz Album of the Year, in 2005. That same year, ALMA Records released Hilario's second recording, Encuentro en La Habana, which was a reunion with the former members of Perspectiva and a musical celebration of the great energy, spontaneity and creativity

this group shared. It was recorded at the EGREM studios in Havana. Encuentro en La Habana was also produced by Roberto Occhipinti, and was nominated for a Canadian Juno Award in 2006.

Hilario's musical relationship and friendship with Roberto Occhipinti led to many more sensational collaborations and performances. Roberto, with all of his enthusiasm and support, encouraged Hilario to make one of his musical dreams come true; a dream from his days back in Cuba. Together, they formed a Latin Jazz Big Band that featured the crème de la crème of some of the best Canadian and Cuban musicians. They gave their first performance at Toronto's The Distillery Jazz Festival in 2005, and this was followed by numerous performances in Ontario, Canada including Big Band Festivals, Toronto's The Beaches Jazz Festival, Ottawa Jazz Festival, Markham Jazz Festival, Oakville Jazz Festival, and The Chet Baker Festival in Toronto, featuring special guests Randy Brecker and Jane Bunnett,

This Latin Jazz Big Band led to an idea for a new ALMA Records recording in 2006, From the Heart featuring Hilario Durán and His Latin Jazz Big Band, produced by ALMA Records president Peter Cardinali. In 2007 From The Heart won the Canadian JUNO Award for Best Contemporary Jazz Album of the Year; and it received an American Grammy Nomination for Best Solo Performance for the Hilario Durán composition, "Paq Man". From The Heart featured Roberto on bass, and special guests Paquito D'Rivera, Dione Taylor, and Horacio El Negro Hernandez. This big band performed at the 2007 Toronto Downtown Jazz Festival with a special appearance by Paquito D'Rivera and Dione Taylor.

Since his move to Canada, Hilario Durán has become an integral and important part of the Canadian music scene. His current musical projects as a leader include The Hilario Durán Trio', 'Hilario Durán & Orquesta Havana Remembered' and 'Hilario Durán & His Latin Jazz Big Band'. Hilario is a faculty member at Toronto's Humber College, acting as both adjunct Piano Professor and Ensemble Director. Hilario also currently performs as a special guest with international artists and orchestras.

In addition to his many awards, nominations and treasured honours, Hilario Durán recently received a 2007 Chico O'Farrill Lifetime Achievement Award from Latin Jazz USA in the United States for his outstanding contributions to Afro-Cuban jazz and Latin Jazz. This award was presented at a concert at The Arttime Theater in Little Havana, Miami, Florida, where Hilario Durán was the special guest pianist of the legendary Cuban conguero, Candido Camero.

Hilario Durán is presently based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In summer 2008, he led his Hilario Durán Trio on a coast-to-coast tour of Canada, featuring Roberto Occhipinti on bass and Mark Kelso on drums.