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The Mambo Kings: Jazz Roots series pays tribute to crossover pioneers Machito and Tito Puente

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They were the giants of a musically gigantic era, mambo kings and musical revolutionaries. Frank "Machito" Grillo, of the standard-setting Machito's Afro-Cubans, and the inimitable, stage-stealing Tito Puente ruled New York dance floors from the late 1940s to the early '60s. They brought explosive and authentic Latin music to the U.S. mainstream and to the world, pioneers of crossover and fusion long before those became cultural buzzwords.

These two men will be honored in *A Tribute to Machito and Tito Puente* on Friday, the third concert in the Jazz Roots series at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts.

Machito's band, with its brilliant but little known musical director Mario Bauza, brought together American jazz with Cuban rhythms to set the template for Latin jazz and salsa. And Puente, raised in Spanish Harlem, went on to become one of the most famous musicians in the world. They combined precise and profound musicianship with uninhibited energy and verve, with a success that inspired other Latin musicians and the Latino community.

"I said, this is about being yourself without fear," says percussionist Sammy Figueroa of seeing the two bands at New York's legendary Palladium club in the early '60s. 'A lot of musicians said the same thing, 'I want to be like that.' These guys brought to the stage not only the very best musicianship but eloquence, humor, glamour."

Figueroa is one of a number of stellar participants in Friday's show that will also include Cuban trumpeters "Chocolate" Armenteros, who played with Machito in the '60s, and Arturo Sandoval; flautist Dave Valentin, former musical director of Tito Puente's Golden Latin Jazz All Stars; singer Albita; timbalero Orestes Vilato; flautist Nestor Torres, and the Machito Orchestra, which has been directed by Machito's son Mario Grillo since the elder bandleader's death in 1984.

Although the big band and mambo era is long over, Machito and Tito's music is still potent stuff. "That combination of jazz tunes with Cuban rhythm -- it's two very strong music styles, and when you combine those two correctly you got a very powerful thing," says Sandoval. "It's very contagious. When you see good Latin jazz onstage, even if you are not a jazz fan, we are going to grab your attention."

Machito and Puente took off in the late 1940s, as the era of swing and the danceable jazz orchestras of Chick Webb, Count Basie and Duke Ellington ended and jazz moved into the more complex, intellectual bebop era. Latin big bands picked up that popular audience. "In the 1930s, jazz was popular music, dance music," says Larry Rosen, Jazz Roots' co-producer and curator. "When you got into the World War II era, jazz went into bebop and it was all about listening. . . . The Latin part maintained those rhythms that had the dance element, so it maintained something that was lost in the evolution of jazz itself."

GREW UP IN CUBA

Machito was born in Tampa in 1912 but grew up in Cuba. He moved to New York in 1937, after his brother-in-law Mario Bauza, a trumpeter, had thrilled him with tales of the city and its music. Together, Machito and Bauza ran Machito's Afro-Cubans, Machito as singer, frontman and maraca player, Bauza as musical director and sometime arranger and composer.

It was Bauza, who had immersed himself in American jazz directing the Chick Webb Orchestra and playing for Cab Calloway, who shaped the Machito sound, bringing together the sophisticated arrangements and innovation of jazz with Cuban rhythmic power and melodic sweetness.

"I was with the Cab Calloway orchestra and somebody with the orchestra made a remark making fun of Cuban music, they said it sounded like hillbilly music," Bauza told The Herald in 1993, shortly before his death at 82. 'I said, 'You're right. But someday you're going to hear music by me, orchestrated just like this orchestra here.' I marry the two cultures, the jazz at the top, and different Afro-Cuban rhythms going all the time."

The result was Latin jazz -- a term Bauza disliked as much as the word salsa, which both he and Puente called a sauce, not a music. "What country is Latin? What rhythm is Latin?" Bauza said. ``It's Afro-Cuban rhythm, that's what it is."

Bauza was an enormously influential figure. His 1943 composition *Tanga* (slang for marijuana) is widely considered the first Afro-Cuban jazz tune. It was Bauza who gave Dizzy Gillespie his big break, faking illness so the younger trumpet player could substitute for him in Calloway's band, and it was Bauza who introduced Gillespie to incendiary Cuban conga player Chano Pozo, resulting in the classic song *Manteca* and Gillespie's lifelong interest in Cuban music. That interest led, decades later, to a meeting with Sandoval in Cuba that resulted in Gillespie's becoming the Cuban star's friend and sponsor.

But Machito also was an essential part of the band.

"Machito was very much of a showman, he was a leader. . . . Mario never wanted to be the guy out front," says Michel Vega, who managed Bauza's late career. ``It was a really good partnership."

STILL A PRESENCE

"We worshipped Uncle Mario because of how my father worshipped him," says Mario Grillo, who was named for Bauza. ``I don't think of these men as not being here, 'cause when I play the music, I hear their presence."

A generous family man who cooked for his five children, Machito stayed in his Latino neighborhood in New York even after he became a star. Grillo says that when the band fell out of style and its shows didn't pay as well, Machito would supplement his musicians' pay out of his own pocket.

Puente's flamboyance and celebrity in his later years often obscured his musical ability. In 1939, when he was 16, Puente dropped out of high school and was soon playing with Machito and other top bands. By the end of the '40s, he was heading his own group, vying with Machito and bandleader Tito Rodriguez for Latin music supremacy.

"He was a hell of a musician," says Sandoval. ``A lot of people remember him playing the timbales laughing, sticking his tongue out. But beside that he was a solid, solid musician with a very profound foundation."

Puente attended Juilliard, composed, arranged and released numerous recordings, and played a multitude of instruments with a fluency that flabbergasted others. "He'd be talking to you and writing a chart while he was talking," Figueroa remembers. 'You'd crack nine jokes, he'd crack 15 -- he never said, 'Don't talk to me, I'm busy.' "

Puente's early repertory ranged through mambos, Cuban classics, percussion jams with the legendary Mongo Santamaria on congas and Willie Bobo on bongos; cha-chas, even calypsos and ballads. At the end of his life, he led a big band and two jazz groups.

"Tito learned, he expanded," says Joe Conzo, who worked with Puente from the late '50s until the bandleader's death in 2000. "He was always experimenting with new things."

DEMANDING ON THE JOB

If Puente was commercially shrewd, he was also fiercely demanding, of those around him as well as himself. He once halted shooting on the film *The Mambo Kings* because the dancers were off-rhythm. "If you didn't play the way you're supposed to play there'd be another side of him you didn't want to see," says Valentin. "He'd say, 'Leave your problems at home; we're here to play music. Afterwards you take care of your own business. This is *music* business.' "

That ferocious commitment was a driving force for musicians in that era. It was not unusual for bands at the Palladium to finish a show at 3 a.m. and then rehearse until dawn. Drinking on duty, wrinkled suits or millisecond rhythmic inaccuracies were not tolerated. Offstage, Machito, Puente and Bauza fostered each other and shared good times. Onstage they were uncompromisingly competitive. 'After they played, they'd have a drink, but the next week they'd be like 'I'm gonna [mess] you up again,' " says Conzo. "They made each other better."

'I asked my father once 'Who'd you prefer to play opposite of, Tito Rodriguez or Tito Puente,' " Grillo says. 'And he said 'Both, 'cause they'd exhaust each other, and with a cha-cha I'll kill both of them.' "

That devotion carried Machito and Puente to the ends of their lives. In 1984, after opening night of a weeklong gig at famed London jazz club Ronnie Scott's, Machito, 75, had a stroke and died soon after. 'The last thing he told me was 'Do the job,' " Grillo says. "And we finished out the week in London."

Valentin says he believes Puente's musical passion extends beyond the grave. "I still think he's gonna call me for a gig," Valentin says. 'When he died, another five musicians died in a row. I got scared. I got on my knees one day. I didn't pray to Jesus or God, I prayed to Tito Puente. I said, 'If you need a flute player, don't call me now. The phone is off the hook.' And a week later another Cuban flute player died."

Hopefully, when Valentin and his companions take the stage Friday, Puente and Machito will be content just to listen. As long as everyone plays right.