

The Tell-Tale Pulse

BY ELIZABETH HANLY

When Mario Bauza was playing clarinet for the Havana Philharmonic, Machito (Frank Grillo) was partying with sugarcane cutters, learning their rumbas, mastering their maracas. Bauza, after marrying one of Machito's sisters, left Cuba first. By the time Machito joined the couple in their New York apartment overlooking the Savoy Ballroom, Bauza had traded his clarinet for a trumpet and had become musical director for the Chick Webb Orchestra. That's when Bauza began thinking about blending Cuban rhythm into jazz, a notion a young trumpeter in Webb's outfit named Dizzy Gillespie later picked up on. Back in the apartment, Bauza and Machito worked together. In 1940 with their band, the Afro-Cubans, their sound exploded: Cu-bop.

In contrast to white-society Desi Arnaz stuff, here was authentic Cuban repertoire played for the first time in the States. The sound was incredibly layered percussion (especially emphasizing congas and bass), with all the instruments bopping around the clave beat. It's a complex structure, but, Jesus, such a smooth sound. The Afro-Cubans added swing-voicings, those so-called "stabbing brasses and rolling saxes," and the jazz harmonies that further defined Machito's music. Machito and Bauza's band first appeared in Carnegie Hall as intermission fluff, a status that ended in a blink. Major jazz musicians passed through for concerts and recordings: Charlie Parker, Zoot Sims, Buddy Rich, Cannonball Adderly, Tito Puente (a mere teething teen), and many more. Machito and Bauza recorded around 75 albums.

Bauza was back at Town Hall October 25, nearly 40 years after his Afro-Cubans first performed there. His history was a tough act to follow, even with backing by Paquito D'Rivera (sax and flute), Daniel Ponce (congas), and Ignacio Berroa (percussion). Most of the selections and musicians were straight from Bauza's recent album *Afro-Cuban Jazz* (Caiman). Like too much of the album, the evening left me with a what's-wrong? feeling. The signature sound was the same, still fun and occasionally glorious, but the pulse was weak. For that vigor, start searching for *Latin Soul Plus Jazz* (Tico) or *Machito at the Crescendo* (GNP).

Bauza's work feels boxed in now—too finished. Its wit and current don't have room to properly ignite, and the abrasive sound system didn't help. The band was too loose, the results a bit stale, sometimes glitzy. Things turned around mid-concert. D'Rivera tossed off a playful bolero piece, almost a habanera, charmingly understated like the *Afro-Cuban Jazz*'s "Cubanola," setting up the evening for Graciela, who along with Celia Cruz taught New York what salsa's ladies are all about. On the album Graciela's vocals

come tantalizingly close to the classic salsa sound, especially on the steamy ballad "Quedate." And at Town Hall her sass and smoke went all the way, bringing along everybody else. Then entered Dizzy Gillespie, and Ponce cracked his first smile of the evening. The pair led off a slow-burn re-creation of "Manteca," a Cu-bop standard by another Bauza protege, Chano Pozo. And it all blew again, that old-time fever. ■