

Bebo is Cuban

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Ramón Emilio Valdés Amaro is Cuban. Not even the decades he lived far away, first in Sweden and later in Spain, made him less ours, or stopped him from promoting Cuban music. One hundred years since his birth, October 9, 1918, Bebo Valdés is from Cuba.

It could be no other way for someone who played a first order role in the consolidation of the orchestral style with which Cuban vernacular music reached its purest expression around the middle of the 20th century; and at the same time, made a substantial contribution to the development of the Cuban jam session, the most imaginative and profound variant in the “creole-ization” of jazz.

With Dámaso Pérez Prado, Chico O’ Farrill, and Armando Romeu, plus the genius Benny Moré, as the free electron and only member without academic training, Bebo formed a band to fit his desires. He occupied a place to which he would return time and again to find the keys to the stature reached by Cuban music and its continental projection in the 1950s.

Bebo’s trademark band was Sabor de Cuba, with which he worked at the Tropicana nightclub, alternating with Armando Romeu, between 1949 and 1957, recording memorable sessions and accompanying Cuban and international figures like Rita Montaner and Nat King Cole.

In 1952, he created the batanga rhythm, a renovating proposal that was not understood by the recording and performance industry, but which left an indelible mark to become a reference in much that happened later, in the evolution of both Cuban jazz and timba. Of course, the initial

recordings of the rhythm featured Benny Moré, who had just returned from Mexico, and had not yet put together his powerful big band.

Bebo had moved to Mexico in 1960, where he collaborated from some time with the Chilean Lucho Gatica, who he had met in Havana. He later settled in Europe.

He left his family and started another one in Sweden, never understanding the changes taking place in his native country.

But never, even in the days he earned a living in restaurants and seedy Swedish clubs, did he stop thinking about music in Cuban terms.

Such was the case that, at 76 years of age, as someone said, he re-invented himself when he got a call to do a recording in New York.

This is the Bebo who took off again in Latin jazz, discs like **Bebo rides again**, and films like **Calle 54**, his fabulous collaboration with Diego el Cigala, and the re-encounter with his son Chucho Valdés on the album **Juntos para siempre**.

But I agree with something pointed out by researcher Rosa Marquetti: “It would be a major error to reduce the importance of Bebo Valdés in Cuban music, given the international revival boom he experienced with **Lágrimas negras**. In any case, the global recognition he achieved in the last decade of the 20th century was the well-deserved high point of a career that spanned successfully an entire century and more in Cuban music. He has his own outstanding place among the best band directors, composers, and pianists of renown, and moves among the most creative arrangers in the entire history of our music.”

This is the Bebo I would like to recall on his centenary, the Bebo who, without a doubt and beyond the anecdotal, legitimately belongs to us.
