

Chucho Valdés Interviewed

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When it comes to Cuban jazz — and Cuban music, generally — the name Chucho Valdés looms large, almost regal. The masterful pianist and musical adventurer has helmed multiple hybrid projects over the past 50 years, including his longstanding Cuban/jazz fusion band Irakere, the Afro-Cuban Messengers, and Jazz Batá, who will join him at Campbell Hall on Sunday, October 20.

Valdés has also been a centralizing force in supporting and promulgating Cuban music as director of the Havana Jazz Festival, an educator, and the unofficial cultural ambassador of his musically supercharged country.

Valdés can always be counted on for lively, sophisticated, and exciting music-making, a reputation still in restless motion at age 78. On last year's album *Jazz Batá 2*, a latter-day extension of his groundbreaking 1972 album *Jazz Batá*, Valdés blends his jazz trio sound with the traditional Cuban batá percussionists, a musical language linked to Santería rituals. While the drums anchor and exoticize the whole, Valdés's voice on the piano runs alternately hot, swinging, sweet, and sometimes avant-garde, but always with musicality as his guide. He's a musical treasure whose dynamic live shows belong in the catch-him-while-you-can category.

**Do you have any memory of your last visit to Santa Barbara, and Campbell Hall, in 2003 — recognizing that you have played countless cities in many countries over the years?** I remember it was a very beautiful concert where there was a large audience, which was very attentive.

**At the CSB you will be at the roots of Cuban jazz and Jazz Batá. A personal and social history. Can you tell me about the roots of your concept for this album?** We are based on African tradition in Cuba — the songs, the rhythms, the prayers — and this is fused with elements of jazz. This has worked very well for us. The batá is fundamental in this project, because we don't really use drums (in the form of a drum set), and then there is a rhythmic relationship between the roles and the piano. It becomes a very nice and very melodic atmosphere.

**And you do play piano, piano, piano, piano. It's a pilot that has been in the side of the gangl influences?** It's a combination of my ideas and influences. It's in my musical training, and I take all those elements and I mix them in a very organic way — and there's the difference.

**Who would you put on a short list of pianist heroes, and has that list changed over the years?** It has not changed, but new pianists have been added to that list: Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, [Thelonious] Monk, Bud Powell, Oscar Peterson, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Michael Tyner, Orlando Luna, Harold López-Nussa, Alfredo Rodríguez, David Virelles, Omar Sosa, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, and many others.

**The 1972 album Jazz Batá was a blend with more or less strictly jazz direction and then working with the great history and heritage of Cuban music in your work?** Maybe I'm working with roots and identity and researching to create new rhythmic combinations.

**Music is with you, son. You certainly have a matter of down in your father, Olibes and the Valdes family?** I would say that this is in our DNA and continues also with my daughter Leyanis, who is the youngest pianist in the family and is fantastic.

**Do you look back at *Border-Free* as a special and ambitious project, expressing yet another different aspect of your work?** Exactly. The *Border-Free* within the same idea is very different from *Jazz Batá* while still being Afro Cuban music but using drums as a rhythmic element mixed the same with robe and the rest of the Afro-Cuban percussion. But, conceptually, it's different.

**When I like a record in 2013 said speaking of this and a job of a head energy in your long musical life?** That was a very interesting period, and this period of *Jazz Batá* is still very important because in this project, we deepen even more Afro-Cuban folklore — and this makes me feel always creative and young.