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## SON - THE ROOTS OF CUBAN MUSIC

"My major challenge has been to try to convince people (I just started doing this two years ago) that Cuban music continued after Castro [the 1958 revolution], contrary to what so many people think..."

### The Afro-Cuban Allstars Present: Felix Baloy 'Baila mi Son'" An Interview with the Musical Director Juan de Marcos González

By Robin Davies



Since my interview, I have struggled with how to present and describe one of the most important figures in Cuban music today. Juan de Marcos González's professional credits include: musical director, composer, arranger and musician on two of the most renowned CDs in Cuban musical history, "A Toda Cuba Le Gusta," the Afro-Cuban Allstars recording that inspired Ry Cooder to collaborate with González in producing the "The Buena Vista Social Club." Through these two projects, González has helped reawakened the world's consciousness of traditional son music.

But these credits only hint at the debt and poetry scribbled in González's prolific musical soul. His artistry is like that of the sun's golden brilliance dancing on the surface of a tranquil lake. What lies underneath is pure magic. González has a gift of capturing rhythmic moods and styles of the past and merging them with the present with unspeakable ease that is staggering and splendid.

For years, González had the dream of creating a group that featured Afro-centric based Cuban music. He realized this goal in 1995 when he gathered together the foremost renowned Afro-Cuban artist in Cuba. "Allstars really started as an ambitious project, not a band. The only real requirement for participants was to possess a high level of musical ability, and they had to want to play Cuban music without making any concessions whatsoever," comments González. After many hours of rehearsals and financial turmoil, González, in 1997, produced and released the first Afro-Cuban Allstars CD, "A Todo Cuba le Gusta." Internationally, the CD was a hit and became a worldwide success.

González has now produced the Allstars third CD, "The Afro-Cuban Allstars Present: Felix Baloy 'Baila mi Son,'" on Tumi Music. The CD contains an arsenal of high-powered dance tunes that transport the listener to grandeur and colorful hues of Afro-Cuban music. "On this CD, we wanted to pay tribute to Felix Baloy, a great Cuban sonero. Perhaps the most important sonero of the seventies generation," says González. Baloy's charismatic voice adds a new vibrant earthy ingredient to the Allstars that evokes romance, passion, and at times, laughter and intrigue.

Up until the last five years, Felix Baloy has remained virtually unknown outside

of Cuba. Although throughout his forty-plus years as a sonero, capturing the hearts and respect of the Cuban people, this CD marks his first as the featured sonero in a recording. Sr. Baloy's years of experience shine throughout the CD, as he ad-libs hip, unexpected lyrical quips in places only a soldiered singer would dare never upstaging the musicians or musical arrangements. "This CD, in general, is filled with a very traditional sound that highlights Baloy's talent. I think it is exactly what we were after," says González.

From the title track, 'Baila mi Son,' a searing, skintight son melody, bellows and commands the feet to dance. The Allstars leave no questions why they are called Allstars--they are like seasoned fishermen heading out to deep musical waters casting their melodic net and reeling in the listener. Once in the net, the tale of the one that got away will never be told.

Recently, while in the midst of planning the Allstars latest world tour, I had the pleasure of interviewing Sr. Juan de Marcos González. It was an inspiring conversation and testament that in life, persistence is key. But being real with yourself is important to success, never forgetting that you achieve it with love, time with family, challenging oneself, exploring other artistic arenas and admiring the past.

**Robin: Sr. González...**

**González:** Please, call me Juan.

**Juan, can you tell me about your personal background--mother, father, family? What it was like growing up?**

**Juan:** "I was born in La Havana in January, 1954. I am an Aquarius and forty-seven years old. I have no sisters, just one brother named Carlos González, one of the best Cuban bongoseros. You've probably seen him with the Buena Vista Social Club or maybe in concert with some other groups I play with, the Allstars or Cachaito Lopez, Anga Diaz's orquesta.

My father was named Marcos González Mauriz. He was an excellent sonero and rumbero. He sang with Arsenio Rodriguez Orquesta, along with Rubén González. He went with them to New York, but he came back to Cuba because he didn't like cold weather. [González lightly chuckles at the memory.] We had a great bond and a father-and-son relationship. We would, like any father and son, fight, then make up and go hang out. He died in March, 1990. He was my father and a good friend. I miss him a lot.

My mom's name is Lilia Rosa Cárdenas. She was never a musician but has always been linked to music because of the three of us. I don't know any other musicians in my family. Oh yeah, my cousin Leobaldo de la Torre. He is an excellent classical guitar player.

My family is close and united, no doubt about it. We don't make any distinctions among us, like who's better or smarter, we're just family. I love everybody the same way with all my heart and have close relations with my extended family.

I am, of course, very close to my three children. They are the spice of my life. I have two daughters, Glicería and Laura Lidia González Abreu, sixteen and fourteen years old. They are musicians: one, a choir director and the other, a clarinet player. My son, Juan de Marcos González Perez, is twenty-six, he's a mechanical engineer and has no interest in becoming a musician. Even though he sings very well and plays piano, he's decided not to become a musician. Once in a while he plays and records music with me."

## How did you get started in music? Where did you study?

**Juan:** "I started studying music when I was nine years old at a conservatory in Havana called Amadeo Roldan Conservatory of Music. Roldan was a respected musician in Cuba. At the time, my main interest was classical guitar. I studied it at the conservatory for five years, then I was expelled because of my lack of discipline. I was terrible when I was a little kid! A practical joker-- it got me into a lot of trouble with the teaching staff. I was immature and didn't have much discipline.

When I was twelve, I got into rock music. That was not considered a Cuban theme at the conservatory. There was a symphonic rock group named 'Verdadera Historia de la Conquista de la Nueva España' (the Real History of the Conquest of the New Spain). Exactly the same name of the book by Bernal Diaz del Castillo, which I read in those days. I would pretend I was like the musician in the radical underground bands I'd hear from the U.S.-morning radio programs like KAAZ's Baker Street Show in Little Rock, Arkansas. I was a big rock fan back then and didn't care much about Cuban music. I think this is natural for young musicians to experiment with lots of different genres.

When my father found out about my expulsion from the conservatory, he decided I needed to "learn more serious things" and sent me to a prep school in Havana, where I studied more analytical things like mathematics and the sciences. These things eventually lead me to earn my degree as a mechanical engineer, then a Ph.D. at the University of Technical Science, where I eventually became a professor.

Over the years, my father and I fought a lot about my dream of being a musician. He'd always say, "Music is not a career" or "Being a doctor or lawyer-- that's a real career!"

But I never, nor did he ask me, to abandon my dream of being a musician. He just wanted the best for me. To this day, I thank my father for sending me to the university to "learn serious things" because without this, I would not have learned about what I could achieve outside of music.

I have designed dams, hydroelectric plants and irrigation systems in Cuba and have written books and lectured about technical design.

Since the beginning of my musical career, I have been influenced by many different musicians -in classical guitar, Leo Brower; in blues, Robert Johnson; in rock, Jimmy Hendrix, Carlos Santana and Eric Clapton; in son, Cota and the great tres player, Isaac Oviedo. When I play guitar, I find I'm influenced by all of them and have incorporated each of them into my own style of playing.

Today, I don't play guitar as much. I use it during my orchestration when touring, primarily the tres [a six-string guitar.] When I'm not on the road, my focus is orchestration, conducting, composing and arranging."



## When would you say you "had your big break?"

**Juan:** "Well, my first opportunity really happened with my rock friends when I was at the university. They'd come over to the house and play -that's when my father suggested we start a traditional acoustic son group. We did and named the band Sierra Maestra. The group still exists today and is



one of the best groups playing traditional son in the world. When we started in 1977 the band was a big success, at first among universities, then national, and later international. It was in 1980 that we appeared on a popular national TV program that was the catalyst for us. The show was called, "Todo el Mundo Canta." After we did that show, we became well known in Cuba.

I think what was the success of the band was the quality of our interpretations of the music. We had the opportunity of being advised by the greats Rafael Ortiz and Lazaro Herrera, directors of the Septet National of Ignacio Piñero, the highest institution of son habaneros. We learned from them the nuances of the rhythmic patterns and phasing of son music. We were educated by the true soneros.

I also think that part of our success came from the way we dressed-like punks. This created a contrast that made us attractive to the younger generation and, on other hand, older people felt very proud that young people were playing their music. It was a very beautiful period of time. We were the top band for five years, then we became a respected institution.

Another big break came when I started playing with Son Montuno -that's when I left my job at the university."

**Of all your arrangements and compositions you've written, what are some of your favorites?**

**Juan:** "I think the song I wrote for the CD by Amadito Valdés, a great timbale player from the Buena Vista and the Allstars. It is a danzón called "Glicería 5:00 a.m." It is a tribute to my wife. I enjoy it because I had the chance to portrait musically her vital rhythm. Glicería wakes up at 5:00 a.m.; at first, she's a little bit tired, only working at half speed, then she hits maximum acceleration doing her housework. She is amazing! She doesn't like to have any domestic workers come into the home. She likes to do everything herself. I don't like strangers in our home, either. Glicería, she is my everything, my manager, administrator, copier, company vice-president, public relations, secretary, advisor, everything. Around 9:00 a.m., she finishes with the household chores, then starts working in our production office. She is unique, my everything and world."

**What are some of the international musical challenges you face today?**

**Juan:** "My major challenge has been to try to convince people (I just started doing this two years ago) that Cuban music continued after Castro [the 1958 revolution], contrary to what so many people think. In the last forty years, when Cuba was isolated from the international market, there has been some very good music written. The music is not well known, but it exists. The quality of the music is very good and has its own classics. The challenge as well is to demonstrate that the young Cuban musicians are unique-some are exceptional, others genius, the majority are solid, good musicians.

It's a difficult challenge because I have had to take this on by myself, without the support of record companies for the last year and a half. But it is a good challenge because I know I am right.

I know it would be much easier for me to keep filling my pockets with money doing more Buena Vista projects, producing what the record companies want. But I am Cuban, and I understand very well what I have to do for my culture and identity.

Over the last year a half, Allstars have become a group of more young people and the mixing of the older generation. This makes me a target of much criticism from the "purist," who is not well informed and believes I have broken with "the real Cuban music." To them I say, I don't care. My common sense tells me, "Be at peace with my own devils," as Nietzsche said.

In fact, it makes me laugh when I read or hear the "experts" critiquing and disseminating about Rubén González or Ibrahim Ferrer. Because before the spring of 1996, they had no idea who they were. It was my wife and I who went looking for them, incorporated them in the first Allstars project and then Buena Vista production. These projects moved these fine musicians from an unjust anonymity to international fame. There have been more challenges, but educating the world to the fact music did not stop after 1957 is the greatest one."

**Well, this brings us to the new music coming out of Cuba: timba. What are your thoughts about this new genre? It is now considered the fastest growing style of music globally.**

**Juan:** "Well, I think timba is the sound of the young Cuban musician, but I don't think it's a hit globally.

I like how unorthodox timba is in a certain sense. I can see the many valid elements, and it is also transcendental. But at the same time, melodically, it is too repetitive and monotone and has too much U.S. influence in it-rap, free jazz, etc. I think timba is a transition music going toward something better and more authentic."

**What do you mean by "going towards something better?"**

**Juan:** "I can't really explain it in words what I mean by "better." Timba emerged in the seventies and caught more attention in the nineties because during this period of time, there were dramatic changes in Cuba's economic relations. The most drastic change was with the poor people. Timba reflects this in how and why it is so aggressive.

It's lyrically aggressive with its pejorative lyrics against women. This is partly because of the incipient infiltration of our young women entering into prostitution as a means of earning money as never seen before in Cuba. The lyric phrasing is brash, very fast and supported by arrangements that are filled with dissonance and tension-confirming and reconfirming the economic stupor of many of the people. Timba's constant themes are that money and licentiousness are the only possible way to survive. The way the arrangements are repetitive, long and monotonous, alternating with mambos, reflect the constant succession of similar days. What the economic times were like, everyday was like the next. With this evidence, this is what I call a transition.

But timba is also virtuous and has given Cuban music, "timbaos of the piano." By this I mean the form has developed an incredibly syncopated and beautiful system of harmonized orchestrations by using chord substitutions that compare to the Brazilians. The music has a tremendous competitive spirit and national reaffirmation, although at times it seems paradoxical.

The best interpreters of timba are very serious musicians, on and off stage. I'd say many salseros of New York or Latin America have used Cuban son in creating their new music, but timba is something completely inaccessible. It is "cossa nostra," in other words, you had to be there, lived it to know it.

As a sonero, of course, I don't play Timba, but I love to use the form from time to time. I primarily use the positive elements of this genre. I'm sure you can deduce that I see timba's future as a transition to a new Cuban genre that uses the maximum value of this kind of music fused with the best traditional music."

**Many critics and musicologists consider you to be one of the foremost leaders of Cuban music today. How do you feel about what the critics are saying about the chronicling of Cuban music?**



**Juan:** "Well, first of all I really feel very far from being a world leader. Instead, I see myself as a professor. I like to teach based on the demonstration of my hypothesis on empirical ways.

As consequence, my work in Cuba is to teach to young musicians that we have history. A musical history very rich, and if they want to be authentic, they have to be capable of fusing traditional values. Traditional values that are rooted in montuno, danzon and mambo, then translating it into their own contemporary language. This is where great works come from-knowing the roots.

We can't ask a young man to play like Compay Segundo, unless he wants it. But we can ask him to count on the history of our elder artist, for example, Compay Segundo. We can ask the young artist to be inclusive of their styles and all of our music when he is composing and doing orchestration. By doing this, it assures that when these young artists leave to travel internationally, they do it with taste, so that the music isn't something without roots. That's why I have so many young people in my band currently, and I change members every two or three tours. Always mixing members young with old people. Being a musical director in Cuba helps me in my purpose.

Out of my country, on the other hand, I try to show that Cuban music didn't stop in 1961; instead, there are many big things that happened after [the Castro revolution.] The thing is, they are relatively unknown. I prove this by developing bands that feature the Cuban artist of that time in an effort to combat the "purists" and "specialists" who question the quality of the music from 1961 to now. In both areas, thank God, I'm doing very well."

**Do you think your CD projects support this?**

**Juan:** "In the last Allstars CD, we wanted to pay tribute to Felix Baloy, a great Cuban sonero, maybe the most important of the seventies generation. In general, the CD is happy with a very traditional sound. Baloy deserves this after so many years-the CD is very danceable and swings. I think it is exactly what we wanted, or at least very close."

**Yeah, the "Baila mi Son" does swing. Of all the Allstars accomplishments, what is your happiest memory to date?**

**Juan:** "Some of the happiest moments in my life were when, in 1998, we received a nomination with the CD, "A toda Cuba le gusta," and then got a Grammy with Buena Vista Social Club, coinciding this with the nomination of five CDs of Cuban interpreters in two categories at such a prestigious event. I think that [moment] was the end of isolation for our music in the world and particularly in the U.S."

### **What are some of your happiest moments personally?**

**Juan:** "There are many: when I married Glicería Abreu twenty-one years ago, the birth of my children, graduating from the university, recording my first CD with Sierra Maestra, when we finished the first Allstars record, completing the Buena Vista y Ruben González projects in 1996. Those are just some of them."

### **What was your most difficult life experience? And what was the life lesson you learned?**

**Juan:** "So far, the darkest time for me was when my father died. I learned to love life more." [A brief moment of awkward silence.]

### **Juan, this is perhaps the most politically charged question of the interview. Ready? Do you prefer milk, tea or wine?**

**Juan:** [Laughing] "I don't really drink milk, only on special occasions. I prefer Cuban coffee and a Bordeaux '67 or '94."

### **What inspires you when composing or arranging?**

**Juan:** "My inspiration is Cuba and the environments, people, places, foods, cultures, everything. That's why I live here-because it's my little world. This is the way I see it."

### **As a writer, I am inspired by musicians. As a musician, who are some of the writers that inspire you?**

**Juan:** "I read a lot. Some of my favorite writers are: in philosophy, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche; in poetry, Eluard, Nicolas Guillen y Celaya; in story, Hemingway, Onelio Jorge Cardoso, Googol and Garcia-Marquez; in novels, Dostoyevsky, Isabel Allende and Carpenter, Essays, Engineers, Marinello and Russell; in science fiction, Asimov and Bradbury. In general, there are many more. I read many American writers as well, like Faulkner, Dos Passos, Dressier, Walker and Wright, among others."

### **In closing any words for the struggling artist out there?**

**Juan:** "The most important thing for artists [to know] is to respect themselves not to concede their artistry to anything, especially just to make money. By doing this, the artists are the owners of themselves, and this is the only way of being at peace with themselves. Paraphrasing Nietzsche: 'The artist is made for war, and war is for the warrior to rest. Anything else is madness.'"