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SON - THE ROOTS OF CUBAN MUSIC



Agua Por Favor! Adalberto Alvarez y su Son

By Robin Davies - 2001

It's a Monday night in Manhattan, New York's SOB nightclub. The room temperature is that of fire. The "Gentleman of Salsa," Adalberto Alvarez y su Son, have mercifully taken their first break for the evening, giving the audience a much needed rest. The people clamor to the bar, calling to the bartender, "Agua, por favor!" They are breathing heavily, holding their sides and dabbing the sweat from their flushed faces with cocktail napkins. Over the frantic ordering of drinks you can hear the impassioned, horsed voices of patrons crying out, "Eso! Ay caliente! Gracias Dios para el Caballero del Salsa!," then excitedly gulp down their water.

An accomplished composer, musician, arranger, and singer, Adalberto has been an enormous influence in the production and promotion of Cuban music. Globally, over 200 versions of his compositions have been recorded by artists like El Gran Combo, Oscar de Leon, Felix Baloy, Arsenio Rodriguez, Roberto Roena, Sonora Ponceña, Juan Luis Guerra, Wichy Camacho, Gilberto Santa Rosa, and many others, tagging him as the most covered artist in Latin music today. Internationally, Adalberto has won the accolades of numerous musical critics in Asia, Europe, Central and South America, and the United States for his work on the three Afro-Cuban All-stars CD series. The very project which is credited for the inspiration and launching of musician Ry Cooder and German film director Wim Wender's brainchild projects, "The Buena Vista Social Club."

"Jugando con Candela" Alvarez's First



With all the success Alvarez has experienced, in 2000 he released his first CD, "Jugando con Candela" (Playing with Fire), on Havana Caliente, a division of Atlantic records. "This CD for me is my musical jewel because of the quality of the singing, arrangements, and improvisational interpretation --it's a great CD," says Alvarez. From the first note Alvarez showcases his alchemy musical abilities to mix up pure rhythmic gold.

The band is unstoppable, playing with the musical force of a high-speed silver bullet train. His daughters Dorgeris and Yanithza Alvarez (featured on the cover) serve up superb spirited keyboard solos amidst explosive searing horn arrangements and smoking percussions. Lead singer Aramis Galindo has it all---charisma, style, and a vexing voice that's stealthy in tone and soulful in delivery. "I've always said that the hardest part of leading the orchestra is finding the right singers. The singers have to have a lot of power in their voice because of the arrangements I do. The horns are heavily accented; they

[singers] have to have perfect pitch, a good ear, a clean strong voice with the tonal quality and sound of a true sonero. Without these qualities their voice would be swallowed up by the band," explains Alvarez.

Perhaps what makes "Jugando con Candela" outstanding is the orchestrating and production its produced the traditional way, with the entire band in the studio recording each track live, creating a cohesive, well-balanced sound that succeeds in musical excellence.

La Historia del Son

The word son is used to encompass and describe all the traditional Cuban genres of music: the sones, boleros, afros, changüis, guarachas, son montuno, whose birth is said to be in the eighteenth century in Santiago de Cuba. "It's the music of the country people," comments Alvarez. "The lyrics and music are about the everyday life of the Cubano, our relationships, families, parties, sorrows, and joys."

The genre's first wave of modern day popularity came in the twenties and thirties when legendary orquestras like Los Matamoros, El Septeto Habanera, El Septeto Nacional de Ignacio Pinero, and El Cuarteto began performing at the upscale tourist clubs in Havana, where affluent, vacationing high society socialites and wealthy businessmen invited the bands to play in their countries. With each performance the word about this vibrant music spread like wildfire, and son music became genre in high demand worldwide.

But all that changed in the late fifties and early sixties with Castro's revolution. The United States spearheaded global sanctions against Cuba and the revolutionary government countered by closing its doors to the world and silencing the musical voice of son.

The desire for traditional son was then later replaced by mambo and rumba. Then in the mid-sixties, as Latin musicians immigrated to the U.S. they blended and mixed son rhythms with other Latin genres dubbing this new style salsa.

Meanwhile, in the depths of isolation the younger generation of Cuban traditional son musicians began modernizing the form by punching up the tempo, adding tighter changeovers, highlighting the earthiness of the voice but keeping the original essence of the genre in mind. Adalberto was one of the leaders in this modernization. "The social responsibility when I play son is to stay true to the genre's roots and teach the new generation of musicians how the music is really played in its purest form," states Adalberto.



The Seed is Planted, Takes Root and Grows

Born into a family of musicians in Camaguey, a neighboring town of Santiago de Cuba, Alvarez learned at a young age to sing and play son. "At home I used to sing with my mother. She taught me the songs of the old trova and always had music playing in the house, the music of

Matamoros, Beny Moré, and Sindo Garay. I then started working with my father's traditional son band," recalls Alvarez.

By the seventies his musical peers considered him a major troubadour leading the way in reawakening the younger generation in Cuba interest in traditional son. Alvarez says this journey started when he began developing musical ideals as director of Orquesta Tipica and scoring hit songs for Conjunto Rumbavana, which Alvarez sites was a paramount in his career. "When I wrote songs for Conjunto Rumbavana and heard my songs for the first time on the radio it was one of my happiest and inspiring moments, it still is to this day," comments Adalberto.

His break as a performer came when he formed Son 14, a group that captivated and swayed audiences throughout Cuba, eventually leading to international travel. "When I look back at what I created in the seventies, combining what I learned in art school, using modern technology, with the foundation based on what my parents gave me---the flavor of the old trovas. That's been the foundation of all I have created musically," explains Alvarez.

In the eighties Alvarez disbanded Son 14 and placed his focus on producing and collaborating on other musical projects: scoring music for films and working with respected artists in Cuba like Juan de Marcos González, musical director of the Buena Vista Social Club. But by the mid-eighties his desire to perform prompted him to form his current band. "The biggest challenge as a bandleader of a popular group has been making sure the orchestra remains on top and as the years go by doesn't loose its musical quality, keeping the sound fresh and modern," comments El Caballero. "I never think I've completely got it. There's always something more to learn."