

AFRO-CUBAN ALL STARS

Afro-Cuban All Stars is a unique orchestra that has always been devoted to promoting the full range of Cuban music, one that embraces several generations and all musical styles. Over the years many of the band's musicians have become international stars, including brilliant performers such as Ruben Gonzalez, Ibrahim Ferrer, Guillermo Rubalcaba, Amadito Valdes and Manuel "The Guajiro" Mirabal.

The genesis of the Afro-Cuban All Stars has its roots early in the 1990s. At this time the son ensemble Sierra Maestra, headed by Juan de Marcos, received a lot of international exposure. As a consequence, de Marcos was introduced to Nick Gold, president of World Music Records (at that time a small independent world music label). That encounter led to a couple of very successful tours in Europe. Later the group went to London and recorded *Dundumbanza*, considered one of the jewels of the world music scene of the early '90s. (In retrospect, this recording opened the doors to the further incredible boom of the traditional Cuban music of the period.)

Months later, de Marcos got the go-ahead to do an album celebrating the classic Cuban sound of the '50s – a recording whose personnel would feature many great musicians that de Marcos knew. An agreement reached, the plan was to prepare two projects: one featuring a Cuban big band and the other favoring a more traditional sound reminiscent of the acoustic style of Nico Saquito or Portabales.

In March of 1996 they recorded the album *A toda Cuba le Gusta*, featuring nearly 60 performers. Then, with the addition of celebrated artists such as Compay Segundo, Omara Portuondo, Eliades Ochoa, Barbarito Torres, and legendary American guitarist Ry Cooder, what became the Buena Vista Social Club. Finally, with low budget and only during two live sessions and simple orchestrations written at the studio by de Marcos, they also recorded the first solo album of Rubén González, "Introducing Ruben Gonzalez". This was destined to be one of the most successful of the "Buena Vista" series of recordings.

During the spring of 1997 and along with the release in Europe of the three albums, de Marcos and a select group of stellar musicians started touring all over the continent under the banner of a band christened the "Afro-Cuban All

Stars." The original line up, familiar from the records, included Ruben González

and Guillermo Rubalcaba (piano), Orlando López (bass), Amadito Valdés (timbale), Carlos González and Roberto Valdés (bongos & cuban percussion), Ángel Terry (congas), Daniel Ramos, Alejandro Pichardo and "Guajiro" Mirabal (trumpets), Alberto "Molote" Martínez and Jesús "Aguaje" Ramos (trombones) and, Raúl Planas, Manuel Licea, Pío Leiva, Ibrahim Ferrer and Félix Baloy (lead singers).

After several years of success – including four Grammy nominations, being the subject of several documentaries and films, and recipients of many other distinctions – the All

Stars are certainly one of the best-known and successful Cuban orchestras along with Los Van Van and Irakere.

Afro-Cuban All Stars has also opened the doors to a new generation by incorporating young musicians into the band. With his project, de Marcos has developed a concept: to stand up on the roots for creating the future. More so than simply creating a band, his approach has allowed him to expand its creative range by incorporating contemporary styles of Cuban music; as well, as a fluid approach to adjusting the orchestra's line-up by changing or adding musicians as appropriate to best reflect the different styles of music from the various periods that the band features.

The Afro-Cubans are the same orchestra that can be seen in those distinct performances captured in the famous Oscar-nominated Buena Vista Social Club documentary by Wim Wenders, the Tony Knox documentary Salon of Dreams, or the DVDs Live in Japan and Live in The Hague.

JUAN DE MARCOS

Juan de Marcos González, born in the Pueblo Nuevo barrio of Havana to a musical family, is a Cuban producer, composer, bandleader and actor better known for his albums with Sierra Maestra, Afro-Cuban All Stars, the Buenavista Social Club series and the films VIVO, Mambo Man, Buenavista Social Club and Buenavista Social Club: Adios. His father, Marcos González Mauriz (d March 1990), was a vocalist and rumbero who performed with prominent bandleader Arsenio Rodriguez and other well-known orchestras of the forties and fifties. He studied popular and tres guitar at the Ignacio Cervantes Conservatory and with maestros Leopoldina Nunez and Vicente "Guyun" Gonzalez. Later took courses on orchestral conduction and contemporary harmony at Goldsmith College, London. He has also a major and a PhD in Agricultural Sciences.

Growing up, González was a fan of American and British rock music before rediscovering his Cuban roots and establishing the first young "traditional" Cuban band, Sierra Maestra, in 1976. González's stated goal was to keep the torch of Cuban folk music alive for a younger generation.

González became a key member of the Buenavista Social Club under contract with Nick Gold, of World Circuit Records. And using his knowledge on and contacts in the Cuban music world created the required line-up, where many of the musicians were old friends of his dad. When Ry Cooder arrived in Havana for recording, González himself was working an "all stars" album tribute to the golden era greats of Cuban music, the Afro-Cuban All Stars, featuring many of the same musicians who comprise the Buena Vista Social Club. Subsequently, González led this band, The Afro-Cuban All Stars and Ruben Gonzalez's ensemble on their first European and American tours, including the concerts at Le Carre (Amsterdam), Mexico's Auditorio Nacional and Carnegie Hall.

Gonzalez's work has been nominated 4 times for the Grammys and won the first Womex Awards.

He speaks Russian, English and Spanish and has some knowledge of Afro-Cuban syncretic languages.