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SAY HELLO TO THE JUBANS

Jewish and Cuban music blend together for Buena Vista Social Klez. **by Adam Davis**



Ry Cooder's 1999 film **Buena Vista Social Club** shed light on the forgotten world of Cuban jazz musicians. The crumbling wall of secrecy hiding the Castro regime and the marvelous Cuban jazz tradition exposed aging legends Compay Segundo, Ibrahim Ferrer and Ruben Gonzales, with whom the world fell in love with all over again after a 40 year absence.

A well publicized visit by Pope John Paul II around the same time resulted in a relaxation of religious restrictions on the island and, before long, news emerged of the languishing remnants of Cuba's Jewish community, known as Jubans.

Some surmise that the early Converso Sephardic Jews who helped settle the island first brought the Middle Eastern Oud to the island, which eventually evolved into the Cuban stringed instrument the Tres. Its distinctive twang characterizes the Cuban musical form known as Son, a folksy grandparent of salsa and other Latin musical forms.

That's the premise of jazz recording artist Yardena Namerdi, an Israeli native who has long performed Latin jazz. Her Sephardic heritage and love of Cuban music have resulted in Yardena y Son Ladino, a marvelous musical fusion of the two cultures.

The shared roots of Sephardic Jewish and Middle Eastern music with Cuban rhythms evolved in 15th century Spain, where an already thousand-year-old mix of Moors, Jews, and Gypsies helped produce flamenco. Upon their expulsion from Spain, Sephardic Jews took their Castilian language, known as Ladino, with them.

It traveled from North Africa to the Balkans, Greece and Turkey, the Middle East itself, and bridging the Old World to the New World like Columbus and Cervantes, as far as Brazil, New Amsterdam and, yes, Cuba. The colorful words and rhythmic variants of the language were passed through the generations across the oceans in Ladino folk songs.

The Spanish culture and music which came to Cuba was already heavily influenced by Sephardim when it arrived, so when Jews arrived in Cuba en masse in the 1800s, their cultural contributions simply picked up where they left off. This was cut short by the mass emigration in the wake of Castro's revolution; by 1960, only 2,000 Jews remained. Current population estimates range between 1,000 and 1,500.

Yardena and arrangers Naomi Bloch-Schartz (pianist) and Chacho Schartz (bass) imagine what might have developed; a modern blend of Afro-Cuban jazz with ancient Ladino Romanceros. This album works on a very fundamental level musically and Yardena's rich vocals recall a bit of Celia Cruz, but she shines in her own right on lively Ladino standards "Almenderas" and "El Rey Nimrod." A more sensual approach is employed on "Una Matica De Ruda" and "Los Bilbilicos," and the Schartzs' arrangements stand out here, as does Tony de Vivo's percussion and the work of conguera Jainardo Batista and trumpeter Guy David.

Yardena doesn't consider this to be new at all, but a continual 500 year-old dance of cultures that is part of the fabric of Cuban culture itself. "I believe the fusion of these two traditions with so much common ancestry comes off as so natural as to sound startlingly inevitable," she says.

Percussionist Roberto J. Rodriguez seems to agree, though his personal connection to the subject tells a slightly more detailed story. He fled Castro's regime with his family at age nine and settled in Miami with many thousands of other Cubans, among whom were ten thousand Jubans.

Though Rodriguez himself is not Jewish, he began to feel an affinity for Jewish-Cuban music after meeting his father's musician friends, which included many Holocaust survivors and other Jubans. "Like my father [trumpet player Roberto Luis Rodriguez], I was exposed to Jewish culture and music at an early age," he explains. "To me culture is music. Sometimes I feel it was centuries ago the first time I listened to Jewish music."

Rodriguez was fascinated by the fact that many leading Latin bands were led by or featured Jewish musicians and pondered Miami Jews' affinity for Cuban sounds. The flavor of Cubans and Jews living in proximity — exiles and refugees all fleeing from a shared history of revolution and persecution, combined with his own family's longstanding ties to the Jewish community were too much to be coincidence. Roberto immersed himself in the culture and began playing professionally.

"I played a lot in Yiddish Theatre in Miami Beach in the 1970s when I was a teenager. I personally believe [Sephardic/Ladino Music] is a given due to my Spanish heritage. There are about seven last names in my family that are Sephardic, one of them being Salazar and the other Mu'oz on my mother's side," says the trumpeter and percussionist.

After graduating from the University of Miami, he played with Ruben Blades, Lester Bowie, T-Bone Burnett, Randy Brecker, Paquito D'Rivera, Julio Iglesias, the Miami Sound Machine, Joe Jackson, Paul Simon and Marc Ribot's Los Cubanos Postizos band, which recorded on John Zorn's label, Tzadik. Zorn and Ribot both were instrumental in fomenting the "Downtown" klezmer renaissance in New York, the vitality of which revived Roberto's interest in Jewish music.

In 2001, Zorn asked Rodriguez to record for his label. He gathered some musician friends, among whom were klezmer luminaries Matt Darriau and David Krakauer and recorded *El Danzon de Moises* (The Dance of Moses). The album seamlessly fused Cuban forms with klezmer sounds without being beholden to either, a musical blend of Cuban Danzon and Guahira with some Sephardic melodies and klezmer instrumentation. The imaginative tracks "El Polaco" and "The Shvitz" are standout examples of this fusion on what is a terrific record.

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THE SUCCESS WAS SUCH THAT A SECOND ALBUM, *Baila! Gitano Baila!* was recorded last year with direct references to a specific Cuban culture that evolved in Havana and Miami. "Wolfe's Corner" recalls a famed Jewish restaurant in Miami and "Piruli" is inspired by a Cuban lollipop sold on street corners by Polish Jews. "Marranos y Conversos" refers to the Spanish Jews who converted during the Inquisition while "Dice El Sabio Solomon" (Solomon the Wise) expands the musical repertoire to include Columbian cumbia. Legendary klezmer clarinetist Naftule Brandwein's "Turkish-Bulgarish" gets a delightful treatment to wrap up an outstanding album.

For a tiny community of exiles among exiles, the Jubans have made their mark and given us a unique sound all its own. ■

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