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MUSIC

MUSIC; Bottom Line: Guardian Of the Beat

By BARRY SINGER

LISTENING to music is one thing; feeling it is another. Nowhere is this distinction more overt than in the Afro-Cuban tradition, in which a tactile rhythmic pulse called clave underscores every musical value.

Think clave and what you hear and see, of course, are instruments of percussion. Two marvelous new CD's go beyond conga drums and timbales, however, to celebrate the rarely appreciated contribution of the string bass to Afro-Cuban music.

Surprisingly, it is the Buena Vista Social Club's venerable bass player, Orlando (Cachaíto) López, who has adopted the more renegade approach with his debut solo album, "Cachaíto" (World Circuit/Nonesuch 79630-2). In it he gooses the traditional Buena Vista style with contemporary shocks courtesy of hip-hop and dub reggae. In contrast, Charlie Haden, the longtime bass player for Ornette Coleman and other jazz avant-gardists, delivers a reverently straight-ahead encomium to the slow, lyrical ballad form known as bolero on his latest album, "Nocturne" (Verve 440 013 611-2).

What the music on both discs have in common is a bass player nurturing the rhythmic patterns that make Afro-Cuban music dance. This sort of role, though not wildly different from the bassist's part in other forms of music, is nevertheless singular, uniting improvisational virtuosity with time keeping that grounds the groove. It is a style that resembles rhythmic partnering -- as on a dance floor -- with the bassist deftly nudging the percussion-driven rhythms now this way, now that; always leading, always keeping the pulse in motion.

Mr. Haden's interest in Cuban music dates from 1968, when he released "Liberation Music Orchestra," an album of compositions about revolution and political freedom that includes one he wrote, "Song for Che." This time Mr. Haden relies on the Cuban pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba for inspiration. When Mr. Haden took his Liberation Music Orchestra to Havana in 1986, he met the 23-year-old Mr. Rubalcaba, whose gifts as a jazz player astonished him. It was not until 1989, though, that Mr. Haden finally persuaded André Ménard, the artistic director of the Montreal Jazz Festival, to extricate Mr. Rubalcaba from Cuba for an appearance with Mr. Haden at the festival. After returning to Cuba, Mr. Rubalcaba ultimately made his way to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic and finally to Coral Springs, Fla.

Mr. Rubalcaba introduced Mr. Haden to many of the 12 boleros presented on "Nocturne" -- five of them of Cuban derivation, four by Mexican composers, two original compositions by Mr. Haden and one by the pianist himself. The music is strongly influenced by Mr. Rubalcaba's piano style: deeply romantic, tender, yet contemplative. "I didn't want to bring anything about Cuban rhythms into my bass playing," Mr. Haden acknowledged in an interview at this year's Montreal Jazz Festival, where he and Mr. Rubalcaba performed the music from "Nocturne" with the album's primary collaborators, the violinist Frederico Britos Ruiz, the drummer Ignacio Berroa (working with a jazz kit) and the tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano. The ensemble will reassemble for a weeklong engagement at Iridium, the Manhattan jazz club, beginning on Tuesday.

"I'm not from Cuba," Mr. Haden said. "I would never, ever attempt to slip on the shoes of Cachaíto or any of the great Cuban bass players. The music inside of a culture can get inside a musician, though, if they have the ears to allow it to happen. It allows the tradition of the music to come in and inspire you. Inspiration from the source."

Where "Nocturne" is a tryst, hushed and enchanting, "Cachaíto" is a party, roisterous and exhilarating. As the son of Orestes López -- a multi-instrumentalist and composer whose work with his brother, Israel (Cachao) López, the legendary bassist, was a linchpin of the revolution in Cuban music from the 1930's on -- Mr. López has nothing to prove in terms of aesthetic veracity. His CD teases the tradition with a sense of joy that is both irreverent and bone-deep. There are strings and electronic sampling, hip-hop tropes and descarga (jam session) riffs, rapping as well as eloquent bolero crooning by the Buena Vista Social Club's own Ibrahim Ferrer. Other Buena Vista regulars on the album include the pianist Rubén González, the trumpeter Manuel (Guajiro) Mirabal and the musical director Juan de Marcos González; the record also features the South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela and the French D.J. Dee Nasty.

A S a bassist I think of myself as a colchón -- a pillow," Mr. López has said, "always supporting everything that is happening, always there for the soloists to fall back on."

In a recent interview he added: "The beauty of the bass is that its essential function is for dancing. It's the bass that holds the beat; you need the bass to dance! What I wanted to do with this record was take the tumbao -- the key bass patterns of Cuban popular music used to launch the descarga -- and move them away from the traditional. It was an experiment. And I really like the way it turned out. It's cool."

Photos: Orlando (Cachaíto) López, left, rehearsing with members of the Buena Vista Social Club in Cuba last year; right, Charlie Haden performing at Lincoln Center: (Associated Press; Jack Vartoogian)