

Cuban Piano Masters Handle Handful of Keys Thursday for SFJazz

by Jim Harrington

Once again showcasing the type of inspired programming that has made it one of the nation's most exciting presenters of jazz, SFJazz hosted two generations of Cuban piano mastery Thursday. Chucho Valdés, 61, and Gonzalo Rubalcaba, 39, performed as part of the arts organization's spring season, and the Masonic Auditorium is probably still trembling from the virtuosic skills on display. A capacity crowd turned out to the venue at the top of the City by the Bay mostly to see legendary Valdés. He was the headliner and by far the bigger name of the two. Valdés certainly didn't disappoint his loyal fans. Leading a quintet that included the great Joe Lovano on saxophone, the son of pianist Bebo Valdés delivered a stellar evening of energetic originals and classic Afro-Cuban tunes. Rubalcaba held up his end of the deal as well. The young gun might have even stolen a few fans away from the elder statesman during his delightful opening set. Backed by drummer Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez and Bay Area bassist Jeff Chambers,

Rubalcaba put on a much more enjoyable show Thursday at the Masonic than he did when I last saw him perform at Yoshi's. One complaint that has dogged the young pianist during the years is that he tries to do too much with his songs. But he spent less time on the high-wire act and actually showed great -- gasp! -- restraint in his playing at the Masonic. He started off with a ballad and allowed the momentum to build naturally. By the time he fully unleashed his blazing skills, and his hands were flying about the piano keys like hummingbird wings, the crowd was right there with him. One of the most difficult things in the music business is for the opening act to warrant a true standing ovation. But everyone in the building was on their feet when the Gonzalo Rubalcaba Trio walked off the stage.

After a short intermission, Valdés took the stage, and the pyrotechnic piano stylings continued. Valdés' hands don't quite flutter about the keys. Moving at top speed, they chop like dual woodpeckers at the

piano. Starting with Rafael Hernandez's classic "Cumbanchero," a song recorded by everyone from Desi Arnaz to Liberace, Valdés forcefully took the crowd from Nob Hill all the way to Havana. Valdés, founding father of the Cuban super-group Irakere, is quite a presence on stage. That's without even playing a note. He's a huge man, standing 6-foot-6, and he looks remarkably like actor James Earl Jones.

He has a wingspan that would make an eagle jealous, and his hands look as if they could palm medicine balls. What that translates to on songs like "La Comparsa" and "Drume Negrita" is that Valdés can cover a great amount of territory on the keys seeming to put much effort into it. Valdés was backed by a great rhythm section featuring bassist Lazaro Rivero Alarcon, drummer Ramses Manuel Rodriquez Bazalt and percussionist Yaroldy Abreu Robles. The three powerful rhythm players continually pushed the master to great heights on the Valdés original "Mambo Influenciado."

The shining moment of the collaboration between Valdés and Lovano occurred during the song "Nanu." Performed as just a duo, with the rest of the band off stage, the two masters gently intertwined their playing to create a very warm, delicate ballad. Lovano showed some mighty chops during his sax leads. However, in my book, he took too much of the spotlight away from Valdés. On the other hand, not everyone in attendance would agree with me. Notably Valdés. The gracious bandleader even closed the show with an encore of "St. Joe," dedicated to Lovano.

In all, it was an evening dedicated to Cuban jazz piano. And we witnessed two masters of the genre at the Masonic.

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