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## In Cuba, an 'Extended Family' Reunites

Wynton Marsalis says his Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra's five-day residency in Havana is 'a dream come true.'



Crowds wait outside Teatro Mella to see the performance of Jazz at Lincoln Center with Wynton Marsalis.

FRANK STEWART

*By Larry Blumenfeld*

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### *Havana*

A tight circle of musicians, diplomats and journalists ringed a piano in one of the 65 rooms within a sprawling neoclassical house here Monday night. Wynton Marsalis raised a trumpet to his lips, finding easy communion with pianist Chucho Valdés, a towering figure of Afro-Cuban jazz. The house, built in 1942, is the residence of Jonathan D. Farrar, the chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba, which serves in absence of an embassy. The trumpet belongs to the 23-year-old Cuban trumpeter Julio Rigal, who was standing nearby. The song, a Gershwin classic, "Embraceable You."

Mr. Rigal beamed. Lazaro Montero, 79, member of an informal collective in nearby Santa Amalia that meets monthly to dance to classic jazz, cheered lustily at song's end. Later, he recalled Mr. Valdés's father, Bebo, also a celebrated pianist, playing that song decades ago, when American musicians such as Sarah Vaughan regularly visited the Tropicana nightclub.

The current five-day residency (through Saturday) in Havana by Mr. Marsalis's Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra—at Mr. Valdes's invitation and under the auspices of the Cuban Institute of Music, an agency of the Cuban Ministry of Culture—aims to reaffirm a long-standing embrace between American and Cuban musical traditions. Five nights of concerts at Havana's Teatro Julio A. Mella serve to showcase the orchestra in various settings, including in tandem with Cuban musicians. Improvisation workshops are scheduled for Friday at the National School of Music and Amadeo Roldán Conservatory, and a "Jazz for Young People" concert is slated for Saturday.



Mr. Marsalis performs.

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"This is about music first and foremost," said Mr. Marsalis after a lengthy afternoon rehearsal. "And it's a way to be among extended family. It is a dream come true on many levels."

"The fantasy goes back at least eight years," said Adrian Ellis, Jazz at Lincoln Center's executive director, who raised nearly \$500,000 from the Mellon and four other foundations once his organization secured approvals from the U.S. Treasury Department. For Susana Llorente, a vice president of the Cuban Institute of Music, "this expresses the realization of our deepest and our common desires."

A recent easing of the enforcement of American travel restrictions related to cultural exchange between the U.S. and Cuba helped facilitate everyone's dreams. The Havana residency will be followed by Mr. Valdés's concerts with his band, Afro-Cuban Messengers, at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Allen Room on Oct. 22 and 23, his first U.S. engagement in seven years. (Mr. Valdés will also perform at the Village Vanguard jazz club on Nov. 1.)

"I think people forgot what the bridge between Cuba and the U.S. looks like," said Carlos Henriquez, a Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra bassist who is of Puerto Rican descent and grew up in the Bronx, and who was tapped by Mr. Marsalis as the project's music director. "We're here to remind them."

The 1,500-seat Mella theater was packed for Tuesday's opening-night concert, up through a balcony formed from an organic sweep of rough plaster. The program was studded by new arrangements and recent compositions by orchestra members. The most ambitious example, "Dalí," composed by alto saxophonist Ted Nash, swung gracefully and included hints of clave (the rhythmic building blocks within Afro-Cuban music) despite its unusual 13/8 time signature. The orchestra shone brightest through exquisite muted-trumpet passages and dizzily interlocked trombone parts during Duke Ellington's 1939 composition "Braggin' in Brass."

Wednesday was a night for hometown heroes and homegrown sounds. It began with "Afro-Cuban Jazz Suite," composed by Chico O'Farrill (1921-2001), who left his native Cuba for good in 1957, and whose son, pianist Arturo O'Farrill, led an Afro-Latin orchestra for Jazz at Lincoln Center from 2002 to 2007: It's an astounding piece that moves from staggering horn hits to tender lyricism, and the orchestra handled it with sensitivity and focused technique, grounded through the mastery of percussionists Yaroldy Abreu Robles, Dreiser Durruthy Bambole and Pancho Terry. Bobby Carcassés, beloved locally for his many musical talents, sang a rousing version of Ernesto Duarte Brito's "Como Fue." This and other tunes familiar to nearly all in attendance arrived via savvy, sometimes untraditional arrangements. On Abelardo Vázquez's danzón "Almendra," flutist Orlando "Maraca" Valle's fleet improvisations were well framed by the piccolos and clarinets of Vincent Gardner's version.

Finally, Mr. Valdés joined the orchestra along with members of his band. Mr. Henriquez moved to a conductor's role. Lázaro Alarcón stepped in on electric bass. Instantly, the feeling shifted: Mr. Valdés's music freely blends disparate musical styles, from ceremonial Yoruban chants to contemporary Cuban dance beats, ragtime to jazz fusion. Within 12 minutes, he spanned four

decades of his own history, from his 1970 composition, "Misa Negra (Black Mass)" to "New Orleans," his tribute to Mr. Marsalis's hometown. The former folded multiple rhythmic strategies into a broad musical statement. The latter stuck mostly to Mr. Valdés's approximation of what's known in New Orleans as "the big four," beat-wise, save for one four-bar passage of clave-based, 6/8 rhythm. It was a pleasing jolt, potent with possibilities that the musicians clearly reveled in, a small signal of the larger promise of this still unfolding trip.

—*Mr. Blumenfeld writes about jazz for the Journal.*

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