



SEPTEMBER 2009 ISSUE

Features ⊕ ⊕ ⊕

CHICO ALVAREZ & MAFIMBA: CAUGHT IN THE ACT

By Allan Spatz



On August 14th, I had the pleasure of photographing Chico Alvarez and his conjunto Mafimba at SOB's (Sounds of Brazil) in New York City. What an incredible first set! Unfortunately, I had to leave in order to catch the last bus up to Riverdale (Bronx), so I can only imagine what the second set must have sounded like. But this was not the first time that I have been privileged to hear their music up close and personal, and the one thing I can relate about most of their

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performances is that Chico and his "mafimberos" sound absolutely great! I like all types of music, but I'm also old school, which means that it's that pure hard-driving Cuban *masacote* that does it for me every time. Mafimba's tumbao is simply infectious and they have always been a band that brings out the excitement of the traditional Cuban songbook, chosen especially by Alvarez for the hardcore salsero crowd to dance to. His book includes a variety of moods and colors, with styles that range from the very frenzied rumba-guaracha-mambo of the Palladium era, to the laidback son and chachachá of post-mambo era. And that includes an occasional hint of the charanga style as well. This night's performance was no exception. Being a lover of this genre of music, I derive enormous enjoyment not only from listening and dancing to their music, but also from capturing the excitement of their performance with my lens.

Mafimba consists of extremely talented and professional Cuban and Puerto Rican musicians; each in their own right is a seasoned master of his respective instrument. Individually, they really shine brightly. As soloists they can be depended on to deliver something unique and different. Collectively, they come together as one fine tuned machine to perform the greatest music on earth, the way it was intended to sound. In a word, these cats explode.



I first met Ernesto "Chico" Alvarez Peraza a couple of years ago at a local function in Queens, and have enjoyed his music ever since. Chico is a native New Yorker specializing in hot dance music. He was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Cuba, and has been performing as a singer throughout the New York City tri-state area for the last four decades. He currently performs with the aforementioned ten-piece conjunto and can be heard hosting New World Gallery, a weekly music show which airs on Sunday afternoons at WBAI Pacifica Radio (99.5 FM). A staff writer for Latin Beat magazine, his written works can also be found online, via latinjazznet.com. Currently he lives in northern New Jersey. Throughout the years, Alvarez has been the recipient of many awards, among them a special recognition from the National Federation of Community Broadcasters. During his twenty-two years on the air, he has interviewed a broad range of artists, from Andres Segovia, Tony Bennett, Ben E. King, Dizzy Gillespie to Tito Puente, Cachao Lopez, Celia Cruz and Chucho Valdés.





Alvarez is of course the consummate lead vocalist and he is sometimes joined on the bandstand by the likes of Jorge Maldonado or Pepito Gomez. On this particular night Alvarez featured a newcomer, Manuel Alejandro, who sang and danced around the stage like a seasoned pro. The rhythm section was a who's who of New York soneros: Sergio Rivera (piano), Ruben Rodriguez (bass), Luis Mangual Jr. (bongó and vocals) and Pito Castillo (tumbadoras). This is about as tight a foundation as one can get these days. Tres player Alfonso Garcia Osuna evoked a bygone era, back when the "typical" Cuban style of Arsenio Rodriguez and Niño Rivera was paramount, adding a touch of Santana here and there. Then there was that awesomely tight horn section, sizzling with ad-lib mambos and exciting solos—Roberto Rodriguez, Leonel Sanchez and José Freyre whipped the audience up into a frenzy, building a fire that was reminiscent of the original Fania All Stars. I thoroughly enjoyed myself, and from the looks on the faces in the crowd (not to mention the movement of their happy feet), everyone else in the room did too.

Allan Spatz is a freelance photographer and writer living in New York City. His varied collection of photos can be viewed by going to: www.vinilemania.net and clicking on "photos."



RAY VIERA

Bringing Back the OLD SCHOOL "MONTE ADENTRO" SOUND

By Chico Alvarez Peraza

SOB'S: an Oasis of Latin Dance, Food and Culture

Back in June of 1982 something began to bubble on Varick Street in lower Manhattan. Fueled by a total commitment to exposing the musical wealth and heritage of the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora to as many people as possible, owner Larry Gold opened the doors to what would eventually become New York City's premier venue for world music – Sounds of Brazil, popularly known as SOB'S.

At that point in time, the area known as SoHo (derived from the words "South of Houston") wasn't exactly a hub of ethnic



culture in Manhattan.



SoHo hadn't yet become the trendy, cutting-edge community that it is today (I don't even think the tag was widely used).

Varick street was simply a strip of asphalt just south of Greenwich Village, an extension of 7th Avenue that led to Canal Street and the Holland Tunnel, marked by non-descript warehouses and a squat, grey looking post office. And in the wake of the famed Village Gate's demise, the whole downtown area was dullsville, to say the least.

Looking back to 1982, Latinos were still married to their favorite midtown and uptown dance venues (all of which are now gone) so the area below Houston Street wasn't exactly inviting. But true to his positive New York attitude and spirit, Larry forged ahead with his vision, which was to make SOB's the number one spot for dance and entertainment. All he needed to do was to create that certain atmosphere, a kind of *ambiente popular*. Because of that dedication and perseverance, the corner of West Houston and Varick Street was transformed from a quiet family eatery in the middle of a harsh commercial landscape to an internationally known, highly respected oasis of world music and fine cuisine in the heart of SoHo. But truth be told, Larry could not have done this alone.

He hired a young and savvy indy promoter named Ana Araiz, whose ingenuity in booking acts for the club's "Latin crowd" earned her the respect of every musician in New York. With the help of New York's non-commercial radio stations, she conceived and promoted "La Tropica" on Monday nights. Ana's self-described mission was to ensure that the old Monday night tradition of memorable and historical Latin music *jams* (which had been started by popular deejay "Symphony Sid" Torrin during the late 1960s) lived on in the area. Because she was such a classy lady, and well liked, she achieved her goal, doing it with a consummate style. During her tenure, the club's new ambience instantly began to draw young, hip and creative followers, and this eventually helped transform and revitalize the area from a virtual no-man's-land to a vibrant and exciting community of artists and cutting-edge commerce.

SOB's did for SoHo what the Apollo Theatre had done for Harlem decades earlier. Sadly, Miss Araiz passed away on October 8, 2001, and believe me, she is still being missed today. I often perform at SOB's myself, and I can say with credibility that I do feel her spirit lingering around the stage, as I imagine her on the sidelines, happily smiling at me.

So let's fast-forward twenty-five years to 2008 and the cross-cultural scene that SOB'S has helped to create. True, the classic Monday night *descargas* are no longer part of that scene, but there is still great dance music being performed on the weekends, especially on Friday nights, when both Cuban and Haitian music share the spotlight. Both the venue and the neighborhood remain an important and vital part of the cultural fabric of New York, drawing both locals and tourists from around the world. SOB'S caters mainly to the hardcore seasoned New Yorker, as well as to that neverending flow of out-of-towners – "the new breed" – by providing top-notch entertainment in an intimate setting. The club has developed a reputation among artists and industry insiders as the one place where trends develop and artists on the cusp of their

breakthrough into the mainstream are discovered.

The list of performers who have honed their pre-fame chops on the bandstand at SOB'S is a veritable who's who of Latin Americana. Even more impressive is the number of artists who continue performing at SOB's after they have reached their goals. They keep coming back because they want to maintain an intimate connection with their initial fan base.

Such an artist is the fiery pianist Eddie Palmieri, who returned recently to SOB's for yet another fine performance on April 16th. New Yorkers and visitors to our fair city treated themselves to an incredibly tropical getaway right in the heart of SoHo, as the maestro weaved his timeless Afro-Cuban magic. Many of New York's top Latin bands are featured there regularly, such as Libre, Willie Villegas, SonSublime, Grupo Irek, Zon del Barrio, La Bolá, La Excelencia, Grupo Vibe, Chico Alvarez y Mafimba and many others.

It was also my pleasure to have been present when former Pacheco vocalist Ray Viera took center stage with his own trombone conjunto and whipped up a king size portion of *són*, *guaracha* y *guaguancó*, to the delight of all those dancing feet. It all went down easily, and from my vantage point, it was a match made in heaven.

Ray Viera at SOB'S: connecting with the dancers again

Chévere is the word I would use to describe newcomer Ray Viera's presentation back in April at SOB's. He may be young but he certainly is not brand new to the circuit. What's more important though is that this very humble man knows the history of the music from the bottom up. He was born in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico and grew up in Philadelphia. He is still an avid student as well as a professional. Viewing him as a vocalist I would put him in the top twenty worldwide. His charismatic and boyish charm, crystal clear high pitched voice and range are not unlike a young Ismael Quintana. His clever phrasings and his intuitive sense of rhyme are of optimum quality – down to earth you might say. And "sabor" is definitely his middle name. As far as having "paid his dues" (where experience is concerned) Viera has been performing for 11 years with Johnny Pacheco's band and I would say that he knows the ropes pretty well by now. Having become a bandleader only recently, he carries himself accordingly, with the persona of a seasoned veteran. But as the old adage goes, no man is an island. Trombao is Ray's backup band, his family away from home, his musical foundation.



This was Ray's second appearance at SOB's and the band immediately took off, with *mucho swing*, like Al Santiago used to say. The band came off really tight (well rehearsed), and explosive like in the old days – which is a bit strange because most of them look young enough

to have come up during the "salsa pendeja" era. Their approach to the New York "trombone sound" delivers more of a trumpet conjunto feel, hence the name of the band. This does not mean however that they are anchored in the Pacheco and Casanova styles, but rather that their tumbao is traditionally Cuban. Their arrangements are 100% in the here and now and their beat is relentless (as it should be).

Stylistically, Ray adheres more to the classic 1970s tradition than to the trendy sounds which have recently become popular among dancers. Obvious to this writer was the fact that Trombao was trying very hard to keep in step with the newly renovated "salsa brava" style, versus the free-wheeling-hip-shaking-arms-in-the-air "timba" modality that has been wreaking havoc on the dance floor. Trends notwithstanding, today's young musicians – like those whom I saw on stage at SOB's – are unanimous in discarding the insipid "sensual" style altogether, which is really a good sign that "salsa brava" is making a badly needed comeback. Even the club deejays have begun to delete the stale old music of the '80s and '90s, opting for a more even balance of classic '70s and new wave timba, thus diversifying and energizing the dance floor. Viera and the guys all know that the public is really into that kind of thing these days, and so it must have been quite satisfying to see their fans' appreciation by packing the club. The Friday night crowd dances to every type of beat and tempo and applauds after each number. When was the last time you saw that?

The audience was also very much in tune to the movements and the antics of the musicians who were performing with Ray on stage. They danced, but they also observed. One could sense an instant rapport between the artists and the audience. *Són, Guaracha y Guaguancó, Tratame Como Soy, Por Bella Que Eras Blues, Un Mundo Cruel, Valluna Mando Caleña, Oración al Padre Celestial*, and *Cancion Pa' Abuelito* are all compositions from Ray's debut CD which were heard that night, with practically no filler material added. The exception perhaps was the inclusion of *Guajirón*, an old piece from Willie Colon's more typically Cuban era.

Closing out the evening was the smoker to end all smokers – *Mi Montuno Monte Adentro* – with all the guys soloing and creating all sorts of counterpoints within their ad-libbed mambos. Jose Tabares is one of the most swinging bassists around. At the keyboards was Pedro Bermudez (former pianist for Willie Rosario and another monster musician). His solos on *Por Bella Que Eras Blues, Guajirón*, and *Un Mundo Cruel* were quite reminiscent of that neo-classic period in Latin music. The three trombonists were José Davila, Luis Cruz and Noah Bless, an awesome trio that gives Trombao their overall "identity." Under the leadership of José Tabares, the brass section is explosive and aggressive, not only in terms of its dynamics and accompaniment but also in terms of its improvisational skills (on Ray's CD the musical direction was handled by Edwin Sanchez). As I listened to the montuno finale, each member seemed to add a little something to that particular musical arrangement, which was conceived by Ray as a *descarga cubana a la Nueva York*. On percussion were the dynamic duo Willie Romero and Luis Campana, each playing their respective instruments with a lot of gusto – "metiendo mano," as they say. Look for this group and this vocalist to go for the brass ring within the next few years. It's in the cards.



Dia De San Juan

San Jose, CA. 7/18/2009

By Jesse "Chuy" Varela



QUE DIA! It was a hot muggy July day in San Jose, CA. for the annual Dia de San Juan Festival. But the heat did not diminish the spirit or enthusiasm of the event that serves as a fundraiser for student scholarships. Instead, it helped to bring the day to a cultural boil in honor of St. John The Baptist, the patron saint of Puerto Rico.

Organized by the Western Region Puerto Rican Council, the celebration of Boricua pride took place for years at the Santa Clara Fairgrounds. It moved to the Shoreline Amp Theater in Mountain View, CA. where it lasted three years. The event relocated again this year, moving to the quaint History Park, a replica of a small western town located within the bigger Kelly Park in

San Jose.

People came from inland areas like Bakersfield, Modesto, Sacramento and other spots around California to enjoy Puerto Rican food, music, arts, crafts and conversation about "La Isla del Encanto." Two stages presented music and dance, and vendors selling food had long lines all day. Traditional dishes and delicacies like pastelitos and alcapurrias emitted mouthwatering smells. The blue, red and white colors of the P.R. flag blended beautifully with the greenery of the park.

VIVA LA MUSICA! On the main stage the renowned cuatristera and bandleader Stanley Robley warmed up the celebration to open the day's events with some great jibaro music. DJ Coqui (Ivette Fuentes) had already set the mood spinning great salsa classics honoring Puerto Rico, as people staked their spots with lawn chairs and coolers on the grass and shady areas.

The discovery for me this year was the South Bay salsa band, Saboricua. Co-led by pianist/keyboardist Mike Ramos and singer Tony Acevedo, the band sizzled with old school salsa hits from P.R. and NYC. The band's sound is brass-heavy salsa dura and made up of some seasoned cats like conga drummer Ali "Choco" Lopez.

Mike is the son of Nick Ramos, a heavyweight percussionist in NYC during the pachanga and boogaloo days who recorded on the landmark *Vladimir and His Orchestra: New Sound in Latin Jazz* (Alegre Records). He grew up hearing the best Latin, jazz and classical music. He began piano studies as a boy and he has only gotten better in the jazz genre, citing influences like the Palmieri brothers, Papo Lucca, Herbie Hancock, Bill Evans and Bay Area "maestro" Carlos Federico. For the last 10 years he has worked with bands like Orquesta Soroa, Cimarron and La Verdad.

Tony Acevedo was born and raised in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. He started singing with a trio at the age of 12, and later with a group called Los Aguadillanos in high school. He sang over the radio in regional singing competitions. Migrating to California, he sang with Miguel Agosto's band Concepto Unidad and many others over the years but was brought out of retirement to sing with Orquesta Saboricua. He also sings with the Latin Rhythm Boys, a Bay Area jibaro band.

A smooth sonero whose style is reminiscent of Adalberto Santiago and Pete "El Conde" Rodriguez, Tony was at the top of his game and delivered a great set of salsa hits that got the crowd dancing. The seasoned band displays a clockwork swing that is comfortable to dance to. And the familiar songs got folks singing along on the coros.

The rest of the musical highlights included Fito Reinoso & Ritmo y Armonia, Eric Rangel & Orquesta America and the Tribute to Fania, featuring Carlos Rosario and his Bay Area All Stars. It was a great event with MC Jose Solis doing a marvelous job announcing the bands and keeping the crowd up and informed.

A second Youth stage at the other end of the park featured local reggaeton hip hoppers, Latin

Alternative bands and the Aguacero Dance Company, who did traditional bomba y plena drumming and dance. The students from the group's class at La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley were a big hit with the audience who gave them a rousing applause.

EXITO! This year's Dia De San Juan event was a great success and very well attended by a pretty well behaved crowd. There was only one fight toward the end of the day and that was quickly stopped by security. But it is the overall purpose of the event to provide scholarships to deserving students to advance in higher education that makes it so special. Props to the WRPRC and see you at the 2010 Dia De San Juan!



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