

CHICK'N'CHUCHO IN CHICAGO

BY MICHAEL JACKSON



Chucho Valdez

SYMPHONY CENTER PRESENTED RARE performances from two monster pianists over a single weekend in October. Chick Corea, last in town with John McLaughlin and the Five Peace Band in April 2009, debuted his trio with drummer Brian Blade and bass ace Christian McBride on Friday, October 8, then Cuban giant (literally and figuratively) Chucho Valdes followed on a different piano (Chick was fine with a Yamaha grand, Chucho preferred a Steinway), on the Sunday.

Valdes, who still lives in Havana, has had fluctuating difficulties with visa negotiations due to the US embargo of Cuba and last appeared in Chicago with his legendary band Irakere in 1998.

Corea, attired disarmingly in velcro fasten sneakers, began his concert with Kurt Weill's seldom played "This is New" and it quickly became apparent that the trio had some mileage behind them. McBride and Blade comprised the Five Peace Band rhythm section which toured the world, so there was plenty of accrued empathy. McBride, as usual, appeared completely at ease, casually dressed in

a t-shirt with an image of Jaco Pastorius. He seemed to have memorized the lion's share of the material and was ready to enjoy the experience, peppering his solos with lighthearted references to "Mama's Little Baby Loves Shortnin' Bread" and so forth. He dug deeper later in the set, matching arco playing against Blade's mallets on his own "Sister Rosa" and played with consummate one-note-per-measure restraint on "Alpha and Omega," a slurpy, bluesy composition of Blade's performed with stunning drive. During a particularly passionate solo from

the drummer, amidst a display of skittering swordsmanship underpinned by stabbing bassdrum thumps, he grunted as he lost a stick. The audience applauded wildly as, with nonchalant legerdemain, he produced a replacement without losing a beat.

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Chick Corea

Corea mentioned meeting his wife Gale at the London House, a legendary long gone jazz club in Chicago, and introduced an 'exhumation' of "Now He Sings, Now He Sobs" from his classic 1968 trio album with Miroslav Vitous and Roy Haynes, claiming wryly that he first recorded it in 1918.

Corea's playing was not flashy or gratuitously emotional but full of trademark flamenco tinges and chromatic cascades which saw his hands jumping like jack rabbits. His comping behind McBride's solos was uncannily anticipatory. The varied set included Scriabin's *Opus #11*, Thelonious Monk's "Work," an in-depth exploration of an episodic new piece, "Homage," and an encore romp through Joe Henderson's "Isotope."

Flash is the preserve of the gargantuan Valdes, who towered over the members of his all-Cuban sextet for his encore bow. Valdes, who's latest record with his new band The Afro-Cuban Messengers, "Chucho's Steps," traces his formative influences, kicked off with one of Ellington's more prosaic melodies, "Satin Doll." However, by the time he came around to "Caravan" he cut loose, reminding of the preposterously intense "Take the A Train" his son Chuchito performed at this year's Chicago Jazz Festival, wherein the piano was rendered hapless victim under the massive grasp of the collective Valdes dynasty (Chucho's father Bebo is also a renowned pianist). Midway through the set Chucho's sister Mayra Caridad Valdes joined the group for just one song and brought a more indigenous flavor to proceedings, highlighting the Afro thread that runs heavy in this music. The superb three-strong percussion section was streets ahead, it has to be admitted—in terms of power, precision, and close cultural simpatico—of the nearest Stateside equivalent, and sporadically broke into macho song. Bata drummer Dreiser Durruthy Bambole, ultimately could not contain the excitement generated by his section mates and broke into a joyous gangly dance

somewhere between James Brown via Michael Jackson and Rufus Thomas' "Funky Chicken." Valdes continued to pay respects to the American musicians who originally inspired him, with a mambo version of Joe Zawinul's "Birdland," but he soon had the audience eating out of his capacious palm with a participatory call and response improvisation that had nothing to do with the past, everything to do with the moment at hand.

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