









introducing...

Rubén González

Rubén González has waited more than half a century to make this album. One of the legends of Cuban piano, he first entered a recording studio with Arsenio Rodríguez' classic band in the early 1940s and has spent a lifetime playing alongside the greatest names in Cuban music. Long overdue and hugely welcome he finally got to record this, his first ever solo album, last year. When he finally did so, the entire album took just two days, recorded live with no overdubs. The music poured out of him and the result is both fresh and spontaneous and at the same time deeply rooted in the Cuban tradition.

In March I visited Rubén at his home, about fifteen minutes drive from the centre of Havana. We turned up in a 1928 Chevrolet and seeing the car outside Rubén suggested that we went back to the hotel to talk. "The electricity always goes off in

this part of town at six o'clock every Monday night", he explained.

And so it did but I suspected there was another reason. Since his last instrument fell apart due to the ravages of age and woodworm, Rubén no longer owns a piano. Yet he remains a man who lives to play and he is constantly on the alert for any piano which he can borrow for an hour or two. He invariably inspires all those fortunate enough to be within earshot - and he knew that Havana's Hotel Inglaterra on the Parque Central had an instrument in the dining room.

When we sat down in the hotel bar and began to talk, I could see Rubén was constantly looking over my shoulder. He answered all my questions politely but all he really wanted to do was get on that piano. After a word with the hotel manager Rubén was soon seated. A few limbering up exercises to ease the pain in his arthritic fingers and he was off, playing an extraordinary selection of *son*, *danzón* and *guaracha* rhythms, sprinkled with whatever else took his fancy. If the

tourists in the bar took not much notice, the staff certainly did. Pretty soon all work had ground to a halt as waiters, bar staff and cleaners stood and listened in astonishment. Cuba is a musical nation and its people recognise and respect genius when they hear it. An hour and a half later and we had literally to drag Rubén off the piano and take him to another appointment. He looked crestfallen. When he plays the music takes over and he has no notion of the passage of time.

This album was made at the end of World Circuit's three week recording trip at Egrem Studios in Havana in March 1996. Rubén had retired from music some five years earlier yet no-one with music coursing so strongly through his veins ever really retires and Rubén still loved to play. Every morning during the recording of Juan De Marcos González' "Afro-Cuban All Stars" album, Rubén could be found waiting for the studio doors to be unlocked and once inside he would rush to the piano and play.



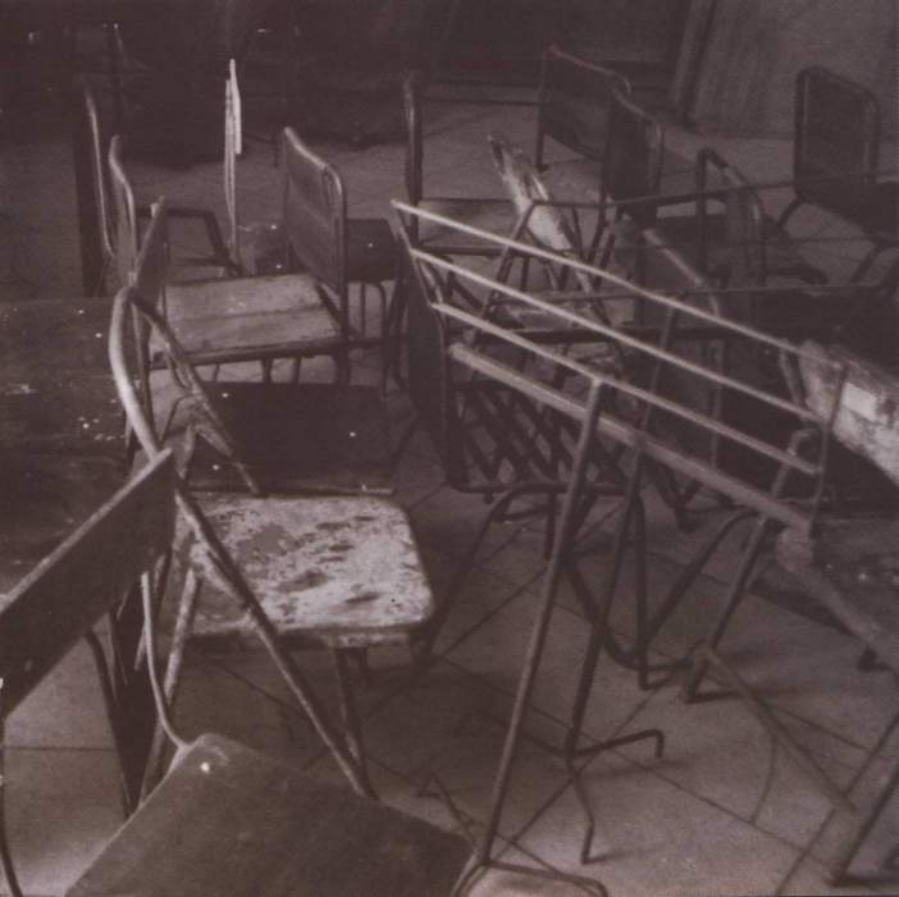
This scene was repeated throughout the recording of the Ry Cooder produced "Buena Vista Social Club".

After the two albums had been completed Rubén was still at the piano. "It was such a beautiful piano and I had to play it. They were all my friends around so I went and started playing a *tumbao*. Then Cachaito joined me on the bass, then the rhythm started to play and it was good. But then someone turned up the lights. I thought they wanted me to stop because I was interrupting. Then I saw Nick put his thumb up and they asked me to stay."

Not only was he asked to stay but he was invited to record his own album; to choose his own repertoire and musicians and to play for as long as he wanted. After almost two weeks recording Rubén's playing was on fire and with virtually no rehearsal the band stretched out over this collection of classic Cuban tunes, *descarga* style (Cuban jam session) and this remarkable album is the result.

Nigel Williamson 1997







Con todo mi amor
y mi devoción a mi querida
recomendación de mi
amor de siempre

Rubén González

Havana, 1996

"I was born in Santa Clara in April 1919. By the time I was fifteen I had graduated as a pianist from the Cienfuegos Conservatoire where I studied with a marvellous teacher called Amparo Riso. I lived in Crucijada, a small village north of Cienfuegos, and I'd go once a month to Cienfuegos for my piano lessons. She'd give me music and I'd come back the following month playing all those pieces. She'd say to her other pupils, 'Hey boys you all live around the corner and you can't even learn one piece of music, yet this boy lives in the middle of nowhere and he's learning twenty five pieces a month! So that's why she kept pushing me up

ahead of the other students, that's why I graduated so young.

But I didn't go into the next phase, which would have been to study to be a concert pianist. I wanted to play Cuban *son*, that's what I always loved and still love. As I grew up I wanted to be a doctor, so I studied medicine thinking that music would be my hobby. But people would say 'Why on earth do you want to be a doctor if you're good at music and you're popular and you have all the freedom in the world! Do you want to spend your life in a lab?' So I gave in.

After playing with groups in Cienfuegos and around the country. I came to live in Havana around 1941 and very soon I began to play with all the major orchestras such as La Orquesta Paulina, Conjunto Camayo, Los Hermanos, Raúl Planas and Mongo Santamaría. In short I've played with almost all of Cuba! From Camagüey to Oriente but especially in Matanzas and Havana.

In the 1940s there was a real musical life.

There was very little money in it but everyone played because they really wanted to. Now people play more for money than for the love of it; now there's more business and less talent. The basis of everything you hear now in Cuban music, that all comes out of that brilliant period.

I've been recording for a long time.

I recorded with Arsenio Rodríguez around 1943 here in Cuba. Arsenio never studied music but he was an incredible composer. He had beautiful ideas and not just with music but with lyrics too. He was a poet. He never studied music but he knew a lot about 'heart'. He used to say to me when I first joined his conjunto "Don't worry about what anyone else is doing. Just play your own style, whatever it is, but don't imitate anyone. Just carry on like that, so when people hear your music, they'll say, "That's Rubén." I paid attention to him because he was always very intuitive. That's how it turned out; people have always recognised my playing on recordings or radio.



I left Arsenio's band to go to Panama with another group, mostly ex-Arsenio musicians. We called ourselves Las Estrellas Negras ("The Black Stars") because we were all black. I was the lightest, but that didn't make me any less qualified! Lili Martínez took over from me with Arsenio. I said to him, 'Lili, do you want to play with Arsenio because I'm leaving'. He said, "Hey do you think I'll be up to it". I said, of course you will. After that he turned into the best pianist with Arsenio.

I played a lot with the orchestra of Los Hermanos Castro, even though they practised what you might call a kind of apartheid. They always tried to have all white musicians, but Peruchín and I played with them. They had to accept us because of the way we played. Peruchín and I were part of a kind of brotherhood of black pianists and we passed each other work all the time. It was a generation of great pianists and you had to be able to sight read any kind of



music straight off, not like now. We'd go into the recording studio or the radio and play stuff we'd never seen or heard before. First time. Perfect.

As for my style, I like the beauty of harmony. I like to make the harmonies rich, not complicated but full. Of non-Cuban pianists I most admire Papo Lucca, because his salsa is very close to *son*. *Son* piano is more varied than salsa piano, which is more formulaic and holds on to a single riff for much longer.

After I came back from Panama I joined Senen Suárez's conjunto and we played at The Tropicana. Then I played with a jazz band led by a Spaniard called Pidre; we played fox-trot, *danzón*, *son* and waltz in the big cabarets like the Tropicana. There was still racism, but it was under the surface. When I joined a big band like that, they'd be saying behind my back to the director, couldn't you find someone a little lighter? And he'd say, but he's the one who can play the music! Anyway this isn't any different

from any other Latin American country. Ever since the "Discovery", there's been racism, and so it goes on...

Finally I became the pianist with Enrique Jorrín's orchestra, in the early 1960s. Then after he died I took over as director, but I didn't enjoy the job; I like to leave the gig as soon as it's over. And now I'm retired. I've just turned seventy seven. My main work for thirty years was with Jorrín but I also worked with other bands from time to time like the Estrellas de Areito. Jorrín created the cha cha cha. I had already played with him in the early 50s and the cha cha cha happened just after I left the group and by the time I rejoined it had taken off.

Jorrín used to play a lot in a club between Prado and Neptuno in central Havana. He used to say that was where the cha cha cha was born, from the way the public would scrape their feet on the floor dancing to that rhythm. So he said 'Let's call this rhythm cha cha cha'. And naturally

he was its creator since he was the first to think of it. Afterwards everyone was doing it and Jorrín became very popular. He was one of the most popular Cuban composers ever. It marked the whole era, the cha cha cha. Just as there'd been a period of *guaracha*, then *danzón*, the cha cha cha had its moment, and it was huge. We went on playing other styles, but everyone *had* to play that one. That's how it is in Cuba.

The record came about like this. I don't have a piano at home any more, so when I saw the one at Egrem studio, I went straight for it and it seems like they noticed what I did. I was playing with the lights off and then they turned them on and I thought they wanted me to stop. But they asked me to keep playing so I said to Cachao, "O.K. let's go for it! What we did is all Cuban music. There are two pieces of mine (though I'm not really a composer)."

From an interview with Rubén González
by Lucy Duran



Produced by Nick Gold

Arranger and conductor
Juan De Marcos González

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Jerry Boys

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Additional photos by
Lucy Duran

Sleeve design by
Kathryn Samson

Photo right shows Rubén's
home in Havana
(photo by Lucy Duran)





Rubén González piano

Orlando 'Cachaíto' López bass

Mañuel 'Guañiro' Mirabal trumpet

Amadito Valdés timbales

Roberto García bongos, güiro, cowbell

Carlos González congas

Alberto 'Virgilio' Valdés maracas

Carlos Puisseaux güiro

Juan de Marcos González

Manuel 'Puntillita' Licea

Antonio 'Maceo' Rodríguez

} chorus vocals

Richard Egües flute on "Tres Lindas Cubanas"

Juan de Marcos González arranger and conductor

Amadito Valdés plays Raúl percussion and Meinl cymbal sets exclusively