

The Star-Ledger

THE VOICE OF NEW JERSEY

A profusion of Afro-Latin fusion

Friday, January 28, 2005

BY ZAN STEWART

Star-Ledger Staff

The merging of the Afro-Latin rhythmic tradition from Cuba, Puerto Rico and beyond with American jazz that began in the '40s continues to produce an engaging, invigorating music style.

Such artists as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, conga drummer Chano Pozo, timbales player Tito Puente, and bandleader-arranger Machito helped pioneer this movement.

Conga drummers Candido Camero, Carlos "Patato" Valdés and Ray Barretto, and timbales player Nicky Marrero are four others who have been instrumental in this Afro-Latin/jazz fusion, playing with the groundbreakers, breaking ground themselves as leaders and sidemen. In careers that began about a half century ago (Marrero in the '60s), they've been heard variously with Puente, Gillespie, Machito, Eddie Palmieri, Herbie Mann and Stan Kenton.

Camero, 83, Valdés, 78, Barretto, 74, and Marrero, 56, headline Saturday at Satalla in New York in a Latin Percussion Summit. Pianist Eddie Martinez, bassist Joe Santiago and conga drummer Walter Vargas are also on hand.

A gathering like the Summit, where solo numbers by each veteran player will lead to a three-conga, timbales jam, is special, as Barretto noted. "The inexorable march of time is evident in our playing," said the Brooklyn native who lives in the Bronx, referring to the congueros. "But the one thing you can see, even if you're looking for sheer speed or technique, is that there's something that stays forever, and that's the soul of the players. These guys exude soul."

Camero, from Havana, came to the United States in 1952 and soon became the most in-demand of Latin drummers. He was heard with a wealth of jazzmen, including Gillespie, Kenton, Randy Weston and Sonny Rollins, as well as Puente, Machito and singer Tony Bennett. He also made numerous albums as a leader, from the 1950s through 2000 ("The Conga Kings" on Chesky).

A melodic player, Camero was one of the first congueros to tune his drums. "I was inspired by hearing the tympani in a symphonic concert," he said. "I did it so I could play melodies."

Valdés, also from Havana, started tuning his drums in Cuba, where he played with Pozo, among others. In the United States since 1953, he's played with Art Blakey, Max Roach, Puente, Mann and Elvin Jones, and as a leader. He's appeared on more than 100 albums, including "The Conga Kings" with Camero. The Six Degrees label released "Patato: Legend of Cuban Percussion" in 2000.

Barretto celebrated his colleague, known largely by his nickname. "Patato is one of the most creative and original percussionists," he said "He's injected a certain lyricism into his playing, which shows you can make drumming a lot more interesting and creative."

Though Valdés has put in the years, he feels time has taken a scant toll. "I feel the same way when I play today as when I was 16," he said. "I haven't changed at all."

Barretto was encouraged by Charlie Parker, with whom he jammed, and has played and recorded with Lou Donaldson, Gene Ammons, Red Garland, Mann and Gillespie. He had a Top 40 pop hit in 1963 with "El Watusi" and currently leads a dynamic Latin jazz ensemble.

Marrero saluted Barretto, saying, "He plays with such flavor, such heart, and he has such a sound on his drums."

A timbalero since he was a teenager, Marrero has performed and recorded with Gillespie, Palmieri, George Benson, Steely Dan and others. He talked about his fascination with Latin drumming. "It's exciting to see how emotional it can get, how the rhythms create interesting situations, carry the soloists," he said.

Camero summed up the pull of having such a summit. "We each have our own personality, that's what people enjoy," he said. "And we've all been close friends for years."