

Wednesday, February 25, 2009, 8pm
Zellerbach Hall

Afro-Cuban All Stars



Juan de Marcos González	<i>cardenas guitar, tres, bandleader</i>
Miguel Valdés Aballi	<i>congas</i>
Calixto Oviedo Mulens	<i>drums, timbale</i>
Jose Espinosa Martínez	<i>bongos</i>
Alberto Pantaleon Loran	<i>bass</i>
Ignacio Herrera Lopez	<i>piano, keyboards</i>
Miguel Angel Valdés de la Hoz	<i>trumpet</i>
Igort Rivas Comas	<i>trumpet</i>
Alberto Muñoz Martínez	<i>trombone</i>
Jorge Reiner Ardiles Ruiz	<i>trombone</i>
Emilio Suarez Martínez	<i>lead singer</i>
Jose Gil Pinera Leygoniel	<i>lead singer</i>
Evelio Galan Castellanos	<i>lead singer</i>
Yaure Muniz Rumayor	<i>trumpet</i>

Cal Performances' 2008–2009 season is sponsored by Wells Fargo Bank.

The U.S.–Cuba Conundrum

Cuba and its music have long been a fountain of inspiration that has profoundly influenced American music and the world. The Mexican bolero, the Argentine tango and early New Orleans jazz are a just a few of the genres that have drunk and flourished from its waters. Springing up from a complex mixture of African and Spanish cultures, Cuban music possesses a unique blend of syncopation and harmony that is infectious, joyous and melancholy.

Today, Cuban music is in a precarious place. Since 1959, when Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and a cadre of revolutionaries ousted dictator Fulgencio Batista, relations between the United States and Cuba have suffered. The implementation of the U.S. Trade Embargo in 1963 has created a wall between both nations that continues to separate the neighboring countries who literally are only 90 miles away from each other.

There have been very few instances of a thawing between the United States and Cuba, but in 1997 a musical phenomenon brought the two countries closer than they had been in a long time. And it is perhaps Cuban music and dance that may well be the catalyst for change in U.S.–Cuba relations.

The Buena Vista Social Club

When Carmen Miranda sang in the 1940s, “How would you like to spend the weekend in Havana...,” it was easy to fly to the Caribbean isle. Now it’s virtually impossible for U.S. citizens, but in 1996 the Los Angeles-based guitarist and producer Ry Cooder undertook the rigors and went with Nick Gold of England’s World Circuit Records to record in Cuba.

For Cooder, who won a Grammy Award in 1994 for his album, *Talking Timbuktu*, with guitarist Ali Farka Toure, it was another musical stone unturned. Having briefly visited the island in the late 1970s, he knew the hidden musical wealth but found it “too hard to get to.”

Once the ball started rolling, the key to catalyzing the project was Juan de Marcos González, who served as arranger and organizer in Cuba and

tracked down Cooder’s wish list of Cuban musicians. Distinguished for his encyclopedic knowledge of Cuban music, formidable skill on the Cuban *tres* guitar and bandleader of the renowned Sierra Maestra, De Marcos was also musical director of the three dates produced: *The Afro-Cuban All Stars*, *Introducing Rubén González* and *Buena Vista Social Club*, featuring Cooder.

With the participation of legends like Compay Segundo (Trio Matamoros, Los Compadres) and 80-year-old Rubén González (Arsenio Rodríguez, Enrique Jorrin), the result was a recreation of a bygone era with an interesting American folk twist. When you hear Cooder play haunting slide guitar on the minor-tinged *guajira*, “Chan Chan,” you get the vibe. Ry Cooder has hailed these projects, and especially *Buena Vista Social Club*, as some of his greatest experiences, and for a globetrotter like him, it’s saying a lot.

“Nick Gold wanted to do something in Cuba,” recalled Cooder in an interview in 1997, “and the idea was to unite West African guitar players with musicians from the Oriente province on the eastern side of the island, where they play a more rural style. But the Africans couldn’t make it. Their passports or visas weren’t right, so we thought maybe it’s a gift. We’re here, let’s focus and get a session together.

“I had a list of names but really wanted to find pianist Rubén González. I didn’t even know if he was alive but our friend Juan de Marcos González said he was around but hadn’t played in years. Get the guy, I said! Imagine! It’s like being in the same room with Jelly Roll Morton, we even played Rubén some Jelly Roll and he said, ‘That’s a nice old *habanera* style, you want to hear some?’ Here’s a man whose total awareness of early Caribbean music goes way back. He was Arsenio Rodríguez’s first piano player and the only living member of that band.

“Musicians in Cuba live for their music,” continued Cooder, “whether playing at home, or places like the Buena Vista Social Club (a long time fraternal club exclusively for musicians). So we recreated our own and invited everybody. It was perfect and the songs flowed like water over stones.”

Sierra Maestra

Born in January 1954, Juan de Marcos González has seen a lot of changes happen in Cuba following the 1959 revolution. He witnessed the island's music evolve as it drew from a variety of exterior outside influences. The emergence in the 1970s of supergroups like Irakere and Los Van Van strayed far from the soul of the traditional *son*. As jazz and classical virtuosity took center stage in the government music schools, students like de Marcos and trumpeter Jesus Alemany began a renaissance movement to search out their *Son* roots with their band, Sierra Maestra.

"We created the group at a moment when Cuban music was stuck in a crisis. Younger musicians only wanted to play foreign music," recalls De Marcos. "The conservatories wanted people to play jazz. It was at a time when Gonzalo Rubalcaba was emerging as a new voice in Cuban music. Even as university students we were just imitating the music of South America. We had 12 groups at the university just dedicated to Andean music. So it became important to trace our roots. In 1976, I started Sierra Maestra at the University of Havana with the idea of countering the immense influence of foreign music in Cuba. By 1979, we achieved tremendous success. I believe that Sierra Maestra in Havana and *Son 14* in Santiago revived Cuban traditional music."

The success of Sierra Maestra brought them to the attention of producer Nick Gold who signed them to his World Circuit record label. Their tribute to Arsenio Rodríguez's music, *Dundunbanza*, in 1994 gave the revival its first big push. It's there that perhaps the seeds of *Buena Vista Social Club* were sown. In the late 1990s, both De Marcos and Alemany left Sierra Maestra to pursue their own projects. Trumpeter Jesus Alemany stayed in London and launched a neo-traditional *son* band called Cubanismo and Juan de Marcos started touring the world with his Afro-Cuban All Stars.

The Afro-Cuban All Stars Today

"We used to perform in the United States every year starting in 1994," writes Juan de Marcos in a recent press release. "When I went for the first time with my group, Sierra Maestra, we toured the whole country. Then the musicians from the Buena Vista started to tour, with great success and with their own bands that we put together. But in 2003, everything stopped."

But the political hurdles have not stopped him and now is embarking on a U.S. tour that will take him to over 40 American cities including his performance here at Cal Performances. With a band made up of Cubans from outside the island who have passports that will allow them into the United States legally, Juan is satisfying the thirst of those fans dry for the authentic waters of Cuban music.

The first Afro-Cuban All Stars album—*A Todo Cuba le Gusta*—was recorded in the legendary EGREM studios in Havana, Cuba, around the same time as the *Buena Vista Social Club* date and featured nearly 60 performers. Ibrahim Ferrer, Pio Leyva, Manuel "Puntillita" Licea, Raul Planas, Jose Antonio "Maceo" Rodríguez, Felix Baloy and Rubén González were some of the legendary names on the date.

The follow up albums for the Afro-Cuban All Stars included *Distinto Diferente* (1999), *Baila Mi Son* (featuring singer Felix Baloy) (2000), *Bajando Gervasio* (featuring Amadito Valdés) (2004), *Live in Japan* (2005) and *Step Forward* (2005), a 2006 Grammy-nominated album. Their latest album is *Absolutely Live*, a combo CD/DVD package of live performances in at the Zepp in Tokyo, Japan, and unreleased material from The Hague's North Sea Jazz Festival.

Juan de Marcos has put together a stellar band of musicians that will no doubt impress audiences with top-notch abilities and impressive performance résumés. But foremost to De Marcos is the energy they transmit to the people attending their shows.

"The energy that moves around the band is very important because you physically transmit it to the audience," Juan explains. "This isn't some mystical force; it's all about the electromagnetic waves that the brain transmits and receives through pineal

gland. When you have really good positive energy, the audience gets it."

The musicians for their 2009 Cal Performances show include: Ignacio "Nachito" Herrera (Minnesota), pianist and ex-musical director of Tropicana Orchestra and Cubanismo. Calixto Oviedo (Stockholm), drummer, who has performed with Adalberto Alvarez, NG La Banda, Pacho Alonso, and others. Trumpeters Yaure Muniz (Madrid), Igort Rivas (Curacao) and Miguel Valdés (Vancouver), have performed as part of the Buena Vista Social Club as well as individually with Paulo FG, Klimax, Tropicana Orchestra and others. Trombonist Alberto "Molote" Martínez (Amsterdam) is an original member of the Buena Vista Social Club and has performed with the band of Elio Reve and the Cuban Symphonic Orchestra.

"It won't be long," concludes Juan de Marcos, "before the new U.S. administration allows for more cultural exchange. This tour stands to be the first in a new period of openness and appreciation for Cuban music, and perhaps the beginning of the end of the embargo itself."

Jesse "Chuy" Varela

The **Afro-Cuban All Stars** is a unique orchestra that has always been devoted to promoting the full range of Cuban music, one that embraces several generations and all musical styles. Over the years many of the band's musicians have become international stars, including brilliant performers such as Rubén González, Ibrahim Ferrer, Guillermo Rubalcava and Manuel "Guajiro" Mirabal.

The genesis of the Afro-Cuban All Stars has its roots early in the 1990s. At this time the son ensemble Sierra Maestra, headed by Juan de Marcos, received a lot of international exposure. As a consequence, Mr. de Marcos was introduced to Nick Gold, president of World Music Records (at that time a small independent world music label). That encounter led to a couple of very successful tours in Europe. Later the group went to London and recorded *Dundumbanza*, considered one of the jewels of the world music scene of the early 1990s. (In retrospect, this recording opened the doors to the further incredible boom of the traditional Cuban music of the period.) Months later, Mr. de Marcos got the go-ahead to do an album celebrating the classic Cuban sound of the 1950s—a recording whose personnel would feature many great musicians that Mr. de Marcos knew. An agreement reached, the plan was to prepare two projects: one featuring a Cuban big band, the other record favoring a more traditional sound reminiscent of the acoustic style of Nico Saquito or Portabales.

In March 1996, they recorded the album *A toda Cuba le Gusta*, featuring nearly 60 performers. Then, with the addition of celebrated artists such as Compay Segundo, Omara Portuondo, Eliades Ochoa and legendary American guitarist Ry Cooder, what became the legendary *Buena Vista Social Club* CD was recorded. Finally, with a small budget, they also recorded the first solo album of Rubén González. This was destined to be one of the most successful of the *Buena Vista* series of recordings. In spring 1997, along with the release in Europe of the three albums, Mr. de Marcos and a select group of stellar musicians started touring all over the continent under the banner of a band christened the Afro-Cuban All Stars. The original line-up, familiar from the records, included Rubén González and Guillermo Rubalcava (piano), Orlando López (bass), Amadito Valdés (timbales),

Carlos González and Roberto Valdés (bongos), Ángel Terry (congas), Daniel Ramos, Alejandro Pichardo y "Guajiro" Mirabal (trumpets), Alberto "Molote" Martínez and Jesús "Aguaje" Ramos (trombones), and Raúl Planas, Manuel Licea, Pío Leiva, Ibrahim Ferrer and Félix Baloy (lead singers). After several years of tremendous and unexpected success—including four Grammy Award nominations, several documentaries and films and many other distinctions—the All Stars are certainly the best-known and most successful Cuban orchestra in the world.

With the Afro-Cuban All Stars, de Marcos has developed a concept more so than simply creating a band. His approach has allowed him to expand his creative range by incorporating contemporary styles of Cuban music; as well, a fluid approach to adjusting the orchestra's line-up by changing or adding musicians to best reflect the different styles of music from the various periods the band features. The Afro-Cubans are the same orchestra that can be seen in those distinct performances captured in the famous Oscar-nominated *Buena Vista Social Club* documentary by Wim Wenders, the Tony Knox documentary *Salon of Dreams*, or the DVDs *Live in Japan* and *Live in The Hague*. In 2002, Mr. de Marcos founded his own independent label, DM Ahora! Records, with which he has released the Afro-Cuban All Stars' albums *Live in Japan* and *Step Forward* (which was Grammy-nominated in 2006). He also released *A Diario* (Telmary) and *Goza Pepillo* (Interactivo), projects that represent a new generation of Cuban music, one that fuses hip-hop with contemporary Cuban genres. More recently de Marcos, along with his wife Glicería Abreu, have founded GG and LL, a musical production company based in Mexico City that aims to create a space for the new Latin American music.

The recent plans for the Afro-Cuban All Stars include the recording this year of the album *Breaking the Rules*. This documents Mr. de Marcos's latest project, for which he has gathered the most remarkable expatriate Cuban musicians from around the world. This new version of the Afro-Cuban All Stars will tour internationally, starting in the United States in February 2009.



Juan de Marcos González, a central figure in Cuban music for three decades, has set himself a lifetime mission: to show the wealth, diversity and vitality of Cuban music to the world. His work with super groups and incredible artists such as the Afro-Cuban All Stars, the Buena Vista Social Club, Rubén González, Ibrahim Ferrer, Sierra Maestra and others has had extraordinary success in introducing the whole range of Cuban music around the globe. Juan de Marcos was born in Havana in 1954 and grew up surrounded by music. In the mid-1970s he co-founded the group Sierra Maestra. Styled as a

traditional Cuban *septeto* group, the band achieved great success, recording 14 albums in Cuba, Africa and Europe, touring many countries and receiving various awards. In the 1990s, Mr. de Marcos continued to delve into the now-neglected "golden age" of Cuban music. Things really took off a few years later, when Mr. de Marcos's signature group, the Afro-Cuban All Stars, released *A toda Cuba le gusta* (Grammy-nominated in 1998). This was the first album to be recorded during the now-legendary *Buena Vista Social Club* sessions, and Mr. de Marcos's band proved to be a springboard for the success that followed. Following the album's release, Juan de Marcos led the Afro-Cuban All Stars and the Rubén González Ensemble on their debut European and U.S. tours.

Never content to rest on his laurels, Mr. de Marcos continues to develop promising new ideas for Cuban music, which is evolving in exciting ways. In 2005, he inaugurated two innovative new labels: DM Ahora! Records and GG and LL Records. This is typical of Mr. de Marcos who, during his career, has arranged, conducted, produced or co-produced more than 25 albums. His work with the Afro-Cuban All Stars has been nominated for four Grammys, and the band is hailed by *Down Beat* magazine for its continued excellence. Mr. de Marcos has been responsible for creating and producing some of the most important and seminal recordings of 20th-century Cuban music. No one has done more to invigorate the revival and growth of Cuban music than the incomparable Juan de Marcos.

Education & Community Event

Latin Music Series: Afro-Cuban All Stars

Friday, February 26, 2009, 5–6:30pm
Zellerbach Hall Lobby Mezzanine

Jazz radio host and Latin music specialist Jesse "Chuy" Varela gives a lively talk featuring extensive background information, guest interviews and musical illustrations to complement the performance by the Afro-Cuban All Stars.