

# The Record

Gonzalo Rubalcaba  
by John Radanovich  
The Record

For many boys, finding a father's girlie magazine is an unforgettable surprise. But for Gonzalo Rubalcaba, finding his father's jazz records was a life-changing moment. "I was around 12 or 13. I found LPs from Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa, Benny Goodman, Errol Garner. I went totally crazy." The 38-year-old pianist and jazz explorer was born into a Cuban family of known musicians. His grandfather composed a famous march, "El Cadete Constitucional." His father played piano in the orchestra of Enrique Jorrin, creator of the cha cha cha.

"My first references were Cuban. Frank Emilio, Chucho Valdez, Paquito d'Rivera, Bebo Valdez. I was already at the classical school, and I was very deep in Cuban music." Many famous Cuban musicians rehearsed at his father's home. "[At the time] I had no idea how important it was having those musicians around...talking about music, discussing styles, concepts, form, harmonies, everything."

Rubalcaba also discovered the complex genius Keith Jarrett early on. "I first heard 'The Survivors Suite.' I was really impressed. Cuban pianists didn't listen to him until he began recording standards, but as soon as I first heard him, I knew he was really big for me." Rubalcaba searched for his own voice. "I started to improvise. I put everything together: jazz, *son*, *danzón*, *boleros*, everything." *Son* is a syncopated blend of African and Hispanic elements, sometimes called *rhumba*. *Danzon* is a ballroom dance created in the late 1800s. A Cuban *bolero* is a romantic pop song.

But Rubalcaba still had plenty to learn about his country's rich musical heritage. At 18, played with the famous Orchesta Aragon. "That was a challenge. Beautiful but difficult. I learned a lot, and I'm [still] using a lot of that experience now."

Rubalcaba doesn't hesitate to pick *danzón* as the greatest of the Cuban forms. "It's very elegant, very pure. Cuban composers extended the French *danson*. They put Afro-Caribbean elements together with European elements, but they also developed harmonies and used instrument combinations that we hadn't heard before in Cuba. They created something like a chamber music to play popular music."

"Right now I'm working with Cuban music from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. People know Ernesto Lecuona but not Ignacio Cervantes or Leo Brouwer. These composers made wonderful, difficult, very serious music." Rubalcaba remembers his father playing in *danzón* places on Saturdays in Havana. "Old people came, great dancers." But he admits that the form isn't as popular with young Cubans as it once was.

Rubalcaba also sees ahead. "I love keyboards, synthesizers, and technology," he says. "It all depends on how you use it, how you apply it. It's to extend the sound of the groove, your compositions."

Rubalcaba's veteran trio consists of Cuban-born drummer Ignacio Berroa, and New York bassist, Carlos Henriquez, who was born to Puerto Rican parents. Like Rubalcaba, both were also classically trained. "We want it very fresh, organic, and natural."

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Rubalcaba's most recent "Supernova" on Blue Note is a platform for his sensitive, percussive playing. Two Cuban classics, "El Manicero" and his grandfather's "El Cadete Consitucional," are given fluent jazz updates. Both the standard "Manicero" and "Cadete" are at times funky and cerebral, and add synthesizer solos for effect. The entire record is full of surprises in dynamic juxtaposition of styles and tempo.

"The main thing for me is to get a balance, something that is unified but not a collage. Cuban rhythm is the most important element in our music. Cuban musicians think about rhythm first and then they build everything onto that."