

The Record

Bebo Valdés
Village Vanguard
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9PM only
178 Seventh Avenue South
New York
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Bebo Gallops
By John Radanovich

One of the greatest living Cuban pianists is about to play for the very first time at a club in New York. The 87-year-old Bebo Valdés will spend an historic week at the Village Vanguard, and his visit is one that no serious fan of Cuban music or latin jazz would dream of missing.

Of the expatriots who moved away from their native Cuba, it is hard to imagine any who went farther than Bebo Valdés. Pianist and former music director for the infamous Tropicana nightclub in the 1940s and 1950s, Valdés met a Swedish woman on a tour in the early 1960s and moved permanently to Sweden. There the great innovator played hotel and restaurant bars, raised a family, and was forgotten by the rest of the world. It wasn't until saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera felt compelled to get Valdés in the studio again that the world outside Sweden knew what had happened to Valdés. In 1995, obligated by Valdés' place in history and a personal connection, D'Rivera convinced Valdés to record "Bebo Rides Again." "I just couldn't let people forget about Bebo. He was one of my father's friends," he said (his father was also a musician). "It's not that he was starving over there in Sweden, but it's not so much that you are eating, but

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how you are eating,” D’Rivera added, and laughed loudly at his own joke. He spoke from his home in North Bergen the day before he flew to Spain to tour with Valdés.

Even D’Rivera seems amazed by Valdés’ breathtaking arranging and performing skills that he helped re-unleash. “It’s not easy to leave your own country. Some people were devoured. Like my father—he never played again. When you take a fish out of the water, you know what happens. Maybe if he’s a frog, he can survive. But a fish, he will die.” Although Valdés did seem to go into a state of animated suspension for 34 years, and was a bit reluctant to record “Bebo Rides Again,” the act of scoring and recording that CD released more than just those 11 songs.

After an hilarious appearance in the documentary film *Calle 54* in 2001 when he is reunited with his world famous son Chucho—the other great Cuban pianist—Valdés continues to make truly astounding records that somehow manage the impossible: to be better than the last. “Arte de Sabor,” “Recuerdos de Habana” (when he was 80), and this year’s masterpiece “Bebo de Cuba.” The latter contains a CD of big band arrangements led by the maestro, another with Valdés in a smaller group setting, and a short film of Valdés in a down coat wandering the streets of New York last winter. However, it was in 2003 that Bebo became famous on the international music scene for a record that paired him very simply and powerfully with a Spanish flamenco singer. “Lagrimas Negras” won a Grammy and was among the best records of the entire year, in any form. An instant classic, it ties Cuban music back to its Spanish roots. Suddenly Bebo Valdés had become more famous than his own globetrotting son Chucho, also a Grammy winner for his latin jazz.

The entertaining and quick to laugh Valdés spoke by phone from Sweden recently about his days playing with the greats of Cuban music like Julio Cueva, Obdulio Morales, Benny Moré, and that other living legend—his dear friend, bassist Israel “Cachao” Lopez.

By some strange Viking magic, Valdés doesn’t seem to have physically aged all those years. Does the Scandinavian air have a preserving quality? Maybe, but that doesn’t mean he wants to keep spending winters near the Arctic Circle. “I like Sweden in the summer,” he said, but has tired of gray winter. Still looking ahead, Valdés is searching for an apartment in Andalucia in Spain. “I’ve lived here for 42 years and believe me, the winter is ferocious. At some point you can have enough of snow.”

Valdés will appear at the Vanguard with Spanish bassist Javier Colina. The last three nights of the show are to be recorded for a live record