

Clave Royalty Kicks Back in New York
Down Beat
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By John Radanovich



Photo by author

Although Alfredo “Chocolate” Armenteros’ sound was formed by a childhood of the Afro-Cuban rhythms and rich musical history of his birthright, Armenteros has little interest in music in Cuba these days: “I don’t know anything about it there now. I never cared for politics. Politics doesn’t make for good music,” he said.

After telling a story about the famous 1950s Mexican cathouse Bandidas, Armenteros shook his finger to correct a misunderstanding. “We didn’t go to mess around, you know, it was to play music. I played there, everyone did,” he said.

It was the day after Thanksgiving. At Armentero’s elbow was a tall glass of Remy Martin, which he calls his “Do-Re-Me.” He was finishing the second of four cigars for the visit, and often leaned forward sharply when he made a point. With the added distraction of the dazzling photographs and memorabilia of a career covering the walls of his Spanish Harlem apartment, it was often hard to follow his rapid Spanish.

Born in 1928 in rural Ranchuelo and nicknamed for a Cuban boxer, Armenteros is a living bridge from the Cuban trumpet configurations of the 1940s to modern *son*. Armenteros came to New York in the late 1950s because he couldn’t resist jazz. In Cuba, he had worked with everyone of historical consequence, including blind *tres* genius Arsenio Rodriguez, Perez Prado, in 1946 on Nat King Cole’s first latin record, Rumba a la King. Then in 1953 he

assembled and led the first Banda Gigante for the soon-to-be infamous singer Benny Moré, the Sinatra of Cuban music, in addition to being Armenteros' first cousin. Today, the Cuba that Chocolate embodies can seem as exotic, fantastical and impossible to locate as a fictional kingdom in Voltaire's *Candide*.

Once in New York permanently, Armenteros took over Mario Bauza's spot in Machito's Afro-Cubans, playing beside Doc Cheatham. He has been the premier trumpeter in salsa and latin jazz ever since, and his warm and atmospheric tone shows a relaxed approach owing more to Sweets Edison or Clifford Brown than to Dizzy Gillespie. Rick Davies calls him "the most important Cuban trumpet player of the second half of the 20th Century." Paquito d'Rivera refers to him as "one of the key figures in our music." The photographs of Armenteros alongside musicians and admirers that adorn his walls tell the story of his activities in the US: Machito, Celia Cruz, Larry Harlow, the Palmieri brothers, Johnny Pacheco, Bebo Valdés, Tito Puente, Cachao, Chico O'Farrill, Wynton Marsalis, Paquito, Jimmy Bosch. There is a proclamation from former New Orleans mayor Marc Morial, and many photographs of his better known admirers: smoking cigars with Bill Cosby, shots with Andy Garcia. The latter is a particularly strong Chocolate fan; he included Chocolate in his Cachao documentary "Como Mi Ritmo No Hay Dos."

As a bandleader, Armenteros has recorded for Salsoul, Caiman, Cobo, and SAR where he served as musical director. Lately he has made appearances in several Cuban music DVDs of live shows, most recently "The Cuban Swing: Tribute to The Legend Chocolate Armenteros."

Unlike Cachao or Arturo Sandoval, Armenteros never had any interest in moving to the winters of Miami. "Miami is too big for me. Here," he said of his neighborhood and immediate proximity to the New York scene, "everything is right where I need it. I can play with anyone. I can get flights to anywhere from here."

When asked about current and future projects, he leaned back to put his arms behind his head and answered "Nothing. I'm on vacation." When asked for how long, he shrugged while lighting another cigar. Taking time to blow out the smoke, he flashed his big smile, looked over his glasses, and said again "vacation."