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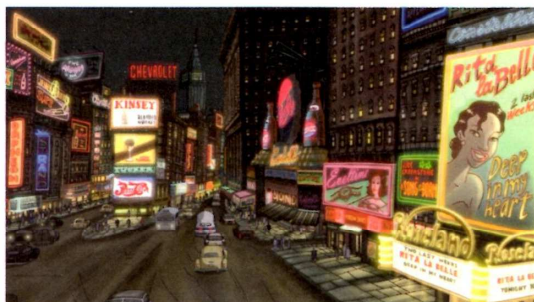
Chico & Rita ... & Bebo

A CELEBRATED ANIMATED FILM, NOW AVAILABLE ON BLU-RAY AND DVD, PAYS THRILLING MUSICAL TRIBUTE TO LATIN-JAZZ PIONEERS

The Oscar-nominated animated film *Chico & Rita* is, on the surface, a standard boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, will-boy-get-girl-back? movie. It starts in the late '40s, and tells the love story between a pianist and a singer, following them through their early struggles, success, heartbreak and final triumph, from their native Havana, Cuba, to New York, Las Vegas and back.

But the real focus of *Chico & Rita*—the creation of a Spanish team comprising Oscar-winning director Fernando Trueba, illustrator Javier Mariscal and director Tono Errando—is the music. “The love story is [a plot device], a pretext to tell the history of the music of those days—the rise of bebop, the rise of Afro-Cuban jazz,” says author and producer Nat Chediak, who wrote the *Dictionary of Latin Jazz*, which Trueba edited, and is a longtime friend and collaborator of the director’s. For *Chico & Rita*, Chediak collaborated with Cuban composer, arranger and guitarist Juanito Márquez on the lyrics to “Lily,” a key song in the plot of the movie.

▼ Cartoon Masterwork: Stills from *Chico & Rita*



While dedicated to the great Cuban pianist, arranger and bandleader Bebo Valdés, the film is not *The Bebo Valdés Story*, says Trueba, speaking from his home in Madrid, but “a composite of the stories of many Cuban musicians in the '40s. We created a character that is not Bebo, but has a lot of him.”

In fact, in explaining the dedication to Valdés, Trueba wrote in his liner notes that “It could be no other way. Had I not met Bebo, *Chico & Rita* would not exist. He was our inspiration.” Chediak, who was close to the process, adds, “Mariscal drew the character as an approximation of Bebo. There are no ifs or buts about it. Mariscal’s character was Bebo.”

The relationship between Valdés and Trueba dates back to *El Arte del Sabor*, a trio recording featuring Bebo’s childhood friend, bassist Israel López “Cachao,” and conguero Patato Valdés (no relation), and *Calle 54*, Trueba’s film about Latin jazz, both completed in 2000.

The decade that followed encompasses what Trueba refers to as his “Bebo years.”

In that period, there were several albums—including *Lágrimas Negras*, the improbable international hit with flamenco singer Diego el Cigala, the tour de force *Bebo de Cuba* and the emotional *Juntos Para Siempre*, the duet recording of Bebo and his son Chucho Valdés. They earned Valdés, Trueba and Chediak multiple Grammys and Latin Grammys.

And Valdés also went on to appear in a couple of Trueba films, including a cameo in *The Shanghai Spell* (2002) and, playing himself in a leading role, *The Miracle of Candel* (2004). In *Chico & Rita*, with one exception, when Chico plays we are listening to Valdés.

In all likelihood it was his final performance. “Knowing Bebo has been a gift for me, one of life’s gifts,” says Trueba. “And I believe it has been a very happy collaboration for him because he has felt again the affection of the public, he has played at sold-out theaters around the world, he has made some money. For 10 years we didn’t stop working together, and it all culminated in *Chico & Rita*.”

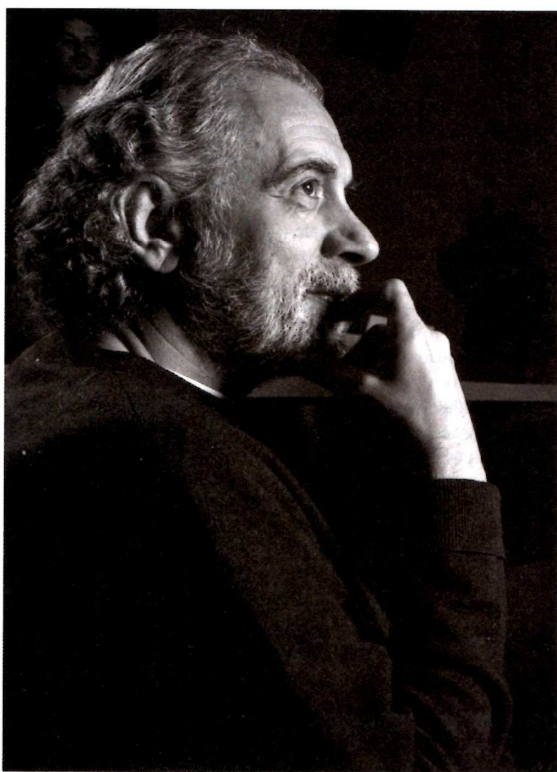
After completing the film, Bebo Valdés, who will be 94 on Oct. 9, effectively retired.

For Chediak, who has shared in much of their time and work together, “Even if you don’t know the special relationship between Bebo and Fernando, which is almost that of a father and son, I think it’s virtually impossible to watch this film and not see it as a loving embrace of the man and his music. By the end, the dedication to Bebo is almost unnecessary.”

As Trueba underscores, the story not only pays tribute to Valdés but also to other pioneering Latin musicians such as Mario Bauzá, Machito, Chano Pozo, Tito Puente, Miguelito Valdés (no relation) and Cachao. *Chico & Rita*’s tale of fame-to-oblivion-and-back alludes not only to Valdés, who was playing hotel lounges in Sweden before Paquito D’Rivera came calling in 1994, but also those of musicians such as Cachao (who was for a time making do playing quince parties and bar mitzvahs in Miami) or pianist Rubén González (rescued from obscurity by Buena Vista Social Club.)

Notably, rather than relying on historical albums, Trueba had the music rerecorded.

Using the old recordings would have made yet another compilation, “and that would have been uninteresting,” he says. “Those



▲ Director Fernando Trueba

who love Charlie Parker or Dizzy or Chano Pozo already have their records at home. What's the point of making a movie for that? Recreating it was a much better challenge."

The new versions were recorded by three different bands in Havana, New York and Madrid. Valdés arranged and conducted the smaller Madrid band, Jorge Reyes played that

role in Havana and Michael Mossman arranged and directed the New York orchestra. (The soundtrack also includes tracks from *Bebo de Cuba* and *Bebo*.) "So when you hear a Bebo composition, it's him on piano, even the new versions of them," says Chediak. "In the updated version of 'Con Poco Coco' [Valdés' piece from the groundbreaking Cuban jam session in 1952],

that's him on piano."

The music scenes also include cameos by jazz icons such as Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Nat "King" Cole and Ben Webster, interpreted by living musicians playing in character. Freddy Cole "appears" as his brother Nat, Jimmy Heath becomes Ben Webster, Mike Mossman plays Dizzy, Yaroldi Abreu becomes Chano Pozo and Germán Velazco takes a turn as Charlie Parker. "Once we decided that we were going to include the moment when jazz meets Cuban music, that led us to the idea of including Chano Pozo as a character in the plot and mixing truth and fiction and including the cameos," says Trueba. "We had a great time playing around with all that."

Still, he says, "I was concerned that the musicians would be offended by me asking them to 'play like.' But they understood what we were doing, they embraced it, and it was great fun." In some cases, the results were dramatically successful.

"I remember Paquito [D'Rivera] coming out after watching the movie and asking me, 'Who the hell plays Dizzy? It's perfect,'" recalls Trueba. And he tells the story of how, a few months after the sessions, Valdés was visiting him at his home and the film's soundtrack was playing in the background. "And we were talking and when 'Con Poco Coco' comes on, Bebo stops in midsentence and

says, 'Listen. That's [trumpeter] El Negro Vivar,'" recalls Trueba with a chuckle. "And I had to tell him that actually that was the new recording and that was Carlos Sarduy."

After completing the film, and before the official premiere, Trueba traveled to Málaga, in the south of Spain where Valdés now lives, and rented a movie theater to show it to the *maestro* and to flamenco singer Estrella Morente, who stars as herself in the movie and, as it turns out, also lives in that city.

"Bebo came with Rosemarie [his wife, who has since passed] and Estrella with her husband, Javier. And the four watched in the empty theater and at the end, they were all crying. I had never seen Bebo cry. And when he sees me, he kisses my hand and hugs me and says, 'When I'm gone, the people will still watch this movie and will hear my music.' And that's when I understood that for Bebo, as a musician, that was the greatest gift of this movie. For me, that was a moment of pure happiness that I'll never forget."

FERNANDO GONZALEZ

On Sept. 18, Chico & Rita is being released in a Limited Edition Collector's Set including Blu-ray and DVD discs, an audio CD and a 16-page excerpt from the graphic novel based on the film. Single Blu-ray and DVD versions will also be available.

Playing With Genre

POSITIVE CATASTROPHE CONNECTS SALSA AND THE AVANT-GARDE, MUSIC AND LITERATURE, BRAINS AND BRAWN

The music of Taylor Ho Bynum, 37, the prolific cornetist who leads or co-leads groups of various sizes and helps run the Firehouse 12 label, can't

be categorized without a lot of hyphenated descriptions. When discussing his work, Bynum likes a term used by his former teacher and ongoing associate

Anthony Braxton: "'Transidiomatic'—[the idea] that you acknowledge, respect and draw from idiom, but you don't let yourself be defined by, or lim-

ited by, the idiom," he explains. "It's an embrace of it and a freedom from it at the same time."

Percussionist Abraham Gomez-Delgado, 40, has an even