

## The glue that binds

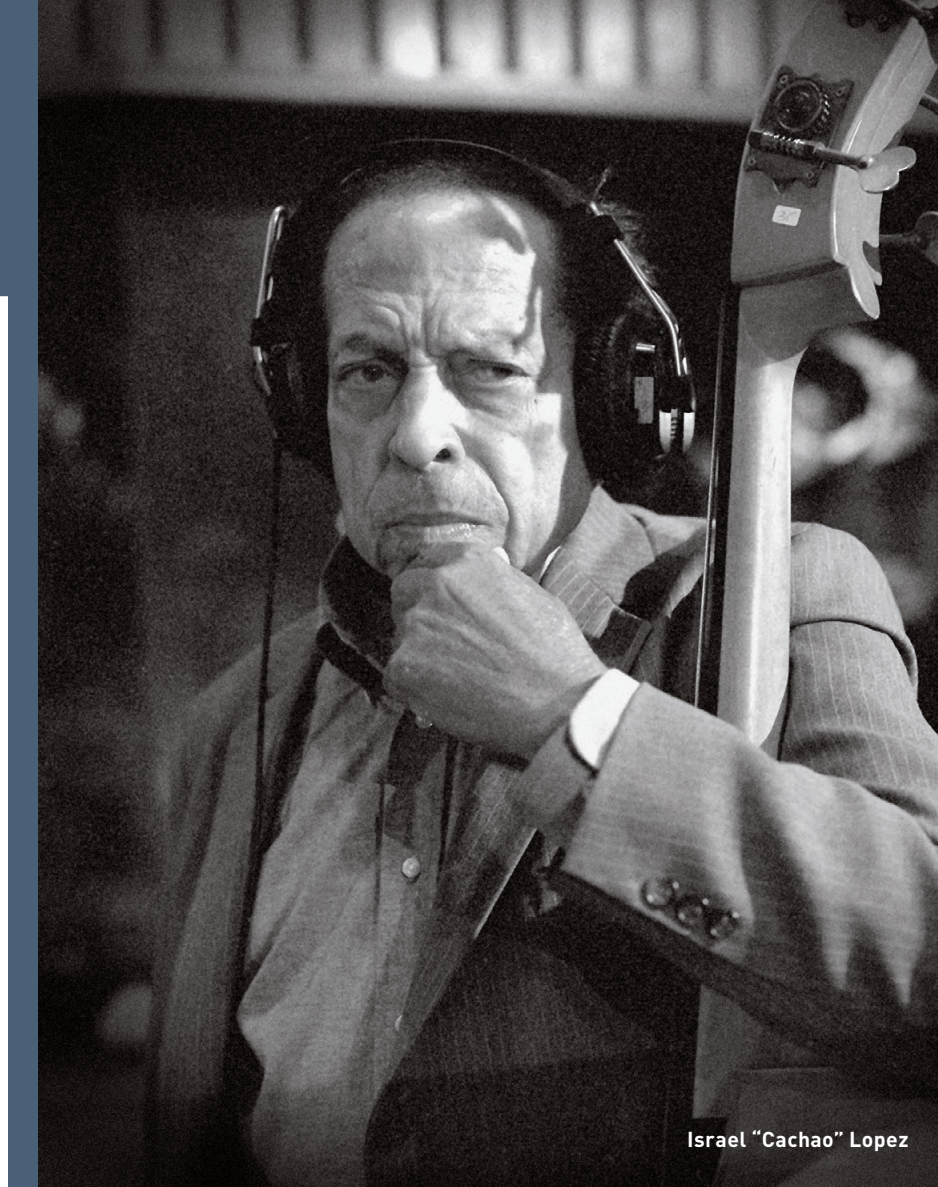
By Larry Blumenfeld

**CUBAN PIANIST BEBO VALDÉS** once recalled for me his first meeting with the bassist known as Cachao, in Havana. “We’re both wearing short pants then,” he said, before making a deeper point: “Cuban music had timing, but no syncopation before Cachao.”

I know what Valdés meant. Cachao transformed the bass *tumbao* — the bassline that both anchors and propels the music, and which is commonly referred to as the “glue” that binds *montunos* (repeated musical phrases) to *clavé*-based grooves. In the bass *tumbao*, more than one Cuban musicologist has said, beats the heart of the song. And no one plays it, feels it, like Cachao.

Cachao’s brother Orestes, a pianist, says that Cachao’s innovation inspired his own 1937 composition “Mambo,” which crystallized a transformation of a then-popular Cuban *danzón* style, and ignited a dance revolution within and outside Cuba. And like Valdés, who played in the earliest recorded Cuban *descargas* (loose-limbed, jazz-inflected jam sessions), Cachao was instrumental to this phase of Afro-Cuban jazz development, too.

*Descargas: The Havana Sessions* (Yemaya) gathers on two discs Cachao’s legendary jam-sessions recordings from 1957 to 1961, along with other seminal tracks. It’s two-and-a-half hours of driving, swinging, sweet, hot, improvised music, full of jazz ingenuity and Afro-Cuban dance-music thrust. It arrives via 39 tracks, each like its own wave, most of which are no more than three minutes long. (*Descargas en Miniatura*, the title of



Israel “Cachao” Lopez

“We all invented the *descarga*, all of us who met in the small hours of the night to improvise. ... We were Cuban musicians, playing Cuban music with the spirit of jazz.” — Tata Güines

Cachao’s original Cuban release of this material, refers to its song-like condensations of late-night improvisations that would typically linger far longer.)

Born in Havana on September 14, 1918, Israel “Cachao” López was the youngest child in a family full of accomplished musicians. By age 9, Cachao was playing for silent films. At 12, he joined the Havana Philharmonic. In his teens, along with Orestes, Cachao joined Orquesta Arcaño y sus Maravillas, a dance band that had begun to take the *danzón* style — known for its emphasis on violin,

brass, and timpani drums — into a more percussive, African-inspired direction. Cachao and Orestes are said to have composed 2,000 tunes in this new style, making them as prolific as, say, Ellington was within the swing idiom. “Mambo” marked the moment this new wrinkle developed into a movement all its own. But the *descargas* on the new discs are a different thing — defining moments of a Cuban musical evolution that is closely intertwined with and yet clearly distinct from what went on in the United States.

“We all invented the *descarga*,” says

conga player Tata Güines in the CD notes, “all of us who met in the small hours of the night to improvise. And improvisation takes you to jazz — jazz in a Cuban way, which has nothing to do with the jazz they do over there on the other side, although it has a little swing and some bebop. We were Cuban musicians, playing Cuban music with the spirit of jazz.”

Cachao left Cuba for good in 1962, after Castro took power. He headlined in New York City and in Las Vegas. But longing to be among other Cuban émigrés, he moved to Miami, where he languished for years. In the 1980s, he could be found playing weddings. All that changed in the 1990s. With the help of actor Andy Garcia and producer Emilio Estefan, he found himself the subject of an acclaimed documentary and a Grammy Award winner (for 1994’s *Master Sessions, Vol. 1*). Now 89, Cachao still lays down a tumbao with authority and invention, still plucks, slaps and bows his strings to ignite fellow musicians and anyone who cares to dance.

The story told by his descargas seems especially poignant to me just now. Last November, I added my name to the hundreds of musicians, writers, and arts administrators who petitioned the American government to end the politically banned cultural exchange between U.S. and Cuban artists ([www.cubaresearch.info/cubaletter](http://www.cubaresearch.info/cubaletter)). A brief relaxation of the embargo during the Clinton administration made for something of a Cuban-music boom in this country (Cachao’s resurgent career here is owed in part to that), but the Bush administration shut that window tight.

In the letter that sparked the petition, addressed to “American intellectuals and artists,” Alicia Alonso, director of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, wrote: “Let us work together so that Cuban artists and writers can take their talent to the United States, and that you are not prevented from coming to our island to share your knowledge and values; so that a song, a book, a scientific study or a choreographic work are not considered, in an irrational way, as a crime.”

The reissue of Cachao’s *Descargas* preserves a shared history. If only our common future could be so well assured. ▲

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