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Cachao, Descargas: The Havana Sessions

Written by Eugene Holley, Jr.  
Monday, 31 March 2008



Appreciation and Review by Eugene Holley, Jr.

When people eulogize Israel "Cachao" Lopez, the Cuban-born, Miami-based bassist/bandleader/composer who died at the age of eighty-nine on March 22, they'll tell how he was born in 1918 to a family of bassists; how he performed with the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra as a teen; how he and his brother, Orestes "Macho" Lopez extended and elaborated on the final section of the courtly *danzon* and launched the *mambo*; they'll reminisce about his groundbreaking late fifties/early sixties Havana *descarga* jam sessions, which provided the foundations for Latin-jazz, salsa, and other Latin-descended musical idioms.

Others will recount his exit from Castro's Cuba in 1962, his sojourns in Spain, Manhattan, Las Vegas and Florida, where he was rescued from

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obscurity by actor Andy Garcia, who launched his comeback with a documentary, and still others will recount his scene-stealing performances in the film, **Calle 54**.

But many will sum up his genius with the phrase “Como Su Ritmo No Hay Dos (His Rhythm is like no Other).”

That phrase can be heard on “Descarga Cubana,” the first track of **Descargas: The Havana Sessions** (Yemaya Records), a compelling and comprehensive two-CD, 39-track compendium that contains all of legendary sessions released from 1957 to 1961. The importance of these tracks – compiled for the first time on one CD, with an authoritative, bilingual booklet – cannot be overstated: This recording is on par with other canonical discs, from Miles Davis’ **Kind of Blue**, and Glenn Gould’s **Goldberg Variations**, to the Beatles’ **White Album**.

To be fair, many musicologists credit the blind Afro-Cuban guitarist Arsenio Rodriquez as the true mambo author, and pianist Bebo Valdes for releasing the first *descarga* recording in 1952. Those quibbles aside, Cachao’s inventions and dimensions on Afro-Cuban music have had the longest impact, as these delightful, dancing tracks aurally illustrate.

The cast of characters represent the cream-of-the-crop of Cuba’s finest pre-Revolutionary musicians, including: the late *conguero* Tata Guines, pianists, Orestes “Macho” Lopez, and Pedro “Peruchin” Justiz, trumpeters Alejandro “El Negro” Vivar and Armando “Chocolate” Armenteros, *timbalero* Guillermo Barretto, flutist Richard Egues, *tres* guitarist Andres “Nino Rivera,” Echevarria, and percussionists Los Papines. Indeed, these tracks show that the development of jazz and its percussive parallel, Latin-jazz, has three birthplaces: New Orleans, New York and Havana. The musicians swing with a Negroidal rhythmic gravity directly imported from Mother Africa, married to the harmonic influences of Spain transculturated on foreign, New World soil, buoyed and anchored by Cachao’s deep-toned, succinct, and in-the-bottom basslines.

Collectively, the CD's tracks features a number of standout selections; the fanfarish "Goza Mi Trompeta," the elegant pianisms of "Malanga Amarilla," the hilarious "Descarga Mexicana," which features a raunchy vocal exchange, "Juan Pascao," an adaptation on the American standard "Tea for Two," the afro-anthemed "Descarga Naniga," Tito Puente's "Cha, Cha Cha de Los Pollos," the sixteen-minute "Cachao te Pone a Bailar," and the Latin hit, "El Manisero (The Peanut Vendor)."

Released just before his passing, this recording is a fitting, Elegba-embered eulogy to a music master, whose impact will be felt as long as music is heard and played.

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