

# A Brief History of Latin Jazz and Some Thoughts About My Own Comping Style

By Mark Levine

North Americans tend to use the term "Latin music" loosely, as if it were a homogeneous music, rather than the incredibly complex mosaic that it is. The music from the Rio Grande south to Tierra del Fuego includes the influences of Africa, Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, the Middle East, India, and thousands of indigenous American cultures. On *Volume 64 "Salsa/Latin Jazz,"* we play Latin and jazz tunes in a rhythmic style of music called "Afro-Cuban."

Drums, rhythmic patterns, and vocal call-and-response patterns were brought to Cuba by African slaves, and the mixture of Spanish harmony, melody, and song and dance forms evolved into Afro-Cuban music. From the late 19th century on, Afro-Cuban music has also been highly influenced by jazz. The cultural interchange went both ways. From its earliest days, jazz has had a "Spanish tinge" as it was once called, due to the trade and travel between Miami, New Orleans, and Havana. Before the Cuban revolution, bands frequently travelled back and forth between the two countries. The term "Afro-Cuban music" is somewhat misleading. The music of Tito Puente, Jerry Gonzalez, Mongo Santamara, Eddie Palmieri and Cal Tjader is actually a mix of African rhythms, the music of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and American jazz.

Puerto Rico adapted Afro-Cuban music to its own traditions and produced its own brand of the music. More than a million Puerto Ricans have migrated to the continental United States, including thousands of musicians who settled in *Nueva York*.

The popularity in the U.S. of Latin bands such as Xavier Cugat<sup>1</sup> in the 1930s paved the way for the jazz-influenced big bands of Machito<sup>2</sup> and Tito Puente<sup>3</sup> in the 1940s and 1950s. Other musicians who helped combine jazz and Afro-Cuban music were Mario Bauza,<sup>4</sup> Juan Tizol (the composer of "Caravan" and a long-time member of the Duke Ellington band), and Chano Pozo, who collaborated with Dizzy Gillespie in the 1940s.<sup>5</sup> Other important figures who stirred the Latin jazz pot were Mongo Santamara,<sup>6</sup> Willie Bobo,<sup>7</sup> Cal Tjader,<sup>8</sup> Jerry Gonzalez, and, most important of all, Eddie Palmieri. Tito Puente switched from a big band to a Latin jazz sextet format in the 1980s,<sup>9</sup> and he, Poncho Sanchez,<sup>10</sup> and Manny Oquendo's Libre<sup>11</sup> are among the best Latin jazz groups in the 1990s.

Most groups that play Latin jazz involve a compromise. The jazz musicians in the group grew up playing and listening to jazz, and their knowledge of Latin music is often minimal. The same thing in reverse is true of the Latin musicians. A small group of musicians, most of them from New York, have grown up with and are comfortable playing both kinds of music. This small group has exerted a profound influence on the course of Latin jazz. The late trombonist Barry Rogers both played and arranged for Eddie Palmieri's great bands of the 1960s and 1970s. Saxophonist Mario Rivera (with Tito Puente's band for the past several years), pianist Hilton Ruiz (who has recorded with George Coleman) and trumpeter/percussionist Jerry Gonzalez (who has worked with McCoy Tyner off and on for several years) are all exceptional musicians adept at playing both jazz and Afro-Cuban music. Mario, Hilton, and Jerry appear on Jerry's album *Ya Yo Me Cure*,<sup>12</sup> which is one of the greatest Latin jazz albums ever recorded. Another great Latin jazz recording is the Eddie Palmieri-Cal Tjader album *El Sonido Nuevo*.<sup>13</sup> Eddie's playing on this recording redefined the meaning of Latin jazz.

Mark Levine's piano comping on the chords of

# Sabor

1 ♩ = 224

1 A- D7 A- D7 A- D7 A- D7

Musical notation for measures 1-4. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The music is in a piano comping style, featuring a steady eighth-note bass line and a treble line with chords and eighth-note patterns. Chords are indicated above the staff: A- (A minor), D7, A- (A minor), D7, A- (A minor), D7, A- (A minor), D7.

5 C- F7 C- F7 C- F7 C- B- Bb-

Musical notation for measures 5-8. The key signature changes to one flat (Bb) and the time signature remains 4/4. The music continues with piano comping. Chords are indicated above the staff: C- (C minor), F7, C- (C minor), F7, C- (C minor), F7, C- (C minor), B- (B minor), Bb- (Bb minor).

9 A- D7 A- D7 A- D7 A- D7

Musical notation for measures 9-12. The key signature returns to one sharp (F#) and the time signature remains 4/4. The music continues with piano comping. Chords are indicated above the staff: A- (A minor), D7, A- (A minor), D7, A- (A minor), D7, A- (A minor), D7.

13 C- F7 B- E7+9 A- D7b9 G B- Bb-

Musical notation for measures 13-16. The key signature changes to one flat (Bb) and the time signature remains 4/4. The music continues with piano comping. Chords are indicated above the staff: C- (C minor), F7, B- (B minor), E7+9, A- (A minor), D7b9, G, B- (B minor), Bb- (Bb minor).

37 D7<sup>+9</sup> G- G- C-

41 D7<sup>b9</sup> G- G- C-

45 D7<sup>+9</sup> G- G- C-

49 D7<sup>+9</sup> G- G- C-

53 D7<sup>+9</sup> G- G- C-