



Power piano, Cuban style

By Jay Harvey
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Chuchito Valdes is a third-generation Cuban pianist whose command of Afro-Cuban musical idioms is joined to a vibrant intimacy with mainland jazz styles.

He brought his dynamic quintet to the Jazz Kitchen on Friday night, and in the first of two shows, the charismatic pianist, now a resident of Mexico, indicated just how ready he is to connect with new audiences.



Plunking himself down at the Kawai house piano with the rest of his band offstage, Valdes opened the show with a flamboyant reading of "Over the Rainbow."

He didn't dawdle over the melody but seemed determined to elaborate. He dug out bluesy hints in the tune that Judy Garland was unlikely ever to have been familiar with, and he put the stamp of his heritage on it near the end with characteristic riffs that led to a quote from "Peanut Vendor."

After the band joined him, Valdes was an irrepressible master of the revels, finding it hard to stay seated and making unaffected transitions into a dance captain and a chant leader when the mood struck him. Said to have no command of English, Valdes put all of his

communication into his keyboard and body language.

Only one tune -- the finale -- was introduced, when drummer Ruben Alvarez lyrically announced "Africa," which featured him and congas player Frankie Ocasio. Ocasio sang out lines that Valdes and Ocasio echoed with gusto, as the piece evolved into a haunting duet of the percussionists on the chekeres (globular hollowed-out gourds) before a climactic return to the main theme.

Valdes proved himself capable of nuance, as a trio version of "Bye Bye Blackbird" fetchingly showed.

There also was a hypnotic "balada cha" that featured a lovely flugelhorn solo by Kenny Anderson.

But Valdes showed a preference for pouring on the power, of which he had plenty to spare. Keyboard-spanning glissandos were whipped up on a moment's notice, and heavy chording unfurled from his powerful right hand in crushing sequences.

There were times when one wished he would pull back from utter abandon, but he represents a tradition that plants the piano firmly in the percussion section and treats it like an ensemble all by itself.

His pair of solos on a long dance tune just before "Africa" helped highlight the band's torrential and becalmed sides appealingly, as well as encompassing the leader's wit, with quotes from "That Old Devil Moon," "Rhapsody in Blue" and some Latinized Thelonious Monk.

It was party music that exhilarated even as it struck deep.