

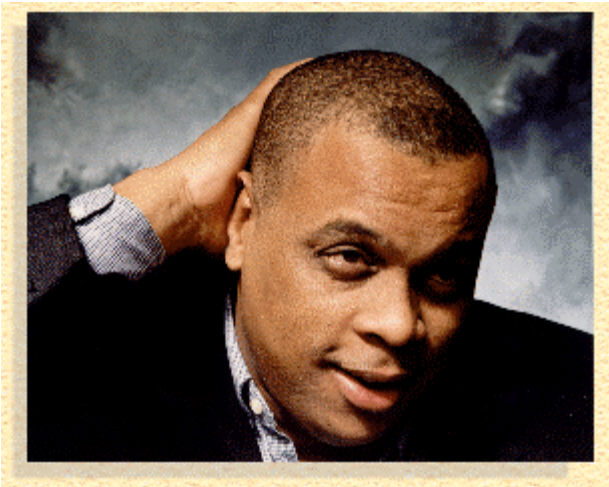
# San Jose Mercury News

## Third Generation

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Chuchito Valdés didn't spend a lot of time pondering his career options while he was growing up.

As the scion of one of Cuba's most celebrated keyboard dynasties, he thought it was perfectly natural to follow his grandfather, Bebo Valdés, and his father, Chucho Valdés Sr., onto the bandstand. Now based in Cancún, Mexico, Valdés makes his California debut on Saturday with a potent sextet that plays styles ranging from mambo and son montuno to Afro-Cuban jazz and cha-cha-cha.



"I was never intimidated by my family's history," says Valdés, 35, from Chicago through interpreter Laksar Reese, who plays saxophone in the band. "My family always nurtured me. I could have done anything I wanted. My talent was given to me by God, and this was the right thing to do."

Whether his talent is divinely inspired, the result of environment, good genes or some combination thereof, Valdés couldn't have been better situated to pursue a career in music. Born and raised in Havana, he was weaned on a wide range of musical traditions, including European classical,

Cuban dance music and American jazz.

"I was influenced by all different styles and rhythms," Valdés says. "I studied Bill Evans a lot, Oscar Peterson and Errol Garner, and more recently, Keith Jarrett and Herbie Hancock."

While his grandfather, an influential Havana bandleader, fled Cuba in 1960 and eventually settled in Mexico, his father decided to stay on the island and was coming into his own when Chuchito was a child. In 1973 Valdés Sr. founded Irakere, a remarkable band that forged a dynamic new sound by drawing on elements of jazz, rock, funk, classical and percussion usually used in Afro-Cuban religious rituals. A child prodigy, Valdés studied with his father as well as other Cuban piano masters, but once Irakere became an international success, Valdés Sr. spent much of each year on the road. When he left the band to pursue his burgeoning solo career, Chuchito stepped in and led Irakere for two years in the late '90s.

Like his father, Valdés decided to build a career separate from Irakere, developing his own book of arrangements. The band he brings Saturday to the Bay Area plays mostly his charts and is built upon a nucleus featuring saxophonist Reese and bassist Saul Sierra. Conguero Jesús

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Dacuaz, percussionist Jimmy Branley, and vocalist La Niña Rivera, all Cuban-born Bay Area residents, complete the sextet.

Reese, who was born in Australia and leads a Latin jazz band in Chicago, is largely responsible for Valdés' growing reputation in the United States. They first met in Cancún several years ago, and Reese was so impressed with Valdés' keyboard prowess that he coaxed him to Chicago, where they recorded "Encantado" on Towncrier Records.

"I was struck by his musicality and versatility, his technique and total mastery of his instrument in both the jazz and Afro-Cuban styles of music," Reese says. "He also studied classical music, and that helped to facilitate his control of the piano."

Despite living in Mexico, Valdés has maintained close ties with his friends and family in Cuba, returning regularly to visit and perform. Working with Reese, Valdés recently played at the 19th Annual Havana Jazz Festival, where the group received an enthusiastic response from the audience.

With a repertoire that includes pieces by Valdés Sr., Poncho Sánchez, Tito Puente, Dizzy Gillespie and Mario Bauza, the band's book is a treasure trove of classic Afro-Cuban music. At Fuel, the band's first set will focus on Latin jazz, while the second set will feature more Cuban dance music.

"We'll do traditional Cuban son, and turn around and do Coltrane's 'Giant Steps' with a 6/8 feel, so it's a pretty diverse program," Reese says. "Instead of doing a whole night of charanga or timba, we mix it up. It's similar in concept to Irakere, because they did everything."

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