

“Manteca”--Dizzy Gillespie Big Band with Chano Pozo (1947)

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Essay by Raul Fernandez (guest post)*



Chano Pozo and Dizzy Gillespie

The jazz standard “Manteca” was the product of a collaboration between Charles Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie and Cuban musician, composer and dancer Luciano (Chano) Pozo González. “Manteca” signified one of the beginning steps on the road from Afro-Cuban rhythms to Latin jazz.

In the years leading up to 1940, Cuban rhythms and melodies migrated to the United States, while, simultaneously, the sounds of American jazz traveled across the Caribbean. Musicians and audiences acquainted themselves with each other’s musical idioms as they played and danced to *rhumba*, *conga* and big-band swing. Anthropologist, dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham was instrumental in bringing several Cuban drummers who performed in authentic style with her dance troupe in New York in the mid-1940s. All this laid the groundwork for the fusion of jazz and Afro-Cuban music that was to occur in New York City in the 1940s, which brought in a completely new musical form to enthusiastic audiences of all kinds. This coming fusion was “in the air.”

A brash young group of artists looking to push jazz in fresh directions began to experiment with a radical new approach. Often playing at speeds beyond the skills of most performers, the new sound, “bebop,” became the proving ground for young New York jazz musicians. One of them, “Dizzy” Gillespie, was destined to become a major force in the development of Afro-Cuban or Latin jazz. Gillespie was interested in the complex rhythms played by Cuban orchestras in New York, in particular the hot dance mixture of jazz with Afro-Cuban sounds presented in the early 1940s by Mario Bauzá and Machito’s AfroCubans Orchestra which included singer Graciela’s balmy ballads. Mario Bauzá introduced Gillespie to a drummer recently arrived from Cuba, Luciano Pozo González, better known as Chano Pozo. This meeting would have far reaching musical consequences.

While books, biographies and audio and video interviews of Dizzy Gillespie can be found aplenty, important details of Chano's musical career are generally unknown. In the United States, knowledge of him has been limited to a few examples of his performances in Havana, while at the same time those who lived on the island knew little of his artistic trajectory abroad. Chano was a self-taught popular musician, highly gifted composer, dancer and performer. He had honed much of his skill as a percussionist performing in Carnival *comparsa* (street band) groups in Havana. Chano, with a conga drum strung over his shoulder, would dance as he played and sang, adding foot flourishes to his percussive ones. Sometimes Chano didn't even play in the *comparsas*; he just danced, and his performances were something to behold with colorful striking costumes and his original improvisations.

Chano's expert ability to simultaneously dance, play the drums and sing, developed in the carnival streets of Cuba, caused a sensation when he appeared in New York City nightclubs in the fall of 1947 with Dizzy Gillespie's band. In the words of his band mate, the legendary bass player Al McKibbin, "I thought the balcony of the Apollo Theater (in Harlem) was going to fall off the hinges...because Chano was really brilliant." Before arriving in New York, Chano had already established himself in Cuba as a composer of popular dance tunes since the late 1930s. Long before moving to New York, Chano became successful in Cuba with hits such as "Nagüe," "Parampanín," and "Anana boroco tinde." His compositions, recorded by Machito and Xavier Cugat, were also very popular in the New York *barrio* where the Blen Blen Club was named after one his most catchy dance tunes.

Chano Pozo improvised literally on the skin of the drum, like others do when playing the guitar or the piano. His tasty compositions overflowed with swing and feel. As fellow musicians from Dizzy Gillespie's band recounted, he played with great strength, with a vigor that may have been a product of his *comparsa* work, because in the street you have to play loud so that the sound can travel and reach far.

In the Big Apple, Chano was notorious for his belligerent, confrontational style, the same no-holds-barred type, rough and ready to rumble he was known for in Havana. He would always carry with him a switchblade. His fellow musicians from Dizzy Gillespie's orchestra would have to hold him back on occasion so that he wouldn't, for the fun of it, start a fight with one of the enormous bouncers who were hired by the nightclubs to throw out unruly customers.

Chano's collaboration with Gillespie had a profound impact on the jazz scene in the United States with numbers such as "Guachi Guaro," "Cubana be, Cubano bop," and "Tin tin deo," classics of jazz and fundamental to the development of bebop and Afro-Cuban jazz. Part of that collaboration was the writing of the tune "Manteca." The story has been told by Dizzy and Al McKibbin of how, while on tour in California, Chano came to Dizzy with a tune for which he had worked out in his head riff lines for the bass, the trombone, the sax and the trumpet, a musical idea that, according to Dizzy, was very powerful, it "was all rhythm ...and it was going...." Dizzy added a bridge, and arranger Gil Fuller rounded out the piece. "Manteca" was performed to enthusiastic audiences in the United States and Europe, and recorded for the first time on December 22, 1947. It was recorded again in October 1948 at a concert at the Royal Roost in New York. Chano was shot and killed two months later following a dispute over a marihuana

transaction at the Rio Bar in Harlem.

“Manteca” became an instant success and jazz standard and for many jazz fans a first and certainly an emblematic attempt at an amalgam of bebop with Afro-Cuban beats, a defining milestone, after which it was clear that a new genre had been established, a perfect combination: Latin Jazz.

Raul Fernandez is Professor Emeritus, School of Social Sciences, University of California at Irvine. He is the author of “Latin Jazz: The Perfect Combination” and “From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz.”

*The opinions in the above essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.