

Famous Cuban entertainers: Juan Formell



Juan Climaco Formell Cortina was born in Havana on Aug. 2, 1942, into a family of musicians. His father, Francisco, was a pianist and flutist, and Juan began working professionally at the age of 15, playing acoustic bass in several well-known orchestras.

After Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, Mr. Formell joined the band of the Revolutionary Police and also did radio and television work. By the late 1960s he had become musical director of Elio Revé's orchestra, one of the most popular Cuban dance bands of its time.

He founded Los Van Van, whose name can be translated as the Go-Gos, late in 1969, taking much of the Revé group with him. His intention was to expand the foundation of Afro-Cuban music by selectively incorporating rhythms and harmonies from rock 'n' roll and jazz, an approach that proved immediately popular with Cuban audiences.

He called the resulting mix of styles "songo" and organized Los Van Van in similar hybrid fashion. The band's original lineup included the violins and flute typical of traditional charanga bands and was heavy on percussion, but also featured Juan Formell on electric bass and other musicians on electric guitar, electric keyboards and trap drums.

Throughout the 1970s, Juan Formell honed his distinctive approach both in dazzling live performances and in a series of recordings that provided songs that have become standards of Cuban music, starting with the 1972 hit *Pero a Mi Manera*. By the 1980s, attentive to musical developments outside Cuba, he had also brought synthesizers and trombones into the band's sound.

Los Van Van's lyrics, some of which he had a hand in writing, were also innovative. They cleverly commented on the way Cubans lived and the problems they faced, in slangy, salty, humorous language.

In the last few years of his life, Juan Formell largely ceded control of the orchestra's live performances to his son Samuel. But he continued to supervise all aspects of its recordings, from song selection to arrangements, and at the time of his death in 2014 was finishing a new CD.

In 2013 the Latin Recording Academy in Miami had awarded Juan Formell, who was a major influence on salsa performers like Ruben Blades and Gilberto Santa Rosa, a lifetime achievement Grammy for "artistic excellence." In obituary in May 2014, Granma newspaper described Juan Formell as "one of the most important figures in Cuban musical culture in the 20th and 21st centuries" and praised him for "his special way of making us both dance and think."

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