

Cuban JoJazz prizewinner Zule Guerra talks to RHC on The Jazz Place



GJ: What has been the influence of Billie Holiday on your life and art?

ZG: I first heard Billie Holiday when I was very young and I fell in love immediately with her voice.

SP: Were there other North American influences?

ZG: Of course! There was Ella Fitzgerald and Etta James. Etta has a beautiful sense of music. There were many instrumentalists too. I love Louis Armstrong and bassist Avishai Cohen. among the more contemporary. So, my music is a mix of jazz and Blues. And I am a Cuban jazz singer with my own tradition too, a history of beautiful music.

SP: What has influenced you the most among Cuban and Latin American music?

ZG: Benny Moré of course; Omara Portuondo, Elena Burke. My family was fanatical; about Cuban music and I grew up with *descargas*, jam-sessions.

GJ: But you have described elsewhere that your parents were both scientific people, and you yourself have a degree in biotechnology. So where did the music really come from?

ZG: It came from my family. My house was full of singing. I started myself when I was 5 years old. After I visited a Casa de Cultura I started to study piano and ended up in the conservatory Alejandro Garcia Caturla. Music and the sciences are not all that different. When you study music carefully you can find science, and there is music in science too. For me it is something that is there! I remember that I was in the laboratory, studying my science and suddenly a melody appeared in my head and I started singing *Da ta tee da ta...*

SP: So when did you decide to become a full time musician?

ZG: After I finished university and was doing my 4 years of social service I was singing professionally at the same time.

GJ: What do you do with your group at the moment.

ZG: I compose the music and the lyrics. I also arrange and do the musical direction.

SP: So you are a perfectionist! But it seems to me that jazz in Cuba is a lot of work?

ZG: Yes, at first it was really difficult especially working with men. And I have to study a lot and I have to have a lot of patience. There is this impression that if you did not graduate in music you are not a professional.

GJ: The 2014 concert at the Museo de Bellas Artes! Tell us about that.

ZG: It was dedicated to the women of jazz, both in Cuba and in the world.

GJ: Tell us about NU Jazz.

ZG: People started using this term in the 1970s. Its like fusing music, though I don't like the term, fusion between R&B, Funk, Electromnic with elements of jazz music. It's experimental and very much how you feel about it. I use elements of Cuban music, and some hip-hop and Brazilian music too. I do all this with my voice, vocally. When I creat the melodic line, I am using my voice like another instrument. I conserve the traditional music too, and for me that is Nu Jazz.

SP: What are your immediate and long term plans?

ZG: Well, I have a lot of plans. Most recently I am working on the post production of my CD called Blues of Havana, the same name as my group. Next I want to do a trilogy, with three special moments. One of these CDs will be jazz with original songs. The second will be arrangements of Cuban songs with very contemporary harmonies. And I am working on the third.

SP: Any artists that you want to use on that third CD?

ZG: The producer of the CD will be the guitarist Emilio Martini, with Manzano of course on trumpet. And I have Sandoval on the trombone. I want to do a concert with Bobby Carcassés again.

GJ: What does the old guard think about your music?

ZG: Carcassés is my professor. He advises me and has given me recommendations. I love him. I have had a lot of advice from Yasek Manzano too. So I have 2 gods!

SP: And what do you feel about the Jopung Jazz Movement, Jo-Jazz?

ZG: Always I have followed this movement. I attended all the concerts of both Jo Jazz and Jazz plaza last year. I am a JO Jazz prize winner. I am really proud of this movement because we are fighting for Cuban jazz, young Cuba jazz.

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