Rafael “Congo” Castro

One of the Last Performers of His Generation

BY CARLOS FLORES

For the last two decades I have watched and listened to Rafael “Congo” Castro perform his music throughout Chicago’s Latin nightclubs. During a recent interview with Mr. Castro, I learned about his rich musical history, which spans six decades.

Rafael “Congo” Castro is a retired 83-year-old singer, dancer, and percussionist who was born in the neighborhood of La Marina in San Juan, Puerto Rico. His mother died in 1917, and in 1924 he arrived in New York City with his father and stepmother. The family lived in the first Puerto Rican barrio, located on 102nd Street between Second and Third Avenues. Rafael attended public school up to the eighth grade when he decided to leave school and get a job to help support his family. At the age of seventeen, shortly after his father’s death, Rafael began to pursue a musical career.

Pursuing a Dream

By the time he began to pursue his dream in the late 1920s, many Puerto Rican musicians were living, performing, and recording in New York City, attracted by the North American recording industry based in New York City. According to Ruth Glasser, author of the book My Music Is My Flag: Puerto Rican Musicians and Their New York Communities 1917–1940, the Puerto Rican musicians played and recorded plenas, danzas, and boleros for their compatriots; cumbias, sones, and pasillos for other Spanish-speaking groups; and fox-trots, tangos, jazz, and rumbas for African-American and European-American audiences. It was during this time that Castro joined the ranks of the many versatile and talented Puerto Ricans and Latino musicians.

One of the first musical groups that Rafael joined was the Sexteto Moderno. He says that during this early period, many Puerto Rican singers were singing in the style of boleros (ballads); but he became fascinated with the Afro-Cuban music that was introduced to New York in the 1930s. Castro was determined to learn the singing skills of a sonero, a lead singer who improvises rhythmically, melodically, and verbally (continued on 2)
Congo (continued from 1)
against the refrain of the coro (chorus) in the Afro-Cuban son. In order to achieve this goal, Rafael befriended the famous Cuban singer Antonio Machín from the Cuarteto Machín, who was also the singer of “El Manicero” (“The Peanut Vendor”) with the Don Aspiazu Havana Casino Orchestra. Rafael credits Machín with teaching him the fine points of becoming a sonero.

According to Rafael, during the period between 1938 and 1948, he performed with various groups in the Park Plaza Hotel in New York, including Los Happy Boys and Augusto Coens Golden Casino Orchestra. He also performed with Alberto Socarras, a major bandleader and the first flutist to record a jazz solo, at the Savoy Ballroom. From 1938 to 1939, Rafael joined the Pedro Flores Quartet where he recorded one song with the group. He also composed several songs, including “Dos Corazones,” which was recorded by Mario Hernandez, and “Alma Borincana,” recorded by Pedro “Davilita” Ortiz.

During our conversation, I asked Rafael how he got the name “Congo.” He replied that, at one gathering the famous Pedro “Piquito” Marcano, from the Cuarteto Marcano, called him “Congo,” reacting to how Afro-Cuban he sounded—“like someone from the Congo.” The name stuck.

Chicago Connection
In 1948 Rafael traveled to Chicago for a one-week engagement in a downtown nightclub, playing bongos and percussion with a West Indies dance show titled Show Calypso. During his stay in Chicago he became reacquainted with Puerto Rican pianist Kiki Orchard, who offered Rafael a job; he played with Orchard for over a year at the Glass Hat Cocktail Room in the Congress Hotel.

In the 1950s Rafael formed his own band, El Congo y su Combo, which performed in a handful of nightclubs that provided
Latin music in Chicago—the Cuban Village, the Palladium (on Lawrence and Broadway and where the famous Green Mill Lounge is now located), Mambo City (located on Randolph Street in downtown Chicago), and El Mirador (at Roosevelt and Halsted). The group also performed for local community organizations and social clubs such as Puesto Boricua, the Puerto Rican Congress, and La Sierra Club.

From 1960 through the 1980s Rafael continued to perform with local groups, including the Manny Garcia and Augie de la Rosa orchestras. In the early 1960s he had the opportunity to perform with the great Cuban composer, tres and bass player, Arsenio Rodriguez, when Arsenio performed in Chicago for several weeks at Las Americas Theater, located on Madison near Western. Rafael also remembers performing with Rafael Cortijo and his orchestra in the early 1970s, during Cortijo’s short stay in Chicago and making various recordings under a local label called Arinda.

Many local musicians appreciate and respect Rafael’s talent. Victor Parra, musician, bandleader, and radio program host, says that “Congo was my favorite local singer because he had a unique style different than any other singer in the area, and Congo’s singing style reflected the era of the 1940s.” Mike Maldonado, a local veteran singer, says that Congo was not only a great singer, musician, and dancer, but also a warm individual who was always there to assist friends.

In the last six decades Rafael Castro has lived, performed, and recorded with some of the greatest Puerto Rican and Latino music legends of this century, devoting most of his life to bringing joy to many individuals through his music. He retired from music in the late 1980s, so I am glad I had the opportunity to meet, see, and hear Rafael perform. The father of nine children and grandfather to twenty-seven grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren, he is one of the last musicians of his generation.

Around 1939 Congo added dance routines to his performances. Over the years he danced with several partners including Chela, Belen, and Maria Diaz. The dance routines included boleros, danza, and a habanero dance. This photo features Congo with Chela in New York in 1946.
Puerto Rico También Tiene . . . ¡Tambó!

BY J. EMANUEL DUFRAINE-GONZALEZ

The Puerto Rican musical and dance tradition known as bomba is really an African-derived tradition comprised of different regional conceptions, rhythms/rhythmic complexes, repertoires, ensembles, and drumming and performance styles. Although almost nonexistent today, bomba has not been wholly forgotten, especially by those over forty years of age. Bomba is still alive in the municipality of Loiza in northeastern Puerto Rico; and in Guayama, a city on the island’s opposite coast, bomba is occasionally performed by the very elderly. Even though it is in a precarious state of neglect as a people’s art, there is an insistent minority that struggles incessantly to revive this national attribute, thus reminding the world that Puerto Rico also has its Drum.

During the 1950s Marcos Ayala, mentored by his father, Castor, awakened a new interest in bomba in his hometown of Loiza. During the 1970s Gladys Rivera, also from Loíza, led an excellent ensemble that specialized in bomba and the wake tradition for deceased children known as baquín or baquine. For about fifteen years Modesto Cepeda has been teaching the Santurce manifestations of bomba that he learned from his father, Rafael Cepeda Atiles. Other efforts have been made in the southern coastal town of Salinas, where Nelson Santos, senior and junior, along with Héctor Vázquez and other collaborators have organized bomba workshops for children and adolescents. The Salinas projects were part of a conjunct effort with another workshop organized at Bayamón’s Jesús Mediador convent. This joint Salinas-Bayamón project was strongly supported by the Paracumbe ensemble, founded in 1979, for which I served as director. Members of Paracumbe were the instructors for the workshops during 1987–1990. Other workshops in Canóvanas and Ponce were organized by Paracumbe’s lead singer Nelie Lebrón-Robles and myself. In Ponce, Isabel Albizu and her husband Wilfredo Santiago organized Bambalú, an ensemble that has been active since the 1980s. Albizu and Santiago have exerted a notable influence on the Ponce population by awakening an awareness of the Ponce bomba tradition. This is just a summary of recent work toward the revitalization of the bomba tradition.

Regional Traditions
The word bomba, meaning drum, is very probably of Akan or Twi origin, the language of the Ashanti and Fante of Ghana. It is very similar to the word bombaa, the archaic form of the Twi word bommaa, which also means drum. The phrase baile de bomba means “dance done to the rhythm of the drum.” The expression is a cognate to the Venezuelan phrase baile de tambor. So baile de bomba and baile de tambor are equivalents.

There are several bomba regional traditions that can be identified. In yesteryear, the area comprised of San Juan, Santurce, and Loíza shared the same tradition. Another bomba

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region consisted of Cataño, Toa Baja, Toa Alta, Dorado, and perhaps Vega Baja. Moca also had its bomba, but it ceased to be practiced. Enrique Laguerre comments on the decadence and near extinction of Moca’s bomba in his classic novel La llamarada, first published in 1935.

Another musical area—or better still, bomba area—was very probably Mayagüez–San Germán. The tradition practiced in this region had a strong affinity with the bomba of southern Puerto Rico. The districts of Ponce and Guayama shared a common tradition that was present in the municipalities of Guayanilla, Ponce, Juana Díaz, Santa Isabel, Salinas, Guayama, and Arroyo with a strong influence on Patillas, Guánica, and Peñuelas.

In Huancao, a large urban center in eastern Puerto Rico, bomba was a live tradition until the 1930s. It is very possible that Naguabo also had its bomba. Informants have stated that bomba was practiced in this town or its jurisdiction, but more data are necessary to confirm this. Other towns and cities may also have had their bomba traditions, but information is very scarce.

**Bomba as Dance**

Bomba includes different manifestations known as leró, güembé or cuembé, cunyá, belén, holandés, calindá, yubá, sicá, mariantá, seis corrido, corvé, and danuá among others.

The instruments most characteristic of the bomba tradition are the bombas, a pair of drums made of empty barrels with both barrel lids removed and a tight goatskin over one of the openings. These barrels, of different sizes, contained codfish, bacon, or rum. Drum sizes, playing position, and drumhead tension mechanisms vary in these different regional traditions. Repertoires, ensembles, and performance characteristics also vary.

Bomba is a conglomerate of song, rhythmic complexes with dance, and drumming improvisation. Dances may be performed solo or in couples. The essence of the category or genre is the dance improvisation of a soloist who invites, or dares, the musician of the higher-pitched drum to a dialogue. This dance–drumming conversation may develop into a fiery competition or duel. The drummer attempts to translate the dancer’s improvised steps into simultaneous drumming patterns, thus converting what is visual into the audible. The two performers try to convey energy, acuteness, stamina, gracefulness, and elegance while portraying majestic virility or divine femininity. Bomba invokes what is ancestral, telluric, mythic, and even cosmic. Mere words cannot completely describe a musical event.

Bomba has to be lived to be enjoyed.

Bomba is Tambor (Drum).
C A L E N D A R
1 9 9 6

M a y 4
15th Annual International Reggae Music Awards Event will be hosted by singer Nadine Sutherland and will feature international nominees in reggae music. Martin’s Intercultural, Inc. (312) 427-0266.

M a y 2 5 – 2 6
Viva Chicago!
A celebration of Latin-American music. Mayor’s Office of Special Events (312) 744-3370.

M a y 3 1 – J u n e 2
Chicago Blues Festival

J u n e 8 – 9
Chicago Gospel Festival

J u n e 1 1 – 1 6
Puerto Rican Festival
This festival will include the Puerto Rican Parade which will be held in downtown Chicago on June 16. Humboldt Park will be the site for the festival which will include entertainment and food. (312) 292-1414.

J u n e 2 8 – 2 9
Country Music Festival

J u l y 2 0
Ethnic Heritage Parade. Dearborn Street
The Ethnic Heritage Committee will hold its annual parade to celebrate and promote ethnic harmony, growth, and development. (312) 684-6775.

August 23–September 1
AfroCubanism’96
A festival of Afro-Cuban music and dance will be presented at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada. In addition to a major concert series there will be workshops, lectures, and classes in drumming (and other instruments), singing, and dancing. The festival will include a broad range of Afro-Cuban music and dance, both traditional religious and popular forms.
Artists include Chuchu Valdés y Grupo Irakere, Grupo AfroCuba de Matanzas, Changuito, Richard Egües, Región Jiménez, and members of Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba.
For information or an application contact: Office of the Registrar, The Banff Centre for the Arts P. O. Box 1020, Station 28, Banff AB, T0L 0C0 Tel (403) 762-6180; fax (403) 762-6345 e-mail: arts_info@banffcentre.ab.ca http://www.banffcentre.ab.ca/

August 30–September 2
Chicago Jazz Festival

September 7–8
Fourth Annual African/Caribbean International Festival of Life DaSaible Museum, Washington Park
This event will feature a wide variety of musical styles, including reggae, calypso, soca, soukous, highlife, souk, salsa, samba, punta, and many more.
Martin’s Intercultural, Inc. (312) 427-0266.

Project Kalinda Coordinator Attends NPRC Conference

The National Puerto Rican Coalition invited Carlos Flores, Coordinator of Project Kalinda, to attend its Fifteenth Annual Conference, “Advancing the Puerto Rican Community into the 21st Century.” The conference was held October 4–6, 1995, at the New York Sheraton Centre Hotel. The National Puerto Rican Coalition represents more than 400 community-based organizations in twelve states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The organization’s mission is to further the social, economic, and political well-being of Puerto Ricans throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

Flores was invited to represent Project Kalinda/Center for Black Music Research and to participate in a workshop entitled “Cultural Enhancement,” which was moderated by musician Willie Colón. He also participated in a community caucus entitled “Puerto Rican Cultural Empowerment.” The conference was attended by nearly 600 people from around the country and Puerto Rico.

According to Flores, “the conference provided an opportunity to meet Puerto Rican leaders and individuals from other regions in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. These individuals demonstrated a serious commitment to improving the social, economic, and political conditions of Puerto Ricans in their communities.”
Clave

The African Roots of Salsa

[Editor's note: The following article originally appeared in the Fall 1995 issue of Kalinda! The article was inadvertently printed with incorrect musical examples. We apologize for this oversight and reprint the article here with correct examples.]

By Christopher Washburne

In many musical discussions, styles of music found in the Americas and the Caribbean are often referred to as African-derived. Salsa is no exception, and the following discussion explores what is particularly African about the music: clave, a rhythmic concept found in a variety of Latin-American styles. Similarities of sound and function to African bell patterns provide both evidence supporting a theory of the African origins of clave and an evolutionary link between African music and salsa.

Salsa is a Latin musical style that incorporates a variety of influences. Originating in Cuba and Puerto Rico and emerging from the musical climate of New York City in the 1950s, it has found popularity throughout the Americas and the other Caribbean islands as well as in Europe and Japan. Salsa has its roots in Cuban popular and folkloric music and is enhanced by jazz textures. The name salsa, literally meaning “sauce,” has been in use since the late 1960s, popularized by New York’s Fania Records as a “catchy” marketing label. Salsa is often thought of as Latin essence, just as the word “soul” has been a description for black American essence (Baron 1977, 217).

In Spanish, “clave” literally means key, clef, code, or keystone. Fernando Ortiz ([1935] 1984, 9) believes that it is derived from “clavija,” meaning wooden peg, reflecting the appearance of the instrument that plays the clave rhythm, called claves. Claves are two wooden sticks that are struck together to produce a high piercing sound. If no clave player is present in a salsa band, timbale players will often attach a hollowed-out, open-ended box to their cowbell stand and strike it with their sticks to produce a clave sound.

In Latin music terminology, the word “clave” refers not only to the instruments that play it but also to the specific patterns they play and the underlying rules that govern the patterns.

Clave is a two measure pattern in which each measure is diametrically opposed. The two measures are not at odds, but rather, they are balanced opposites, like positive and negative, expansive (continued on 8)
Clave (continued from 7)

and contractive, or the poles of a magnet. As the pattern is repeated, an alteration from one polarity to the other takes place creating pulse and rhythmic drive. Were the pattern to be suddenly reversed, the momentum within the rhythm would be destroyed.

The Clave Concept

The clave found in salsa, also known as "son clave" is notated in Example 4 (see page 9). How a song begins determines which measure of the clave will be played first. The phrasing of the melody is the determining factor, that is, where the accented rhythms of the melody occur. This is referred to as either 3–2 or 2–3, meaning either the measure with the three strokes is played first with the two-stroke measure following, or the two stroke is played first followed by the three-stroke measure. According to tradition, once a song begins, the clave does not change its measure order. For instance, there could never be a 3–2–2–3 clave sequence.

Once the song has begun, the clave pattern functions like the continuous bell patterns found in West African musical traditions by providing a rhythmic formula that serves as the foundation. As Roberta Singer (1982, 168) states, "Clave is a rhythmic time line that . . . functions as a rhythmic organizing principle for the entire ensemble." The rhythm may be overtly played or implied. Competent musicians in salsa must develop a "clave sense" similar to Richard Waterman’s "metronome sense," where a subjective pulse is felt by the participants which may not be overtly heard but functions as an ordering principle (Waterman 1952).

The clave concept reaches far beyond the musical context, as demonstrated by the following excerpt from the inscription found on the inside cover of the first issue of New York’s Clave magazine, published throughout the 1970s:

Clave . . . To us the word goes beyond explanations and definitions. It means life, salsa, the food of our leisure time, the motion of intense rhythm, the emotion of 20,000 people simultaneously grooving to the natural sounds of life. It’s being in beat, on key, on clave . . . It means to be on top of things, to be playing it right . . . Clave is history, it’s culture. African drums from far off places like Nigeria, Dahomey, and Ghana married the Spanish guitar to bring us clave. The seeds were planted in the Caribbean and now their grandchild is Salsa.

This declaration effectively illustrates the broad range of the clave concept and some of its descriptive uses. More importantly, it reaffirms the African roots of the rhythm.

The following evolutionary theory concerning the clave rhythm’s origins, which may explain why Africa and its hereditary nature are mentioned in the Clave publication, is based on three assumptions.

1. When the 700,000 African slaves arrived in Cuba during the 1770s, they did not forget the bell patterns from the traditional music of their past but rather incorporated them into music making in their new surroundings.

2. The pan-West African bell pattern shown in Example 1, or something similar, existed during the 1700s.

Ex. 1. West African bell pattern

This assumption is based on the pattern’s prevalence today among many different African peoples covering an expansive area.

3. As new practices emerged from the combining of various African peoples in the New Worlds, new performance styles arose.

As the Clave inscription suggests, the performance of clave is a living and breathing tradition shaped by the performance practice of

1. The proposed theory was formulated during conversations with scholar and percussionist extraordinare Steve Cornelius in 1991. He demonstrated the rhythmic similarities in the music and proposed this evolutionary connection. I am grateful and indebted for his shared insight.

2. The limitations of this notational style are vast, primarily because it does not represent "feel," instead denoting exactly where the rhythms are actually placed in relation to the beats. The starting point of the rhythm has been chosen only to facilitate the following demonstration. African musicians would not necessarily condone this initiatory choice.
individuals. Each musician contributes to the proliferation and evolution of the tradition by his or her own subtle variations of feel and nuance. Over time, a subtle peculiarity or feel may become the standard, replacing an older practice.

**Rumba Styles**

Rumba is a style of music originating from African slaves and their descendants living in Cuba. Some of the oldest recorded Cuban rumba styles, such as rumba columbia originating from the small towns of the island's interior, are performed with a 12/8 feel, similar to musics where the bell pattern in Example 1 is performed. However, in rumba columbia the bell pattern or clave is slightly different from the West African bell pattern. Instead of consisting of seven strokes, the rumba columbia clave contains only five (see Ex. 2).

Ex. 2. Rumba columbia clave pattern

In some Haitian musical styles, the rumba columbia pattern started on the third stroke instead. The reason for this reduction from seven strokes to five may never be known since it occurred before recording technology was available. It may have started with an individual variation or was the result of the fusing of two or more African styles.

Another later style of rumba, guaguancó, emerged from urban areas in a quasi-4/4 feel instead of 12/8. The duple meter feel may have been the result of the influence of marching bands and other Spanish styles often heard in the larger cities throughout the 1700s. The clave used in guaguancó appears to be an adaptation of the clave rhythm found in rumba columbia to fit the new metric feel (see Ex. 3). This pattern is most often referred to as rumba clave.

The next step of the evolution came from a simplification of styles. The son clave, used in salsa, displaces the final stroke of the three-stroke measure of the rumba clave by one eighth note (see Ex. 4).

As with all of the other adaptations, this consequently changed the musical parts. The name “son clave” was coined because of its use in son, a Spanish-influenced musical style originating in the rural areas of Cuba in the early 1900s. The rhythm of son tends to be much less complex—less syncopated and less polyrhythmic—than the rumba styles requiring the modification of the clave rhythm.

Another factor that led to this simplification was the growing popularity of Latin music in countries other than Cuba. The foreign dancers were not always able to assimilate the complex rumba dance styles, so changes were made to accommodate the new audience.

The rumba tradition has continually been a stylistic influence on salsa music and performance, but the predominance of this new expanding market required change. The result was the preference of the son clave over the rumba clave to facilitate learning the new dance styles. This theory can be tested with any newcomer to Latin music. The son clave will be inevitably easier to clap than the rumba clave. The son clave grew to prominence during the mambo dance craze of the 1950s in the United States and Puerto Rico and has remained in use in salsa performance today. Occasionally, salsa arrangements will have short rumba sections, or interludes, but will invariably resume the son clave for the body of the arrangement. (continued on 10)
Clave (continued from 9)

Current drumming styles in Ghana also suggest that a similar process of rhythmic adaptation has occurred. Patterns resembling rumba and son clave in both rhythmic construction and function are occasionally found. For instance, in David Locke’s book Drum Gahu there is a description of a “gankogui” pattern (see Ex. 5) that “establishes the overall rhythm of Gahu.” Locke says that, when playing this music, one should “always try to establish your feeling for timing and groove by concentration on this sounded phrase” (Locke 1987, 16; emphasis in original). This is precisely how salsa musicians use the clave rhythm. Notice that the gankogui has five strokes and only differs by one stroke from the son clave. It is not clear how long this style of music has been performed in Ghana. This pattern may have been in existence during the slave trade era.

Ex. 5. Gankogui pattern

The search for Africanisms in the music of the Americas has been one approach scholars have taken throughout the last fifty years to understand the roots of black music. It is a quest that is fraught with difficulties because the lack of objective documentation in written or recorded form requires a large degree of generalization and speculation. The processes of acculturation provide a complex of issues that are too vast to address in this short discussion. However, the similarities of the clave rhythm and its function to African bell patterns is worthy of note and may demonstrate the origins of the clave concept found in salsa today. Throughout this constantly evolving and changing process, a process of simplification appears to be occurring, as less rhythmically complex styles are fused and merged with the African roots. This is not to say that new types of complexities are not formed with the newer styles but simply that music is constantly changing. This one evolutionary possibility is presented here in hopes of stimulating future inquiries.

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Representative from Uruguay's Black Organization Visits CBMR

BY CARLOS FLORES

**On October 13, 1995**, the Center for Black Music Research was visited by Romero J. Rodriguez, Director of Afro Mundo. This organization was established in 1989 in Montevideo, Uruguay, to fight discrimination and racial segregation against black Uruguayans and to achieve a more just economic level and social integration among its black population.

Afro Mundo is also interested in creating solidarity with other black communities in the Americas. In December of 1994, Afro Mundo sponsored a conference in Montevideo, titled “Racism, Discrimination and Xenophobia.” The conference was attended by over 100 delegates from around the world, including more than thirty individuals from the United States.

Rodriguez’s visit to Chicago was one of several visits to various cities, including Washington, D.C., and New York. He was delighted with the tour of the CBMR facilities—especially the library, where he was introduced to the Center’s collection of sound recordings, books, magazines, original music scores, and other materials. He stated that Afro Mundo now has a large headquarters building in Montevideo and that he would contemplate the possibility of sending a member of his staff to visit the CBMR for the purpose of obtaining ideas about how to establish a similar center in Uruguay.

Marcos Sueiro, the CBMR’s assistant librarian and sound technician, expressed an interest in receiving information that documents the origins of black music in Uruguay. Mr. Rodriguez responded by indicating that Afro Mundo would be glad to share information with the CBMR.
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(continued on 16)
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Kalinda/CBMR Staff Meet with Representatives of Chicago West Indian Population

BY CARLOS FLORES

PROJECT KALINDA has continued to include the participation of as many local Latino and Caribbean communities as possible in its programs. Chicago and its surrounding suburbs have significant West Indies populations, and many of these West Indies communities have become integrated with other communities. According to Arriff Mullings, president of the Jamaican American Association, there are at least 40,000 Jamaicans living throughout the Chicagoland area, with the majority concentrated in Rogers Park and Evanston.

In order to reach out to these and other West Indian populations, Project Kalinda and the Center for Black Music Research called upon representatives from various West Indies communities to visit the Center and meet with the staff. A luncheon meeting was held at the Center’s conference room on August 2, 1995. The meeting was held specifically to provide the attendees with information about Project Kalinda and to familiarize the Center’s staff with the West Indies communities in the Chicagoland area. The meeting also provided the opportunity for the representatives themselves to exchange information about their communities.

The meeting was attended by Hayelom Y. Ayele, Commission on Human Relations/Advisory Council on African Affairs; Rhodell Castillo from Belize; Carlos Flores, CBMR; Samuel A. Floyd Jr., CBMR; Prizgar Gonzalez, Afrique newsmagazine; Ephrain Martin, Martin Intercultural; Nathan Marley, Bahamian Community Association; Arriff I. Mullings, Jamaican American Association; Morris Phibbs, CBMR; Mike Sears from Trinidad; Marcos Sueiro, CBMR; and Martine Theodor, Executive Director of the Haitian American Community Association.

Kalinda/CBMR has continued to provide educational and cultural programs that reflect the diversity of the Caribbean and African diaspora. The Center for Black Music Research, with the support of Project Kalinda, has played a key role in promoting cultural awareness and understanding among the local communities.
Energetic Evening

Ensemble Kalinda Chicago Lets Its Exuberance Show

BY HOWARD REICH
[January 28, 1996]

WITH ITS EBUILLIEN PERFORMANCE Friday [January 26, 1996] night at the Getz Theatre, the fledgling Ensemble Kalinda Chicago reached an artistic level that young musical organizations rarely attain.

It was just 1½ years ago, after all, that the ensemble announced itself to the world as the newest performance group based at the Center for Black Music Research, at Columbia College Chicago.

Its mission was to explore the links among African, African-American and Afro-Caribbean musical languages, and to demonstrate those inter-relationships in concert.

Though there was no question that Ensemble Kalinda Chicago was a professional caliber organization from the outset, Friday night’s show at Columbia College’s Getz Theatre had an exuberance and a show-business panache that one does not typically encounter in academic settings. That the band also epitomized musical scholarship of the cutting-edge variety made the evening all the more remarkable.

Here were dance and song forms from the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad and Puerto Rico performed with meticulous attention to rhythmic detail, but also with populist flair and enthusiasm.

Without doubt the evening reached its high point when the charismatic singer Raphael Benito fronted the ensemble in a selection of Haitian folk songs.

For those listening closely, Benito’s performance spoke volumes about the chant-like vocal techniques and declamatory nature of this music. At the same time, however, one simply could revel in the richly nuanced nature of Benito’s vocals and the lilting instrumental backdrop that accompanied them.

Benito, however, wasn’t the evening’s only compelling soloist. Jamaican singer Charles Cameron offered persuasive readings of ska and reggae songs, while steelpan virtuoso Liam Teague played calypso with remarkable technical skill and stylistic awareness.

The heart and soul of the evening, however, belonged to the horns, voices and rhythm players of Ensemble Kalinda Chicago. Artistically, they’re clearly ready to record and tour, and they ought to do both.

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