Cuban musician, composer and band leader Adalberto Álvarez (1948-2021)

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It is with great sadness that we report the death of Cuban musician, composer and band leader Adalberto Álvarez. He was an active, working 72-year-old and he joins the many millions who have died prematurely and unnecessarily from complications of a COVID-19 infection.

Adalberto Cecilio Álvarez Zayas, dubbed El Caballero Del Son (The Gentleman of Son), was an exponent of Cuban Son music and also advocate for both the Son and Casino dances. One of just a handful of artists of the Soviet-subsidised era who broke the cultural blockade of Cuba, Álvarez rose to international prominence in the late 1970s as leader of his first band, Son 14. He later left to form Adalberto Álvarez y Su Son, which he continued to direct until his death. In Latin America he became the most covered Cuban composer of popular dance music of the post-revolutionary period, his compositions adding to the century-old body of compositions from which contemporary Son and Salsa orchestras draw and from which their singers quote.

Álvarez was born in La Habana, in November of 1948, to a musical family. He began learning about musical harmony from his mother at an early age. After his family's move to the city of Camagüey he acted as musical director and arranger in his father's youth group or Conjunto. Like many of the island's most talented youth growing up after the Castro revolution, Álvarez benefited from a specialist advanced education. He studied music at the world famous Escuela Nacional de Artes (ENA) between 1966 and 1972. Meanwhile, his compositions were used by at least one band, Rumbavana, but it was not until 1978, that Álvarez formed his first orchestra.

Though little known today in the English-speaking world, the Son is among the most influential Western musical genres of the 20th century. It originated in the trios and quartets of rural eastern Cuba at the end of the 19th century and spread initially through military deployments, to La Habana, then throughout the Caribbean, urban Latin America and the West. It is characterised by its structurally distinct sections and an asymmetrical two-bar Clave guide borrowed from Habana-style Rumba. The original Montuno section consists of interlocking ostinati, repeated patterns, with improvised call and response between vocalist and chorus and/or parts of the orchestra. The Largo, an introductory written verse, became a standard addition when Son arrived in urban areas. Son remains a dominant current in Cuban and Afro-Latin American popular music.

Through the late 1970s and 1980s particularly, Álvarez played an extraordinary role both in continuing this development of the Son, and disseminating it particularly to Latin America, across the blockade. His more recent work adopted elements of the orchestral style developed within Salsa as well as the hybrid Cuban music of the 1990s—Timba—but retained a rustic authenticity and inventiveness typical of Son.

Son 14's first LP, *A Bayamo En Coche*, was released in 1979, *Son Como Son* in 1981 and the following year, *Adalberto Álvarez Presenta Son 14*. They were very much a part of Cuba's new music as it evolved in the late 1970s and diverged in style from the music Son had previously inspired in the United States and Latin America. The title track of "A Bayamo En Coche" opens with a Guaguancó Rumba in acapella, human beatbox style, each percussion part taken by a voice or clapping before the orchestra abruptly interrupts. The brash, aggressive, often dissonant style of its brass section could be confused with Rumbavana's sound of the time. Use of the 3 double stringed Tres guitar, the Segunda Voz (second voice which harmonises at thirds and sixths with the lead vocal) as well as traditional song structures linked it to the past.

The voice of Eduardo "Tiburón" Morales, however, revealed a new aesthetic—rough, gruff, though perfectly in tune and phrased, and lacking any affectation. Arrangements were often harshly dissonant, nervously jumpy and interspersed with Álvarez's, at times, disconcerting synthesised keyboard sounds. The Montuno would kick in, a piston-like Cencerro (large cow bell) accelerating the bpm to a pace few Salsa dancers expected or could cope with. Angular, quirky and unpredictable, this music was never designed for club DJs. But in Cuba, although there was much live music, there were probably few if any clubs.

By some route, Son 14's music and Álvarez's compositions broke both the blockade and off-island prejudices regarding contemporary Cuban music. His work was rapidly discovered and covered by so many artists in Puerto Rico, New York and Venezuela it is hard to be sure of the chronology or how exactly this came about. According to one source, covers number in the hundreds. Atypically in this era, Son 14 did manage to tour extensively outside Cuba.

The date of the first interpretation this reviewer found, 1981, suggests it was Puerto Rico's Sonora Ponceña and its co-leader and pianist Papo Lucca, who opened the door to Álvarez's work, for others to follow. More than copies of Álvarez's originals, La Ponceña's arrangements drew out the core of Álvarez's material

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and transformed it, in their own style, into music accessible to Salsa social dancers. They would generally cover one or more of his compositions on their own LP's up to 1990.

With three LPs under his belt, Álvarez left Son 14 and in 1984 formed Adalberto Álvarez y Su Son. Their style was at first still quirky, unmistakably Cuban yet highly original and with a mischievous tendency to double tempo in the course of a song. However, the distance between the new band's Son and that of Salsa elsewhere gradually began to narrow. Fronted by the exceptional vocalist Felix Valoy who had also sung with Son 14, "Reflexiones Mías" (My Reflexions) and "El Mal De La Hipocresía" (The Evil Of Hypocrisy) are standouts among their '80s repertoire. They also kept various Salsa bands, such as Roberto Roena y Su Apollo Sound, busy with new themes to copy. As Álvarez was settling back into a more traditional, less frenetic vein, on the back of economic turmoil and a new generation of musicians emerging from ENA, a new revolution was about to kick off.

A wayward child of Son with fresh infusions of North American music, Timba was spawned of world-class musicians who both suffered and ultimately benefited from the Special Period of the 1990s. The end of Soviet subsidies crashed and subverted Cuban society. For one reason or another, not all of Cuba's pre-existing dance music orchestras embraced Timba. Álvarez did not immediately adapt to or borrow from it. He was most notable during the 1990s for stating publicly that he belonged to the officially denigrated and repressed Santería religion in which many Cubans, of all ancestry, covertly believed.

His biggest success of the decade was "¿Y Qué Tú Quieres Que Te Den?" (What Do You Want Them To Give You?). This almost 12-minute song runs through the Yoruba pantheon of Orishas (saint equivalents) quoting from their religious music and telling the audience, according to their attributes, what to ask for from each one. At some point, he also became a Babalawo—a priest equivalent in SanterÍa. As the Castro regime performed an about turn to embrace religion, between 2013 and 2018 Álvarez also became a deputy for Camagüey to the National Assembly of People's Power. Shortly before his death, he spoke out against the violent repression of recent protests.

Álvarez released several CDs towards the end of the '90s which seem oriented towards the growing Latin dance market and growing global interest in Casino and Rueda dance. They are his most conventional and least memorable works in my view. As Timba receded in the mid-00s, however, and the worst effects of the Special Period were alleviated, Álvarez's spark returned. He also began to incorporate some of the innovations of the Timba generation, such as complex gears and efectos, into his Son but this was Son informed by Timba, his general trajectory has been towards a Salsa or Casino dance compliant form of Son.

Preceded by *Para Bailar Casino* (2003), *Mi Linda Habanera* (2005) confirmed his ability to consistently turn out a dance tune. *Gozando En La Habana* (2008), *El Son De Altura* (2010) *Respeto Pa' Los Mayores* (2013) and *De Cuba Pa'l Mundo Entero* (2018) followed. Many contemporaries came to pander to foreign tastes that paid the bills and more, but Álvarez found a balance that retained the sensibilities of Cuban popular musical traditions. The result was demotion from the first division of Cuban export bands but the enduring love and respect of those people and populations who were born into, or have learned the language of Cuban music and feel its depth and subtleties.

The Son is as old as the Blues and shares some of the same roots. Unlike the Blues, however, Son, through its environment, available raw materials and perhaps innate potential for complexity, has not yet encountered any impassable obstacle to its continued development. In his first five years as an orchestra leader and arranger, Adalberto Álvarez played a critical role in overturning established norms, opening the way for others and creating a space for Cuba's increasingly well trained musicians to make use of their skills. The often frenetic musical insurrection and experimentalism of his 30s subsided early on but Álvarez did not end his career in conservatism.

His last album release suggests Álvarez still had plenty new to say, including an excellent reworking of "El Mal De La Hipocresía." But from the popular melodrama of Cuban soap opera, and through the medium of Son he produced a masterpiece, "Los Buenos Y Los Malos" (The Goodies And The Baddies), perhaps his most powerful composition in thirty years.

Here are the glowing embers of a life of great work—a rich breadth of textured sound with complex undercurrents and seamless transitions, yet still so sharp. His music matured but in the end was anything but stale. Cuban music is showing alarming signs of commercialised decay these last 20 years, following closely the creeping re-entry of capitalist social relations. There are still several artists, however, who demonstrate that creating fresh popular art from sound is still possible. Whether the younger of these will make such a mark on history as did Álvarez, at present looks unlikely. There has for many years been scant evidence of creativity in the West to which this younger generation are turning ideologically. Possibly his last recording, Adalberto Álvarez y Su Son streamed a short concert during the pandemic nearly a year ago. His contribution to Cuban and human culture will endure.

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