

Alí Bello
The &
Charanga
Syndicate



It's lunchtime in 1950's Cuba. Plates of slow cooked beef *ropa vieja*, succulent pork *lechón asado* con yuca and the classic black bean dish *moros y cristianos* are set steaming in the noonday sun. Tubes inside RCA Victors glow faint orange while dials are hurriedly set to Havana's popular station Radio Progreso. Transfixed to their radios, Cubans from all over the island bend their ears to the latest sensation from Orquesta Aragón, an octet quickly popularizing a dynamic new style of music called *charanga*. Fusing the Spanish based *danzón* with West African influences brought by Haitians migrating to Cuba, original versions of the *charanga* maintained the enchanting blend of wood flute, percussion, piano, double bass and violins. Originally seen as "society music," legendary bands like Arcaño y sus Maravillas encouraged visionary musicians Orestes López and his brother Israel "Cachao" López to pen songs that helped spark the organic evolution of the *charanga*.

As musicians fled Cuba's subsequent revolutions, New York City became the next incubator for the art form. Percolating through the musical ingenuity of New York City's Afro-Caribbean communities, *charanga* took on a brasher sound, laying the groundwork for salsa while absorbing everything from the 1950s Jazz revolution to the 1960s and 1970s *Típica* movement that continued to refine and revitalize Cuban musical traditions. As Latin bands embraced *charanga*, musicians celebrated its design while reveling in the unique energy it brought to live performances.

Enter violinist Alí Bello, a consummate musician whose love for *charanga* runs so deep that he's become a prominent champion for the genre. Born in Venezuela, Bello began learning the violin at six, studying within El Sistema, the National System of Youth Orchestras of Venezuela; a

comprehensive classical music educational system encompassing all aspects of instrumental instruction and orchestral training. Within classical music, Bello embraced the work of Maxim Vengerov, Gidon Kremer and Kyung Wha Chung only later discovering Jazz violin masters like Stéphane Grappelli and Jean-Luc Ponty. Moving to New York City, Bello was exposed to similar musical innovations that originally transformed *charanga*. Given the foundation of his classical training, and displaying the aptitude of an artist keenly adept at embracing new musical languages, Bello absorbed Jazz, rock, and the diversity of Pan-Latin musicality.

Eager to take advantage of everything that is New York City, Bello soon cultivated opportunities across a wide spectrum of music. From gigs with salsa star Johnny Pacheco, Latin Jazz master Paquito D’Rivera and legendary Latin groups like Orquesta Broadway and Africando, to playing with Doc Severinsen & El Ritmo De La Vida, rapper Jay-Z, The Roots, and mega-star Beyoncé, Bello continued to master the violin while working within a spectacular range of musical idioms. Having not grown up with *charanga*, Bello’s time with the progressive band Los Jóvenes del Barrio and popular group Orchestra Broadway cemented his ambition for crafting a musical identity that incorporated the style.

Pop, R&B, Jazz, rock, Latin Jazz, salsa, classical and *charanga*. With that world of music at his fingertips, Bello embarked on recording albums (*Inheritance* and *Connection Caracas - New York*) that exploited every aspect of playing the violin; a goal aided by the unique ethnomusicological disposition of being Venezuelan. As with many of his Venezuelan contemporaries (Edward Simon,

Luis Perdomo, Fran Vielma, and Luisito Quintero) Bello's youth was a musical buffet where Caribbean, US, South American and European influences made for regular feasts of reggae, merengue, salsa, rock, metal, samba and folkloric music.

With *Alí Bello & The Charanga Syndicate*, Bello is artfully circling back to a beloved musical tradition that is especially well tailored to his chosen instrument. "At some point, you think 'Okay, this is mine!' and you own the authority of what you're doing," Bello believes. "And my passion for creating music goes beyond interpretation, it's really about creating something new." Supported by a New Jazz Works grant from the Chamber Music of America, that something "new" is Bello's modern tribute to the timeless resilience and enduring malleability of the *charanga*.

If you got it, flaunt it, and so *Charanga Syndicate* begins with *Gauripumpé*, the popular dance anthem for salsa and Latin Jazz fans alike. Preserving the simplicity of the song while stoking its fire, Bello's violin harmonies, and eventual solo, soar in places traditionally reserved for saxophones, trumpets and trombones. Balancing percussion, flute and crisp vocals from Luis Rosas, Alessandro Bello and sonero Jeremy Bosch, *Gauripumpé* enlightens as it eagerly pushes you towards the dance floor. Arranged by Cuban pianist Sonny Bravo, *Son De La Loma* finds its joyous bounce and infectious rhythm by substituting classic vocal harmonies with flute, violin and piano. Settling into a playful mambo, Bello's violin and David Santiago Jr.'s flute converse above the lyrical foundation set by guest pianist Silvano Monasterios.

Honoring his wife's many wondrous personalities (one of which doesn't like dancing to cha-cha's) is Bello's *Gina's Groove*, a cha-cha arranged by pianist César Orozco. Crisp, buoyant, a syncopated songbird at dawn, *Gina's Groove* sways romantically, the melody eventually shifting to a montuno featuring glorious solos by Santiago Jr., Orozco and Bello, before gently touching down. Having selected a variety of gifted pianists to "spice up" the album, *Emiliando* applies the perfect tablespoon of maestro Arturo O'Farrill on an energetic track that flawlessly straddles *charanga* with Latin Jazz. Bello's violin extends elegant harmonies over an electric pulse before stretching into a sizzling extended solo anchored by the tumbao of Abraham Saenz's baby bass. Protecting the melody, O'Farrill's solo again shows why his fingers should be bronzed before Manuel Márquez's percussive musings take the song home.

As if sharing a spirited musical conversation, Bravo's arrangement of *Tres (Y Dos)* leans into the harmonic framework of *Tres Lindas Cubanas*, the well-loved composition by Cuban guitarist Guillermo Castillo. Reversing the *clave*, Bravo alters the essential framework of the tune but not the lyrical flow of the coros (vocal chorus) it maintains. Guest lead vocalist Manolo Mairena, Santiago Jr and Bello all end up chiming in on this festive love letter to New York City. *Amadeus Rhumba* is a clever Bello original written for his son, incorporating elements of Chick Corea's *Armando's Rhumba*. Not really a *rumba*, the song quickly cascades into a series of instrumental improvisations. Bello's rich violin solo prompts Orozco's own masterful phrasing as the song eases into a short montuno before concluding with one final chant of its vivacious melody.

Dipping back into the deep well of *charanga's* vast ingenuity is *Bilongo* by Cuban folk composer Guillermo Rodríguez Fiffe. Here again, Bravo's skills as an arranger add depth, texture and a modern flare to a composition originally written in 1937. Brilliant fusing Ernesto Lecuona's *La Comparsa* with Chucho Valdés' *Mambo Influenciado* is *La Comparsa Influenciada*. Taking on the formality of a Cuban-style carnival procession, Monasterios' solo piano acts as a gateway for intertwining these classic melodic lines until Bello launches into one of his more exceptional solos on the album.

Named after the mellifluous voices of street vendors singing their way through sales of cucuruchos (paper-shaped cones filled with various treats), is Moisés Simons' *El Manisero*. Shifting the meter to 7/8 makes for a delightfully uneven groove to what traditionally is sung as a *son*. Simplified with only bongó, güiro, piano and bass, ample space allows for Santiago Jr.'s flute and Bello's violin to set the tone before Chakarji has his say. Expect to play this one often not just for its cheerful disposition or its masterful construction, but simply because you won't want the album to end. Seemingly knowing this, Bello uses *El Manisero* to quietly suggest that there's much more yet to come.

Music is made up of a variety of artists who bend traditions to their will creating the next new rage. For Alí Bello, that rage will soon celebrate its 100th anniversary and remains a potent, lyrical Pan-Latin musical art form. Charanga is by nature a collaborative effort but continues to mint champions, clear-sighted artists whose respect for tradition, elite musicianship and precise

orchestration, allow for particular idioms to be refined and reborn for the next generation of audiences. *Alí Bello & The Charanga Syndicate* accomplishes this by taking *charanga* to a brilliant new level, playfully leveraging historical narratives into fascinating opportunities to learn about Cuban musical heritage while you dance the night away.