

Rene Touzet

by Zeno Okeanos (original 1997; updated 2003)

Hopefully by the 21st century there will be at least one in-depth book in English about Cuban music and its various and prominent derivatives including Latin Jazz. If one exists at this point, I certainly cannot find it. I have lists of thousands of books on Jazz music, its contributors and heroes, theory and practice, history and recordings, scholarly studies, biographies, autobiographies, pictorial features, recollections, and analytical treatises on every known note Bird and Prez uttered. I have read and continue to read many. As a great fan of music I am grateful that these exist. My first impulse, however, is always to check the index for any reference to a key word relating to my other obsession: Musica Latina. Let's check for "Cuba", "Afro-Cuban", "Conga Drum", "Montuno", "Mambo", "Cubop", "Guaguanco", or "Cha Cha Cha." Maybe check for a few names... how about Arsenio Rodriguez, Machito, Marcellino Guerra, Chano Pozo. Maybe that is expecting too much, so how about Rene Touzet, Joe Loco, Tito Puente, Charlie Palmieri, Cal Tjader. I guess that is expecting too much also. Then I get upset and I get incensed. Why should the world be upside down, inside out, and backwards! Injustice and inequity do not sit well with me. Credit and recognition are seriously due.

When that momentous tome on Cuban derived music does finally emerge and I look in the index and do not find the name Rene Touzet, I will still be disappointed that the awaited book still has not been written. In fact, Maestro Touzet should rate most of a chapter in that book. The music of Rene Touzet is certainly a treasured chapter in my life as a lifelong aficionado of the beautiful, the exciting and the creative in art and music. I am sure there are many others who feel this way, who perhaps saw, heard, and danced to his piano and orchestra playing mambos

and cha cha cha in the best nightclubs in Hollywood during the 1950's . At that time I was not quite of age, however, his music was played on the radio during this period and one could not help feeling that the man behind this tropic transporting music was perhaps the most "sophisticated" musical presence in town. To this day Touzet's recordings from his Hollywood period stand out as capturing the very essence of Latin music creativity during the heyday of cha cha cha and mambo on the west coast, or any coast for that matter. His wonderful compositions, emotion, arrangements, piano voicings, fresh vocal adaptations (many in English), and his well-spring of rhythmic innovations and solo constructions are the material for still-another awaited book.

Maybe the problem is music labelling and categorization which tends to perpetuate misconceptions and prejudices, ultimately victimizing certain artists while inordinately boosting others. Touzet's music was always marketed as popular Latin dance music, however, those same albums contained Latin Jazz gems as well as noteworthy piano work and original compositions and improvisations with Afro-Cuban rhythm which really should be separated out for special attention and study. Latin music, even when it contains all the same components as creative historic jazz does not seem to warrant recognition in print as part of the North American jazz heritage. This is a somewhat arbitrary and unfortunate oversight. Many of the best musicians worked in both fields. Both Jazz and Afro-Cuban music have been related to dance and both require a high degree of musicianship and creativity. If nothing else, the fact that one has been the darling of American intellectuals and the other beneath their serious attention up until now , can serve as a springboard into a vast pool of potentially new scholarship and "media" attention. That is to say, the field is wide open, so go to it, kids. The relative obscurity of Rene Touzet, at this point in time, is just one example of the many great stories one might uncover with just a bit of probing.

I will save my diatribe on the comparative neglect of Latin music in print, and a history and analysis of the half studied, half-credited, and half-baked appropriation of this music over the years for another time. My focus here, hopefully, is to celebrate the accomplishments of Rene Touzet and to make his presence more widely known.

Rene Touzet was born in Havana in 1916. By the time he was 16 years old he had already completed studies in piano and theory at the Falcon Conservatory in Havana. In his youth he had occasion to contact the great Maestro Ernesto Lecuona who encouraged him to continue his composing. He also played in concerts and was a competitor in many piano contests where he often won first-place honors. He pursued further studies under the direction of Professor Cesar Perez Sentenat and Joaquin Nin. Later, in 1949 he would study instrumentation with the celebrated Italian composer, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco in Hollywood California (as did Henry Mancini, Andre Previn, Bob Cooper, Marty Paich, and many other noted West Coast modern jazz composers and arrangers) , and in 1953 with Hal Overton in New York City (the great teacher Hal Overton is most widely remembered for his big band arrangements of Thelonious Monk's compositions and solos as heard and recorded at the famous Town Hall Concerts). Today Maestro Touzet lives in Miami and has for many years now been a prolific composer, significantly contributing to the classic repertoire of Cuban piano literature in the manner of Ernesto Lecuona. A Sonata, many more Danzas, Preludes and Variations, Impromptus, and more, have yet to be published. Some of this wonderful and uniquely beautiful piano literature, however, is available from Ediciones Universal in Miami. Many of his timeless compositions can be heard on the CD "Danzas Cubanas" . Every year in Miami there is a celebration of the Music of Rene Touzet in which he and a diverse array of musical celebrities perform from his vast repertoire of popular songs, classical compositions,

and dance music which he has created over the last sixty plus years. I had the good fortune to attend this celebration in the summer of 1997 and shortly thereafter met with Maestro Touzet for an interview at his home .

As a young man in Cuba Rene Touzet decided to form a band. Surprise! It was a Jazz Orchestra! Playing many of the Swing charts from the United States, he led a successful ensemble and began perfecting the modern voicings and rhythmic inventions which sprang forth from his natural gift and his training. During the late 30's and early 40's many Cuban musicians would be attracted to American Jazz because of the creative freedoms it explored and also because of its wide commercial appeal. After all, this was the Swing Era and it filtered down to Cuba just as Cuban music found its way to New York. As an orchestra leader Touzet was self taught. Before leaving Cuba he led the Orquesta de la Television Cubana on Channel 2 for three consecutive years. He was and has always has been a very busy working musician, orchestra leader, composer, and arranger. This did not keep him from absorbing the diverse musical heritage which is indigenous to his homeland Cuba. He mentioned to me that on nights off or at after-hours clubs he would hear the likes of Arsenio Rodriguez and others. He also mentioned growing up hearing many of the great soneros on the radio live. One radio station would broadcast say Abelardo Barroso while another station would wait until the song was finished to broadcast their own live singer, this way listeners didn't have to miss any great music. Then there was Carnival every year, how could a person with great musical ears fail to be engaged by that. Many years later Touzet would title one of his compositions "Siempre En Clave" and go on to leave behind a recorded legacy of superb Cuban dance music , Cuban piano interpretations, and Latin Jazz.

When Rene Touzet was 18 years old and had written his first 'Danza Cubana', the Dominican maestro Luis Rivera who scored

Lecuona's theatrical pieces (Lecuona wrote the originals, he did not 'make instrumentations') took him to Lecuona's house.

Touzet: "I played the Danza and Lecuona tells me to play it again, I was very nervous, thinking I played it badly and he wants to hear it again!...so I played it again, Lecuona then told me to keep on writing, keep on composing, which I have been doing to this very day." Touzet very much carries on the tradition and magic of Ernesto Lecuona in his numerous piano compositions, which are, however, uniquely Touzet. There are also several other parallels in their work. Both led popular dance orchestras and were masterful 'rhythmic' improvisers. Both could compose melodies which would have wide and lasting appeal. Touzet's song "No Te Importe Saber" (Let Me Love You Tonight) , written in 1937, has been recorded by everyone from Bing Crosby to Miguelito Valdez. Still going strong, it is just one example from the more than 500 songs he has composed . Both utilized Afro-Cuban rhythms and understood 'Clave'. Both composed for films (Touzet's music appears in "Dark Passage" 1947, among others) . Incidentally, Touzet is also an accomplished lyricist, a poet, who has written the lyrics to all of these songs, of which many are 'evergreen' classics recorded and performed to this day. Now in his eighties, Touzet's composing is just as inspired, impassioned, and exciting as ever. A new CD of his latest 'serious' compositions is in the works, and any pianist drawn to the romantic Cuban tropical undertones and classic 'impressionistic' nuance of this style would do well to get their hands on these musical gems as they are published.

Touzet started playing the piano when he was 4 years old but says he was not really considered a 'child prodigy'! At nine he started serious study with a private teacher, Conchita Pereyra, and by fourteen performed his first 'examination' at the Falcon Conservatory in Havana, playing a Sonata by Greig (the only one that he wrote). The following year he performed a not-well-known Polonaise by Liszt, and the following year for graduation

performed "Fantasy in F minor" by Chopin, one of that composer's most difficult and most beautiful works. Apparently piano came easily and naturally to the young Touzet who confesses that he was not a good student, practicing only two hours instead of four or five. Although considered a star pupil and winning first prize in the Conservatory's competition, this was the end of Touzet's 'legitimate' piano career. Instead, he chose the path of the 'band business'.

By the age of eighteen, having been intrigued by the improvisation of some of the great jazz pianists, he formed an American style swing band in Havana. For the next decade he would gain fame in Cuba both as a noted composer of popular (Cuban) songs and as a band leader and pianist. The only time Rene was late for a gig in Cuba was the one time he and his bass player got carried away joining a Carnival parade. I just knew he knew those cowbell rhythms!

In 1944 there was a hurricane in Cuba which tore the roof off the club Montmartre where Touzet's band had been playing quite successfully for four years. He looked around but could not find another job as good or better. Touzet says "down I would not go" and it was then that he decided to come to the United States. Not wanting to compete with American jazz pianists and because his song "No Te Importe Saber" was already famous he immediately became a pianist in a "rhumba" band in New York.

By 1945 he was hired into a band that Enric Madriguera was taking to Hollywood. Touzet has fond memories of this band and its leader, and participated in recordings and films they made during this period. Having gone back and forth between the east and west coasts several times before finally settling his family in Hollywood, Touzet was to be impressed by the innovations of Joe Loco and others on New York's forming mambo scene.

Along with pianists such as Joe Loco (real name Jose Estevez), Touzet would create a unique piano and arranging style that simply must be credited with the other pioneers of what has come to be known as Latin Jazz. This argument is supported by such early classic Latin Jazz recordings as the great Joe Loco 1949 session "Concierto En Percussion" on the SMC label and Touzet's Capitol sessions from 1948 which included such excursions as "WhoKnows", "Impia" , "Mascarade", and "Just An Idea" (the unreleased "Modernizando" piques my curiosity!). There are Latin Jazz tracks on Touzet's early MGM and Fiesta recordings which place him parallel to and just as innovative as the more widely cited pioneers Bebo Valdez , Machito, Mario Bauza, Chico O'Farrill, Tito Puente, et al., plus you get his harmonically rich piano style and impeccable sense of Clave along with it.

Although you won't find Touzet's name in the index, there is a short passage about him in a Chapter called 'Afro -Cuban Music' in Marshall Stearn's 1956 book "The Story Of Jazz". This is one of the only books that mentions anything about the evolution of Latin Jazz, and for a long time was the only source that mentioned Chano Pozo and included a photograph. "The Latin Tinge" by Roberts loosely paraphrases this same paragraph with no additional information. Apparently Rene Touzet led a "rhumba" band that played Sunday afternoons at the Avedon Ballroom in Los Angeles. In 1946 he hired a drummer named Jackie Mills because he knew some Cuban rhythms. The drummer's loyalty was to jazz and he eventually persuaded Touzet to hire various friends of his who were topnotch jazzmen on vacation from the Kenton band which was known to occasionally dabble in Cuban influenced arrangements "Things began to hum when Touzet hired Johnny Mandel to play bass trumpet and write arrangements. Mandel experimented with jazz arrangements of 'Latin' numbers and the use of Cuban rhythms with jazz tunes. He even put the 12-bar blues to a mambo rhythm and called it

'Barbados' (Charlie Parker recorded it later.) The jazzmen learned to improvise to the clave beat and the Cubans learned to jump the clave when necessary." Stearns goes on to say that Touzet did not really like what was happening: "He (Touzet) felt like the tail to a foreign and swinging kite. When Kenton re-formed and called his musicians back, Touzet breathed a sigh of relief." It is this writer's opinion that this well documented form of compromised music has been given way too much importance in Latin Jazz history compared to the 'real thing,' thus detracting from the importance of true innovators like Touzet who were able to create harmonically and melodically rich improvisations within the discipline of informed Afro-Cuban rhythmic structures. The problem is that for many years, until the popularity of Cal Tjader (an ex- Shearing jazz vibist who accurately drew inspiration from Tito Puente, Joe Locho, Machito, and others), this rhythmic Latin Jazz was referred to as 'Latin' without the 'Jazz' part, as if to say: if it 'don't ' use rounded triplet feel swing rhythm somewhere, instead of straight sixteenth note angular-geometric polyrhythmic clave structure, it 'ain't' no way jazz. Touzet could play either and then some.

Perhaps the very definition of jazz depended on its avoidance of the "straight 16th" rhythmic feel. The resistance of many otherwise astute North American jazz musicians to learning, respecting, incorporating, or fully embracing the musical challenge of Afro-Cuban rhythms (until relatively recently) may have been partly due to an inhibition originally based on the knowledge and experience of a repressive (and racist) American puritanical mainstream consensus which, if provoked, it was felt, could thwart their acceptance and thus their livelihood. Swing rhythm itself was at first considered barely acceptable let alone these more aggressively propulsive and "sexy" African rhythms contained in Afro-Cuban styles. This inhibition is not evident in Cuban style jam sessions called 'Descargas' which showed that extended 'jazz' soloing of the highest order could be performed in

Clave with Afro-Cuban rhythmic feel. Check out the 1952 session which produced "Un Poco Coco" with definitive solos by Gustavo Mas, Alejandro Vivar, and Bebo Valdez. The "straight 16th" is, of course, also at the base of Rock music.

In any case by the mid 50's Rene Touzet had a very clear vision of the type of un-compromised Cuban orchestra he wanted to put together. In the next ten years he would record more than a dozen LP's for the GNP label and work steadily in the best night clubs on the West Coast. In his bands and on recordings he would utilize the best percussionists available on the coast. Carlos Vidal, Jack Costanzo, Francisco Aguabella, Mongo Santamaria, and Willie Bobo were among them. His music was popular and he recorded many hits. Unfortunately the label lacked real vision when it came to marketing 'Cuban' music outside the Southland, and Touzet's work never gained the truly spectacular international audience of a Perez Prado or even Tito Puente, that was its obvious potential.

Other Latin artists of great potential on the label, notably Bobby Montez, gave up in frustration and eventually quit the music business altogether. Many years later some of the classic GNP recordings of Touzet, Peruchin, Eddie Cano, and Jack Costanzo would be briefly reissued on Palladium out of Spain. Today only one slapdash CD is available from GNP called the "Best of Rene Touzet" which fortunately contains such all time masterpieces as "Andalucia", "Mambo Guajiro", "Siboney", "Midnight Sun", "Andalucia", "Pa Chimoso Tu", and many others.

To me the most timeless treasures to study and dig on the GNP - LP recordings are the tracks featuring Touzet's piano with bass and percussion. These include his very personal and exciting rhythmic conceptions of Lecuona's classics: "Malaguena", "La Comparsa", "Danza Negra", "Andalucia", and "Siboney", other classics like "Peanut Vendor", "Midnight Sun", "My Reverie",

"Julie Is Her Name", "Invitation", " Maria", "Moon River", "I'll Remember April", "September Song", and "Autumn Leaves;"
Touzet originals: "Bolero Time", "Leo's Mambo", "Red Dress", and "Piano Pachanga."

I'll bet you could fit all of these on one or two CD's. All it would take is some care and respect and the vision to see beyond the most timid and obvious type of common denominator commercialism, toward a wider perspective. Now, in this age of information , it is possible to reach a slightly more specialized market on a broader base and make the numbers work out. It seems to me a label that made so much off of an artist could afford to stretch beyond its usual opportunistic formula and reissue that artist's material retrospectively with some intelligence, dignity, and meticulousness. Several reissue companies are now doing projects like this and apparently making it pay. Whether or not the original artists ever really see any royalties is a another old and sad story. So how about "The Complete GNP Piano Recordings of Rene Touzet with Rhythm." Gene Norman, are you listening? Do your heirs got ears? Don't lose those tapes!

There seem to be few pianists today, if any, who have picked up on the fresh improvisatory approach that Touzet invented which ingeniously utilized a wide array of 'cowbell' rhythms and clave variations as piano phrases spread out two-handedly in subtly poignant, modern harmonic voicings. Being grounded in a trained classical composer's comprehension of the piano, his style is not all montuno, octaves, and parallel fourths. Today's pianists by comparison can sometime appear to be formed from the latest mold.

Aspiring pianists today should have more easy access to the best recorded examples of such 'older' and wide-ranging stylists as Rene Touzet, Anselmo Sacassas, Rapael Audinot, Pedro Justiz "Peruchin", Luis "Lili" Martinez Griñan , Bebo Valdes, Facundo

Rivero, Noro Morales, Julio Guitierrez, Joe Loco, Jose Curbelo, Rene Hernandez, Charlie Palmieri, Eddie Cano, Clare Fischer, and so many others from various eras, to provide an inspirational base for their own original textural and emotional alternatives to the current trend toward incessant 'virtuosity' and stylistic conformity. I guess what I am saying is that it seems like styles used to be more unique and varied to my old ears.

After so many years as a fan of Touzet's music, it was a great pleasure to finally meet him. We sat and talked, I asked too many questions, he was amazed that I had dug up so many of his older recordings, and he proceeded to engage me with his latest compositions from the grand piano in his studio. Showering me with some of his published compositions and biographical material, I felt greatly honored by the graciousness of this towering figure in modern music. Very proud of his Cuban heritage and not without a poet's ironic sense of humor, he explained to me that he had now, in his eighties, finally given up playing dance music gigs and was devoting himself entirely to serious composition. He thought that the 'complete GNP piano recordings' was a great idea and wished to see it happen. We both laughed about the fact that much of the world only knows of him because the big pop hit "Louie Louie" was based on the first two bars of his great arrangement of "El Loco Cha Cha" from his "Broadway To Havana" album. We both agreed that his third recording of "El Manisero" on the Modiner label was most exciting and that it was a shame that the vinyl issues were all somehow compromised in the pressing. He was hoping to possibly see some of that session reissued and was still not beyond being recruited once again to play 'dance' music on a recording. I was most amazed by the revelation that Touzet only played jazz while in Cuba, and in the U.S. so quickly developed into the unique Latin-jazz pianist that I was familiar with. In the presence of such a complete musician as Maestro Touzet, one is consummately aware of the irrelevance of the arbitrary categories which

separate musical cultures and styles . Perhaps his most well known hit, "Mi Musica Es Para Ti" sums up his lifelong pursuit of creating truly beautiful music for all of us.

The published Piano Music of Rene Touzet is available from Ediciones Universal

Phone: (305) 642-3234, Fax: (305) 642-7978, E-mail: ediciones@kampung.net

Recordings related to this article: (from the Descarga Catalog)

1. Rene Touzet: "Danzas Cubanas", TL-12108
2. Rene Touzet: "The Best Of Rene Touzet", TL-1325 (This CD contains selections from more than a dozen out of print GNP LP albums from the 1950's-60's) "The Complete GNP Piano Recordings With Rhythm" NA "The Complete MGM, Capitol, & Fiesta Recordings" NA "The Complete Compositions For Piano" NA
3. Ernesto Lecuona: "The Ultimate Collection-Lecuona Plays Lecuona" BMG CD
4. Marco Rizo: "Ernesto Lecuona-A Musical Legacy" TL 12296
5. Various Artists: "Afro Cuban Jazz: The Original Mambo Kings" TL-12166 (Un Poco)
6. Julio Gutierrez y su Orquesta: "Progressive Latin" TL-13517
7. Jerry Gonzalez & Fort Apache Band: "Ya Yo Me Cure" TL-14325
8. Cal Tjader: "Primo" TL-12010 (Palmieri), "Latino Con Cal Tjader" TL-13257 (Cano)
9. Eddie Cano: "Duke Ellington, Cole Porter & Me" TL-12091, "A Taste Of Cano" ?
10. Facundo Rivero: "Piano Caliente" Velvet
11. Peruchin: "Piano Con Moña" Egrem (?) "La Descarga" TL-13945 {The Egrem title is the same as out of print LP GNP-50 "Incendiary Piano Of Peruchin"}

12. Orq. Casino De La Playa: "Adios Africa" TL-12993 (Sacasas)
13. Cuarteto Caney: "1939-40" TL-10296, "Perfidia" TL-13264 (Audinot)
14. Clare Fischer: "Crazy Bird" TL-11877
15. Arsenio Rodriguez: "Dundunbanza" TL-13574 (Lili Martinez)