

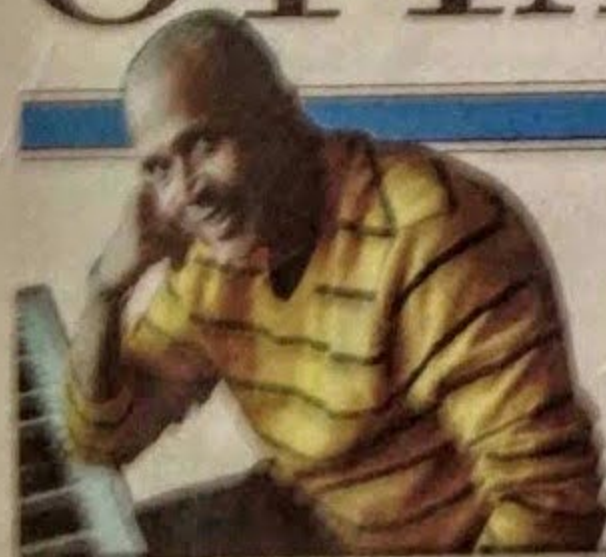
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2013

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RE-CONNECTING WITH AUDIENCES

*Miguel De Armas starts over in Ottawa
after leaving behind success in Cuba*

ARTS, C8

PUCK DROPS ON NEW SEASON

*Maple Leafs get four past Price,
net win over Habs in NHL's opener*

SPORTS, B3



ARTS & LIFE

Editor: Peter Bock, 613-596-3754 • arts@ottawacitizen.com • <http://ottawacitizen.com>

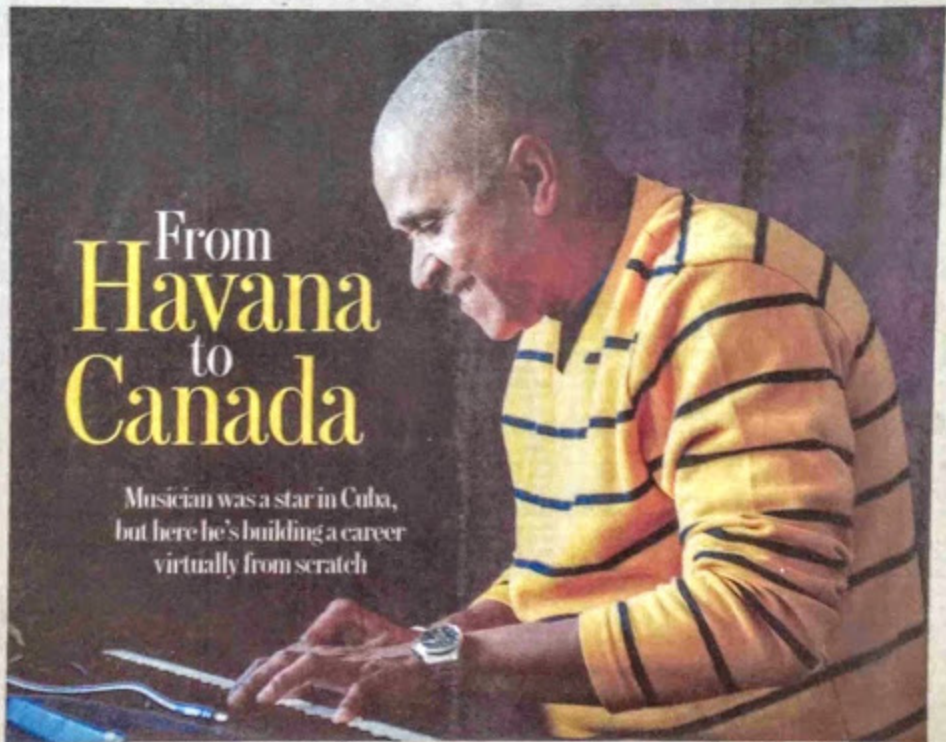
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THE OTTAWA CITIZEN, PAGE C

From Havana to Canada

Musician was a star in Cuba, but here he's building a career virtually from scratch



Cuban pianist Miguel De Armas practices in his downtown Ottawa apartment. He was a regular performer in Cuba and is working to expand his Canadian audience.

PETER HUM
OTTAWA CITIZEN

In his modest downtown Ottawa apartment, Miguel De Armas is seated where he's most comfortable, behind his portable keyboard, fingers striking hard at the keys. The 52-year-old Havana-raised pianist is thoroughly immersed in making music, even if he's only performing for a visitor. His hands race without hesitation, his right foot rocks heel-toe to keep the beat. He's playing one of his most recent compositions, written this summer while the recent immigrant likely looked out at the Ottawa River and Gatineau Hills for inspiration.

"It sounds a bit different (from De Armas' other compositions)," says his wife, Yaxmina Proveyer. She came up with the title for the tightly crafted work filled with dovetailing parts — Getting There.

It's an appropriate title for the piece, and for the veteran musician's latest ambitions.

Before he came to Canada, De Armas was a founding member of NG La Banda, an eclectic Cuban group that created its own style

of popular, dance-oriented music called timba and toured the world playing it. He worked steadily in his homeland, playing on 30 CDs as an accompanist or as a cooperatively led group.

But after De Armas moved to Ottawa two years ago to be with Proveyer, he, like so many newcomers, has started from little more than scratch to build a based-in-Canada career.

He's also taking English classes, and during an interview, it's

Proveyer who does much of the talking and a little bit of interpreting.

"Now he's doing his own thing," says Proveyer, who directs a program for newcomers at the YMCA and says that she's "300 percent" behind her husband's musical pursuits.

"He is more in control of what he wants to do and where he wants to go."

De Armas' next milestone is to take place this Friday at the Sherman Centre, when he is to give a Latin jazz concert with his quartet and special guests including guitarist Randy Ellis, vocalist Caridad Cruz and Angelique Francis, and trumpeter Kelly Crisp.

"Our main goal," Proveyer says, "is to keep expanding the audience for his music, reaching beyond the Latin community."

Another goal, she adds, is for De Armas to, at last, record a CD under his own name.

While De Armas did not grow up in a family of musicians — his father was an anesthesiologist, and his mother was a dentist — he was drawn to music early in life.

He trained as a classical percussionist — "He's still a percussionist in his soul," his wife says — and graduated from the Instituto Superior de Arte with a bachelor's degree in Cuban percussion.

But piano studies were mandatory, and De Armas gravitated toward that instrument. Among the few music books that he has read his keyboard is a folio of Carl Czerny's famous technical exercises for piano.

But even as he was receiving classical piano training, De Armas was being captivated by the sound of jazz from beyond Cuba's borders, played on the radio in the 1950s.

He thrilled to the sounds of such jazz piano greats as Oscar Peterson, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett and Chick Corea. But the music was so scarce for De Armas at the time that he speaks of having just 10 cassettes, which he had to erase and copy over.

Since he came to Canada, De Armas bought a book of Corea's transcribed piano solos. "For him to find those books is like a dream," his wife says.

Latin Jazz Night with Miguel De Armas

When: Friday, Oct. 4, at 8 p.m.
Where: Sherman Arts Centre, 245 Cameron Blvd., Ottawa
Tickets: \$25 by calling 613-560-2700 or via shermanarts.ca

NG La Banda hit it big in the 1990s, combining classic Cuban sounds with Afro-Cuban folkloric rhythms. The band played at jazz festivals in Montreal, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands. The band broke up about a decade ago, and De Armas resided in Cuba, working steadily until 2001, when he moved to Ottawa to be with Proveyer.

Says his wife, "Ottawa is not the best city to be an artist, but we are still dreamers, and we think everything can be possible."

On one level, De Armas has taken plenty of gigs at venues such as Brookstreet, Hotel's Optima Lounge and the Euro Restaurant and Bar, both in Kanata.

See **PIANIST** on page C9

Pianist: 'The real thing'

Continued from page C8

He has accompanied musicians far less experienced than himself, stopped by jam sessions and joined in with novices getting a taste of performing in public.

But at a higher level, De Armas was on the bill with his quartet during this year's Ottawa Winter Jazz Festival, giving an especially rousing show in the NAC Fourth Stage. "For him, it's more about the intensity ... it's more about creating a rapport, how he engages with audiences, the connection he establishes," Proveyer says.

From his years on the Cuban music scene, De Armas has some high-level connections of his own.

For example, last summer, he provided the Ottawa Jazz Festival's jam session with one of its you-had-to-be-there moments when he and some visiting Cuban musicians practically tore the roof off AlphaSoul Café with their supercharged playing.

Guitarist Elias fondly recalls how he joined in with the tumultuously rhythmic, impromptu music-making.

"I have limited experience playing Cuban music, but the feeling was so strong from Miguel and the other musicians, and their attitude so joyous, positive and infectious, that it was easy to play what was essentially a type of music that is normally out of my comfort



MIQUEL/STAFF/OTTAWACITIZEN

Cuban pianist Miguel De Armas is concentrating on learning English and on his own compositions.

zone," he says.

"I was flabbergasted to learn that Miguel actually lived in Ottawa," he adds.

De Armas also says he was offered the chance to do a short tour this year with the band of saxophonist David Murray, playing with Murray's band that features diva vocalist Macy Gray.

But he turned down that opportunity to stay focused on his music and his English studies.

Wakefield bassist Marc Decho, who is in De Armas's group, says that playing with the pianist is "a pure joy and a constant adventure."

Decho, a longtime buff of Cuban music who was familiar with NG La Banda before De Armas' move to Canada, says that "every gig gets better and better.

"As far as the impact he has

made on the city, it's been a major one," Decho says. "There is no other pianist this side of Elliott Duran (in Toronto) who is playing Latin-jazz at this high level."

After a few rehearsals with De Armas, Elias says he appreciates the pianist and his music even more.

"His writing is tremendous. It's authentic and it's contemporary," Elias says. "Miguel is the real thing."

For his part, De Armas is humble.

"I love to appreciate everything and everyone," he says in clear but halting English. "I can learn from everyone."

"The most important thing about music is that you can learn all the time."

phum@ottawacitizen.com
twitter.com/peterphum
ottawacitizen.com/jazzblog



(1)

The Miguel de Armas Latin Jazz Quartet and the Horizon Quintet create a dancing groove at MJF 2015

by Alayne McGregor, photos by Brett Delmage / 27 October 2015

The Horizon Quintet
Merrickville's Jazz Fest
Merrickville Community Centre
Saturday, October 17, 2015 – 12 noon

The Miguel de Armas Latin Jazz Quartet
Merrickville's Jazz Fest
Merrickville Community Centre
Saturday, October 17, 2015 – 1:30 p.m.

Pianist Miguel de Armas is a perennial favourite at Merrickville's Jazz Fest. Even performing in the middle of a Saturday afternoon, his Ottawa-based Latin Jazz Quartet filled a large room in the local community centre with fervent Afro-Cuban jazz enthusiasts, clapping and swaying to the beat.



Pianist Miguel de Armas in close musical conversation with percussionist Arien Villegas and bassist Marc Decho at Merrickville's Jazz Fest ©Brett Delmage, 2015

His show was the second half of a double bill, and the room already looked packed when we arrived partway into the first group's set. More people kept arriving, with a final count from the organizers of at least 130. But the community centre and the volunteers were prepared with chairs, and they steadily added them around the edges of the room.

The quartet has been preparing for its upcoming debut performance at the Havana Jazz Festival in December, and had a long list of tunes ready for this show – but no fixed set-list order. Instead, de Armas signalled the next tune as the applause died down from the previous one – and, in fact, the music flowed well from tune to tune, never losing its strong forward momentum.

[View photos of the Miguel de Armas Latin Jazz Quartet at MJF 2015 \(http://photos.ottawajazzscene.ca/151017-Miguel_de_Armas_Quartet/\)](http://photos.ottawajazzscene.ca/151017-Miguel_de_Armas_Quartet/)

There was clearly an easy communication among the four players. Underlying all the tunes were Ottawa percussionist Arien Villegas' nuanced conga rhythms, giving the music its characteristic Cuban sound and energy, but also moving out at times into interesting variations. He was in frequent eye contact with Montreal drummer Michel Medrano, an

assertive and dynamic player who provided a powerful underlying beat but who could also play quietly and atmospherically under ballads.

Marc Decho played a six-string electric bass, in a style as much guitar as bass. He frequently contributed fluid and inflected solos, alternating with de Armas on piano in vibrantly expressing the melody. In many ways, the melody line felt like a partnership between him and de Armas. When he was more in the background, however, I thought his bass lines were almost drowned out in the mix by the other instruments.

De Armas was everywhere – immersed in the music and frequently signaling changes to the other musicians and keeping the band tightly together. By nature a propulsive player, he could create brilliant flurries of sixteenth-notes on piano, but then a few minutes later would be pounding out long chords to support a fast conga solo, or playing more quietly and emotionally on ballads. Because of language barriers, he has tended to let his music speak for itself, but at this concert he did verbally introduce the music and his musicians more often – with a big smile that went over well.

The quartet opened with a de Armas original, “Almonte”, a song which reminded me of the brilliant skies of Cuba in antithesis to the gloomy weather outside. It began lightly with chiming cymbals and rippling piano and ended with a fast-paced flourish.

They then immediately segued into “Close Your Eyes”, a jazz standard which has been recorded by everyone from Tony Bennett to Ella Fitzgerald to Oscar Peterson. They gave it a Latin beat with shimmering piano notes and emphatic drumming. A duet between bass and congas added a strong groove, and then all four musicians added to a start-and-stop beat under the melody that made your feet want to dance.

The group continued with nine more pieces, with feels that ranged from almost classical, to expressive, quiet ballads, to fast blues, to upbeat Latin numbers. Many were de Armas originals – full of vitality and combining the different

instruments well. But he also included a swinging version of Thelonious Monk's "Monk's Dream" (with cowbell accents), and an emotionally-resonant "You Don't Know What Love Is".

The crowd loved it, and greeted the last few notes of "Getting Serious" with a standing ovation. The quartet came back with an encore: a de Armas original called "Greco's Shopping". As the dancing, melodic piece developed, it felt as though the quartet was putting out enough energy to power a small town. Medrano's hard-edged drums and Decho's bass combined in a strong beat below de Armas' streams of piano notes, and then developed into a strong joint riff – which the audience then echoed with on-the-beat clapping. The pace kept increasing, until de Armas stood up, pointed to the band, and the music instantly stopped – to be greeted by another standing ovation and lots of cheers.

First up on the bill for this concert was the Horizon Quintet , an Ottawa-based group of strong musicians who specialize in jazz/bop music from the 60s and 70s with more than a touch of funk and soul. Their energetic and full-out music melded well with de Armas' quartet – but they were impressive in their own right.

[View photos of the Horizon Quintet at MJF 2015 \(http://photos.ottawajazzscene.ca/151017-Horizon_Quintet/\)](http://photos.ottawajazzscene.ca/151017-Horizon_Quintet/)

CONNECTING THROUGH CUBA

Toronto's Jane Bunnett and Ottawa's Miguel De Armas team up for the first time

PÉTER HUM

Perhaps it was inevitable, given how much they have in common, that Ottawa pianist Miguel De Armas and Toronto saxophonist/flutist Jane Bunnett would one day play a concert together.

The Cuban immigrant in his mid-50s who came to Canada five years ago and the 60-year-old Juno-winning reeds player who has championed Cuban music since the early 1990s will at last share a stage this Saturday night, at La Nouvelle Scène, presented by the TD Ottawa Winter Jazz Festival.

The two musicians met casually, three years ago, when Bunnett had De Armas over to her house in Toronto for dinner after his reputation preceded him.

"My friend, (Aylmer-based) guitarist René Gely, told me this wild Cuban pianist was living in Ottawa and he had done a few gigs with him. I was excited to meet him," Bunnett recalls.

"We received the call that he was in town and I said, 'Drop by our house.' We made dinner and hung out here and ended having an impromptu jam into the wee hours. That's when I heard how fantastic he was."

"We talked about Cuba, its culture, its music, of course, and about not only how many people we knew but have as friends in common," De Armas remembers. "We created a great synergy and that was a fun way of getting to know each other. By the end of the night we both realized that we should do something together in the near future."

It's taken the Ottawa Jazz Festival's advocacy to unite Bunnett and De Armas. In the lead-up to this weekend's festival, programming manager Petr Cancura put out a call to Ottawa musicians to propose first-time collaborations with out-of-town musical guests.

Cancura says he received about 30 applications. De Armas's pitch



Juno-winning saxophonist/flutist, Jane Bunnett first met pianist Miguel De Armas when she invited him to dinner at her house. The pair ended up in an impromptu jam session into the wee hours of the morning. **DARREN BROWN**

to work with Bunnett was chosen for a plum spot during the winter festival because "it was a very well thought-out and realistic project and the match of artists is perfect," Cancura says.

"Miguel is a serious musician and composer with a consistent band," he continues. "Jane is a great collaborator and has worked with some of the finest musicians in the world. The match is of a high

calibre and will undoubtedly be very strong."

De Armas says Bunnett has "the sensitivity to understand and appreciate Cuban-rooted music in its fullness."

"She has developed that sense through 35 years of history, travelling to the island and getting to know in depth the richness and complexity of Afro-Cuban rhythms," says De Armas, who

studied classical percussion and piano in his homeland.

"She is the perfect complement to my work of the last four years, during which I have been composing for my quartet," De Armas continues.

"Also, Jane is a very funny individual. I really love her sense of humour."

Bunnett has played with a who's who of great Cuban jazz pianists

**MIGUEL DE ARMAS
QUINTET**

Special guests Jane Bunnett,
Amado Dedéu García

Where: La Nouvelle Scène
(333 King Edward Ave.)

When: Saturday, Feb. 11, 9
p.m.

Tickets: \$26.50 at ottawa-
jazzfestival.com

and she mentions De Armas in the same breath with them.

"He is from the school of Chucho Valdés, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Hilarío Durán," Bunnett says. "These musicians are so full of knowledge. They can play all the percussion rhythms and they also have this piano technique combined with the Romantic era of not only European music, but their own wonderful Cuban composers. They've got it all covered."

Before he came to Canada, De Armas was a founding member of NG La Banda, an eclectic Cuban group that created its own style of popular, dance-oriented music called timba and toured the world playing it. He worked steadily in his homeland, playing on 50 CDs as an accompanist or in a co-operatively led group.

Bunnett, who is also an Officer of the Order of Canada, has won five Juno Awards. Her most recent Juno came for her 2015 album Jane Bunnett & Maqueque, a project that unites her with a band of young female Cuban musicians to play original music.

At La Nouvelle Scène, Bunnett will join De Armas's working band, which will be augmented with the addition of vocalist/percussionist Amado Dedéu García.

"We will present 10 of my original compositions and two jazz standards that I have re-arranged. This high-energy music will be a great fit for Jane," De Armas says.

phum@postmedia.com
twitter.com/peterhum
ottawacitizen.com/jazzblog



(1)

"Let's play!" Jane Bunnett and Miguel de Armas combine their jazz and Afro-Cuban energy

by Alayne McGregor / 6 February 2017

When Ottawa pianist Miguel de Armas and Toronto saxophonist Jane Bunnett got together to play for the first time a few years ago, they didn't want to stop.



Miguel de Armas is celebrating 5 years of composing and performing in Canada with this show ©Brett Delmage, 2015

Bunnett still remembers their after-dinner jam at her house in Toronto. "We just kept doing tune and tune after tune. It was like, Omigod, as I was winding down, Miguel was winding up! He was this incredible atomic energy. It's why we love Cubans. This is why they're just amazing. They're

so full of energy and creative spirit and collaboration, and let's go for it. We played and played, probably for a couple of hours, to my neighbours' chagrin, and definitely after midnight."

At their Ottawa concert this Saturday, the music will be limited to 75 minutes, but the zest for playing will be there as much as ever.

Bunnett is one of the best-known proponents of Afro-Cuban jazz in North America; her ground-breaking and award-winning recording, *Spirits of Havana*, released in 1991, was the first major collaboration of North American and Cuban musicians. De Armas had an extensive professional jazz career in Cuba before coming to Canada.

Saturday's concert will be their first public performance together.

The show will also mark de Armas' fifth anniversary in Canada. He came here to marry Yasmina Proveyer, a Canadian who now acts as his manager and spokesperson. De Armas quickly found a musical niche in Ottawa, performing at festivals and clubs here and in Montreal and southern Ontario. He's made a point of playing with a wide variety of musicians, both inside and outside the Latin community.

Bunnett said that de Armas had been on her radar for years even before he came to Canada. That included his work with the NG La Banda Orchestra, which is "one of the greatest salsa groups ever. I danced to them at a billion parties in Cuba."

After he moved to Canada, she started hearing about him from Ottawa friends. "A couple of times we crossed paths when I was performing in Ottawa, and he was in the audience. I had another very good friend, René Gely, who is a guitar player who had done some gigs with Miguel and talked very, very favourably about his playing and his compositions. I kept telling René: René, I don't need convincing! You don't really have to tell me how great he is. I already know."

Especially when I work with a good composer like Miguel, I can really go anywhere in his tunes. They're fun to play. They're demanding, they're hard, the chord changes are hard. They're rooted in that foundation. It's not like it's coming from nowhere, it's coming from a very solid force. And having the experience that I've had with Afro-Cuban music, I just thrive in that.

– Jane Bunnett

But what she didn't know was de Armas' capabilities as a composer. At Saturday's concert, all the pieces will be ones he has written in Canada in the last five years.

When de Armas and Proveyer visited Bunnett in Toronto, they came for dinner. "And most people after dinner just chill out with a cognac or something. But Miguel was like, OK, let's play! He ran over to the piano, and he started banging out some tunes and I ran upstairs and I got my instrument. And Larry [Cramer] pulled out a cellphone and started filming us playing."

"I woke up the next day, and I said, 'Larry, that guy, he's a real force. I mean, I had only really known Miguel as being the piano player, the guy who's hitting the timbas, the mambos and really generating that energy in that group. And I didn't realize he was such a very, very good composer."

"We don't know those things with people because everybody has their roles in various groups. And you never know with ... when changes happen in people's lives that they take on new experiences. I'm sure he was composing

when he was back in Havana, but you have your gig and you do your gig and you play your role, and it's all great. But there's all these other things you can do. And he's an amazing composer!"

Bunnett and de Armas got together in December to run over some of the pieces in the concert. "They were pretty hard but very interesting, and I was trying to figure out his tunes. And now I've come to a revelation that his tunes are highly original, very rooted in specific Afro-Cuban elements, which is what I really, really love."

"I'm not a big fan of Latin jazz. Latin jazz to me is taking standards and just injecting a clave and a beat underneath it, and soloing. But his tunes, they're very specific. Every tune is one of a kind, and takes on a different character."

Proveyer said that some of the 15 tunes in the set list come from de Armas' first years in Canada and some are very recent – including two which will debut at the show. They reflect "different phases of his musical personality."

"Miguel isn't a person who will talk a lot. Sometimes he's a bit quiet. But the best way he can express himself is through music. It's when he becomes highly articulate on different levels: rhythmic, melodic,



Jane Bunnett ©Brett Delmage, 2016

formally. He has such a good, clear idea of what shape he will give to every tune. It's like in architecture, putting things together and nothing is random. Everything has a reason."

Saturday's concert came about through the Ottawa Jazz Festival, which offered the opportunity for an Ottawa-Gatineau musician to partner with a musician they hadn't publicly played with before for a concert at the 2017 Winter Jazz Festival. Proveyer said de Armas had always wanted to do something with Bunnett but hadn't found an opportunity to do so, and this was "the perfect place for that show we had in mind for a while."

"The project is called Afro-Cuban Meets Jazz, and it was basically a platform to invite Jane to play Miguel's music."

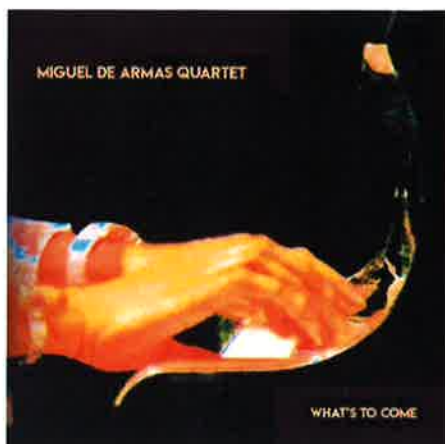
On stage will be de Armas' long-standing Latin Jazz Quartet, with Marc Decho on bass, Arien Villegas on percussion, and Michel Medrano on drums, plus Bunnett and Afro-Cuban bata player and vocalist Amado Dedéu García from Montreal. García will also be adding songs and chants from the Yoruba tradition between sections of the concert.

García plays in the group Clave y Guaguanco, one of the few remaining "serious interpreters now in Cuba of the Afro-Cuban folkloric music," Bunnett said. "Yoruba Andabo, which was one of the first groups I went with, is almost pretty much done. They're trying to keep themselves together but all the original band members are gone, have passed away. Clave y Guaguanco is directed by Amado Dedéu's father, and they probably have been right up there with the Los Muñequitos de Matanzas and the AfroCuba de Matanzas as the Cuban keepers of the flame of the Afro-Cuban folkloric rumba."

Bunnett said that García will add a significant musical component to the show. "He's directly in the lineage of this music, and is one of the people who is able to really keep this music alive. To me it's really important to be able to work with someone like him, because it's not watered-down. It's the real deal."

Miguel de Armas Quartet: What's to Come

By **Raul da Gama** - Nov 30, 2017



**BUY THIS ALBUM ON
AMAZON.COM**

The pianist Miguel de Armas is blessed with a magnificent tumbao and he uses it to great effect on *What's to Come*. But if you thought that he is sticking within his comfort zone on this recording, then you would be dead wrong because clearly not afraid to step out, to invent – very organically, it must be said – outside the Afro-Caribbean idiom and yet stay true to his roots in a refreshing, forward-thinking manner. His use of electronic instruments – especially the synthesizer – is rather effective and while he may not be the first to add splashes of vivid colour and stretch the sonic palette of his music, he certainly makes every sound from the instrument work very well for him and his music, especially when the drama of

musical narratives unfold as piano and keyboards collide to produce a refreshing wave of harmonics.

Miguel de Armas is a sincere and persuasive musician. His pianism is suffused with a panoply of colours and his touch is at the soft end of the spectrum, although it has a subtle and percussive touch and always conveys his music so luminously. The music doesn't often raise its voice much and even when it does, the narratives are skillfully crafted to maintain a certain expressive decorum. An attractive feature of Miguel de Armas' music is that he alters harmonies and structural elements with impressive control, heading in directions that surprise and captivate the ear. The danzón "La Dama y el Perro", "Rumba on Kent St." and "Tango Asunción" are fine examples of such restraint. The use of bātà on "Freddie's Drink" adds much to the rollicking rhythm of the piece.

In those and all the other works on this album, Miguel de Armas performs with consummate artistry, blending superior control and tonal lucidity with a cohesive sense of line and motion. The pianist's music could hardly be better served than by his brilliantly schooled quartet as well as by a constellation of stars who have joined in to celebrate this music: and these include **Jane Bunnett** on soprano saxophone, the fiercely brilliant bassist, Roberto Riverón, guitarists Elmer Ferrer and Galen Weston, superb accordionist Alexandre Laborde and the fiery trumpeter **Alexis Baró**. All of the musicians engage in a skillful and rigorous manipulation of the material in the most listenable light possible, while also making it more vibrant than ever.

Track list – 1: Yasmina; 2: A Song for My Little Son; 3: La Dama y el Perro; 4: His Bass and Him; 5: Pam Pim Pam Pum; 6: Illusion; 7: What's to Come; 8: Rumba on Kent St. 9: Tango Asunción; 10: Freddie's Drink

Personnel – Miguel de Armas: piano and keyboards; Michel Medrano: drums and percussion; Marc Decho: bass (solo – 2 – 4), (5, 7, 9); Arien Villegas: congas (5); Guests: Alexis Baró: trumpet and flugelhorn (1); Roberto Riverón: contrabass (1); Carlitos Medrano: congas and percussion (1, 3, 5, 8 10); Elmer Ferrer: electric guitar (2); Mathieu Sénéchal: bass (4, 8, 10); Galen Weston: electric guitar (4); Jane Bunnett: soprano saxophone (7)

Released – 2017

Label – Independent

Runtime – 47:22

Raul da Gama

LJN Canadian Editor. Based in Milton, Ontario, Canada, Raul is a musician and an accomplished writer whose profound analysis is reinforced by his deep understanding of music, technically as well as historically.



(1)

Miguel de Armas' original and collaborative jazz excites an NAC audience

by Alayne McGregor / 14 December 2017



Miguel de Armas, Marc Decho, Petr Cancura, Lucas Haneman, Michel Medrano, and Amado Dedéu Garcia received a standing ovation for their NAC Presents show December 6. ©Brett Delmage, 2017

The Miguel de Armas Trio, with special guests Amado Dedéu Garcia, Petr Cancura, and Lucas Haneman
NAC Presents
National Arts Centre, Fourth Stage
Wednesday, December 6, 2017 – 8:30 p.m.

[View photos by Brett Delmage of this performance \(https://photos.ottawajazzscene.ca/2017/171206-MDA/\)](https://photos.ottawajazzscene.ca/2017/171206-MDA/)

It's been more than five years now since Cuban pianist Miguel de Armas moved to Ottawa. In that time he's changed Ottawa and Ottawa has changed him.

He has substantially increased the prominence of Afro-Cuban jazz here, with his own group, his regular special concerts, and his Fiesta Cubana dance band – and attracted a considerable steady fan base.

De Armas has used the opportunity to write – creating many new compositions – and worked to steadily improve his conversational English. He's made a point of stretching himself by collaborating with a wide variety of local jazz musicians. He hasn't stuck to his comfort zone in Latin jazz, but instead has played with many different vocalists, guitarists, saxophonists, bassists, drummers, and even a violinist in his Friday night shows in Kanata, and at other venues.

He's also collaborated with high-profile Latin jazz musicians in Toronto and Montreal, including Jane Bunnett, Hilario Durán, Julio Hong, and Amado Dedéu Garcia.

But the centerpiece of his music has remained his long-standing trio with bassist Marc Decho and drummer Michel Medrano, which plays monthly at the Brookstreet Hotel in Kanata and regularly in special concerts here, Montreal, and Toronto and the GTA. They've recorded an album together (What's to Come), which they officially released in Toronto last month with several of the Toronto musicians who performed on it; its Ottawa release show won't be until 2018.

You could see and hear all of those developments at de Armas' concert at the Fourth Stage on December 6. It was part of the NAC Presents series, which doesn't often showcase local jazz, and followed a series of high profile concerts at the NAC's Canada Scene, and the Ottawa and Merrickville Jazz Festivals. The concert was sold out – and packed with enthusiastic listeners who enthusiastically applauded throughout.

The trio was again at the centre of the show, but augmented by two Ottawa musicians – saxophonist Petr Cancura and guitarist Lucas Haneman, both of whom de Armas has played with (separately) on Fridays – along with

Afro-Cuban percussionist Amado Dedéu Garcia from Montreal, with whom he's had previous happy collaborations.

They primarily performed pieces by de Armas and Decho, reinforced by several Cuban jazz standards. A Decho composition, "Song for Bebo", was the opener: a joyful piece featuring scintillating piano and a melodic electric bass solo, and strongly propelled by Medrano on drums and Garcia on congas.

Haneman joined them for the next two numbers, his fluid guitar expressing the evocative melody in de Armas' "A Song for My Little Son", and his hard-edged metallic lines a counterpoint to soft bass and percussive piano in "His Bass and Him".

Cancura joined the trio for three numbers in the first set, playing soprano saxophone. His high, swirling lines soared over the sizzling rhythm from piano, drums, and congas, and a powerful bass solo on the Afro-Cuban classic "Greco's Shopping". On "Yasmina" – a happy tribute to de Armas' wife and manager – his soprano was more inquisitive and a bit wistful over pointillist piano and bass, and the whole built a considerable head of steam before ending with a few last pounded piano notes. "Rumba on Kent Street" featured Gracia and Medrano playing against and pushing each other, faster and faster, with Cancura's soprano providing a more inquiring and quiet Latin melody on top.

The second set opened with "Illusion", a ballad performed by just the trio, its reminiscent melody decorated by sprinkles of faster piano notes – and then developing into a higher-speed showpiece with repeated piano riffs increasing the energy. De Armas said it was inspired by Canada's winter, and based on Cuban rhythms. Haneman joined them for "From Me to You", a waltz which featured him in duet with de Armas.

"What's to Come", the title track of the new CD, featured both Haneman and Cancura and Garcia playing both congas and bātà drums – one with each hand. It was an extended and intense piece with echoing and bluesy guitar

and trilling tenor saxophone over crisp piano and driving percussion. Cancura's powerful sax lines spread throughout the room, as the rhythm section steadily upped its intensity before ending with a hard piano flourish.

"Pam Pim Pam Pum" was a double-time exercise in classic Cuban rhythms, while, in contrast, "I Will Sing for You" was a unhurried and hopeful piece, opening with an expressive piano solo.

Garcia is best know as a bātà drummer, and he finally exclusively played those drums on the show's closing number, "Freddie's Drink". The rollicking number by Decho and de Armas opened with thunderous drumming, and contrasted Cancura's elongated and anthemic soprano sax lines with repeated bass riffs and jubilant piano.

Throughout, the compelling percussion duo of Medrano and Garcia powered the piece. They slowed at one point to a more sensuous rhythm as de Armas left the piano to play with a large shaker – then the ensemble returned to playing all out, building to an intense climax before ending with strong chords on piano.

The audience greeted the end of the show with an extended standing ovation.

I particularly enjoyed how de Armas expanded his repertoire in this show, creating a well-paced line-up which included more ballads and slower numbers, as well as the breakneck-tempo pieces he plays so well. The show was an excellent showcase for how his music – performed as always tightly and with verve – continues to develop and excite audiences.

Set List

Set 1

1. Song for Bebo (Marc Decho)
2. A Song for My Little Son (Miguel de Armas)
3. His Bass and Him
4. La Dama y el Perro
5. Greco's Shopping
6. Yasmina (Miguel de Armas)