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O'FARRILL, O'FINALLY

Forgotten for decades, Cuban jazz composer Chico O'Farrill finds himself on the edge of fame once more, just as he's pushing 80.

BY JORDAN LEVIN

Music is fickle and indiscriminate. Fame comes rarely, and it doesn't always come to those who merit it most, and it doesn't always come at the right time. For Arturo "Chico" O'Farrill, 78, one of three men who made the marriage between American jazz and Afro-Cuban music, whose influence still sounds in salsa and Latin jazz today, recognition is coming at the end of his life, after almost eight decades and after he had almost given up on making music.

The Cuban-born son of an Irish father, O'Farrill composed or arranged for (among others) Benny Goodman, Dizzy Gillespie, and Count Basie. He wrote some of the definitive compositions of Latin jazz, and was part of the music's birth in the 1940s and '50s, part of the



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mambo and big band eras. But for most of the last 30 years, he opted for the financial security of writing commercials, removing himself from the music he loved. While he remained a legend among Cuban and jazz musicians, the larger world of pop culture doesn't even know he exists.

O'Farrill is philosophical about this. "Jazz is not a commercial music," he said by phone from his apartment on New York's Upper West Side. "Yes, sometimes I felt very frustrated that I couldn't do the music I loved and make money at it, felt that persons in positions of power were blind. I finally said to hell with it, I'm gonna go into the commercial field and make money. But I didn't obsess about it."

But now O'Farrill is getting a final chance at recognition with *Heart of a Legend* (Milestone Records), an overview of his life's work that features some of the best musicians in Latin jazz today: Paquito D'Rivera, Arturo Sandoval, and many more. He is touring with his big band again. This Wednesday he will be celebrated at a party hosted by talk-show queen Cristina Saralegui and actor Edward James Olmos at the new Cafe Nostalgia in Miami Beach, at one of those model and celebrity-laden affairs usually awarded to young pop stars with pretty faces and sales in the millions.

"I never lost the hope that maybe it would happen some day," O'Farrill says. "It feels great, just great. Working with such great musicians and

being able to do the material however I liked, that was a very precious thing."

The man behind *Heart of a Legend* is executive producer Jorge Ulla, a Cuban-born filmmaker who made *Nobody Listened* and *Guaguasi* (for which O'Farrill composed the soundtrack), and who has a successful commercial production company -- which is how he met O'Farrill more than 20 years ago.

Ulla remembers hearing Dizzy Gillespie praise O'Farrill at a birthday party the Cuban saxophonist D'Rivera threw for the older Cuban years ago. "Dizzy said 'I owe this man half of what I am,' " Ulla said. So the record was a labor of love for him. "I am doing well, but not that well [financially] -- but this was a kind of cultural rescue," Ulla said. "Look at what he did in Cuban music, there at the crossroads, influencing everyone. I remember Ruben Blades saying if this man hadn't done what he did, salsa wouldn't have been what it was. Other musicians had enormous respect for him. But he never got the attention that he deserves."

In 1995, Ulla thought O'Farrill's chance had come when he made *Pure Emotion* with respected jazz producer Todd Barkan (who also produced *Legend*), and the record was nominated for a Grammy for Best Latin Jazz Album. But Brazilian legend Antonio Carlos Jobim, who died that year, got the award instead. "I saw this sadness in Chico, though of course he didn't say anything, and I said, 'The story's not over yet.'"

O'Farrill fell in love with jazz in classic American style, as a rebellious teenager. His parents sent him from Havana for misbehaving to military school in Georgia, where he heard Benny Goodman, bought a trumpet and joined the school band. An inscription in his high school yearbook reads "To a master of the Rumba -- Learn to appreciate swing!" Back in Havana, O'Farrill played with important groups like the Lecuona Cuban Boys, and studied composition.

But his island's music didn't do it for him. "Cuban music at the time was boring to me," O'Farrill says. "Jazz was refreshing and exciting."

New York and bebop beckoned, and in 1948 O'Farrill, like so many eager young artists before and since, left for the Big Apple. It was there that he rediscovered his culture. "Cuban music became very exciting for me later on, for one reason -- because of 'Machito' Frank Grillo and the marriage of jazz and Cuban music," O'Farrill says. "That made Cuban music richer harmonically and more exciting. It was the beginning of Latin jazz."

The late 1940s and early 1950s saw the confluence of Cuban rhythms and American big band orchestration that would produce mambo, the dominant pop music of the 1950s. It also saw the mix of bebop jazz and Afro-Cuban music called Cubop -- the first Latin jazz, with musicians like Dizzy Gillespie coming together with Cubans like Machito and his Afro-Cuban Orchestra, directed by Mario Bauza. O'Farrill was at the nexus of this musical fusion, bringing his formal training and rich musical sensibilities to bear on composing or arranging for people such as Gillespie and Machito. He married Cuban feeling and rhythm with jazz harmony, color and structural innovation.

He says he can't explain or analyze why these musicians came together, or why he was compelled to link the two forms of music. "People are attracted to each other when they have similar ideas," O'Farrill says. "We would just go out looking for what we wanted. I was trying to put the bebop idiom, the jazz idiom, into Cuban music. That was my natural

way of expressing myself. It just came out -- I didn't say 'I'm gonna do this or that' intentionally, it just came out because that's the way I felt."

"Chico never thought much of Cuban music until he came to America to become a jazzman, when he realizes that the music he thumbed his nose at at home is the one that is making noise in jazz," says Nat Chediak, an Afro-Cuban jazz aficionado who has written a dictionary of Latin jazz. "He was the first one who put [Afro-Cuban jazz] in black tie and tails, who expanded it beyond a novelty. He brought respectability to Afro-Cuban jazz and took it away from being a trend. It wouldn't have gone beyond that if it weren't for him."

His life is musical history. He got his nickname because Benny Goodman couldn't pronounce Arturo, and so labeled him Chico, which O'Farrill says all Cubans were called then. He recalls another jazz legend during the recording of his *Afro-Cuban Jazz Suite*, one of the era's definitive compositions, for the Verve label in 1950. Charlie Parker was called in as a last-minute, saxophonist substitute. "Parker said, 'Chico show this to me,' and he played it right away like he'd been playing it forever," O'Farrill remembers. "My mouth was just hanging open -- I was ready to faint."

For musicians back in Havana, O'Farrill's success on the American jazz scene was inspiring. D'Rivera -- whose father had a music store where O'Farrill used to buy bass strings and music paper -- remembers how they followed O'Farrill's career through his recordings and a Voice of America program called *The Jazz Hour*, and looked up to him as one of their own who had become important in American music. "He was very important for us in Havana, he was like a legend," D'Rivera said. "Always we talked about Chico the Cuban who wrote music for Count Basie and Benny Goodman."

But O'Farrill's role of composer and arranger was one that naturally kept him in the background, as well as what those who know him say is a natural modesty and reticence. He left the United States in 1956, as mambo was peaking in popularity, first spending time in Havana, and then a decade in Mexico City. When he returned to the States in the mid-'60s, rock and roll ruled, and though he worked for the Count Basie big band, O'Farrill's skills, and the jazz music he loved -- which has never had the broad commercial appeal of simpler pop musics -- were no longer in demand. So he retreated into the financial security and creative wasteland of commercial jingles.

D'Rivera says that was a pity, both for O'Farrill and for the music. "He spent too much time in the commercial field, for personal and economic reasons. We could have had more of him out there for a longer time. So the price he had to pay is no recognition. I regret that because we love him so much and have so much respect for him, and other people with a lot less talent got a lot more recognition. But you have to fight for your own rights too -- no one is going to fight for you."

"I think he regrets some of the choices he made," Ulla says. If so, O'Farrill is too much of a more reticent, well-mannered age to complain or make excuses.

"I hate to tell you this, but I'm 78," he says. "I don't like that, but what can I do? All your days should be endured with grace. It's the only way to live."

So he is thoroughly enjoying his late brush with fame. His Chico O'Farrill Big Band, led by his son Arturo, just toured in Mexico and will perform on the West Coast soon. These days he's got fans like movie star Matt Dillon, who Ulla says called O'Farrill recently to advise him on

his health. "I called Chico yesterday and he said, 'Jorge, you know what happened? actor Matt Dillon called, and he said he has a Cuban doctor for me, who has a lot of herbs. You know what? I think he's recommending a Santero.' "

Ulla says the fact that so many people have come together for his music has given O'Farrill a new lease on life -- and hopefully on the life of his music as well. "There's a new energy and vitality to what he's done here, and it's not gonna go into a black hole," Ulla says.

Typically, O'Farrill doesn't say much. "He's a very private man," Chediak says. "But I know that he's very emotional. For someone of his age and professional stature, it's not all in the metronome or on the page, it's in the heart."

His fellow musicians, however, are happy to say it for him. "He deserves all the love and recognition we can give him," says D'Rivera. "I'm glad he's back home where he belongs."