



→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

# IRAKERE

Few bands have been more instrumental in the history of Cuban music than Irakere. John Armstrong tells the story of Chucho Valdés' innovative group

**IF EVER THERE** were a Cuban musical unit who have meant all things to all musical tastes over the years, it must be Irakere. Their artistry is catholic, magisterial, sometimes controversial but always meticulous. At one point in the mid-90s, Irakere's live sets took in funk, classical, Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington, salsa, Yoruban music, disco, jazz-dance, Broadway and vintage Cuban folk classics. Although the band has featured something like 60 or more musicians in the fullness of its history, the sound has remained surprisingly consistent, the threads gathered closely together by a small coterie of top players – the core of the band during its most fertile years – and, above all, by the founder, pianist and main arranger, Jesús Dionisio 'Chucho' Valdés. Around 70 years ago, Valdés could have been heard tinkling at the keyboard of his father's upright in the parlour of their home in Quivicán, a rural suburb of

Havana. "Pretty good for a three-year-old," was the verdict of one neighbour.

When speaking of Irakere, it's hard to know which is the appropriate tense to use. Although the band made their last studio recordings in 1997, no Irakere member has actually clearly stated that the band has broken up. Indeed, many Cuban musicians speak of the band in the present tense even today, and in interviews Valdés is always careful to leave the door open for a possible reunion.

Valdés started playing professionally around 1965 in Elio Revé's *charanga* orchestra. Then in 1967, trumpeter Arturo Sandoval, saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera and half a dozen other players split from Revé to form the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna. During this period, Fidel Castro was hosting many international conferences and, stung by the anecdotal criticism in international circles that jazz and similar non-Cuban music

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was banned in his country, he was happy to encourage Cuban artists, including Valdés, in their search for common ground between European classical music, North American jazz, and all kinds of Cuban traditional music.

Six years later, Valdés, Sandoval and D'Rivera broke away to form Irakere. First recorded in 1975 on the state-owned Areito label (although there may have been a couple of single-song recording sessions in 1973 and 1974), they came to the attention of North American jazz giants Dizzy Gillespie and Stan Getz on a visit to Cuba in 1977. As a result the band was invited to perform in North America between 1978 and 79, recording two albums for the Columbia label while there. D'Rivera defected to the US in 1980, whilst Sandoval also finished up there in 1990 after a sojourn in Mexico. In 1998 Valdés (who has remained a Cuban resident to this day) announced his departure from the band, and his son Jesús took over on keyboards while the original members Enrique Plá (drums) and Carlos Emilio Morales (guitar) moved up into co-leadership roles.

From around 1987 and for almost a decade thereafter, Irakere found a home-away-from-home in the UK, specifically at Ronnie Scott's two jazz clubs – in London and Birmingham. Their frequent live shows in the Frith Street basement are fondly recalled by older jazz and Afro-Cuban fans in great detail even today and, for many, this was an entry point into Cuban music, paving the way for the Buena Vista Social Club era some years later.

Because Irakere's music covers such a range of genres, it's hard to know where to

start. What's more, for the serious record collector, Irakere is a conundrum – there still isn't an exhaustive discography anywhere. The original releases fall into four main categories: Cuban, North American, Japanese and British. There are also a few live albums only available in Venezuela (though they're actually nothing to get excited about).

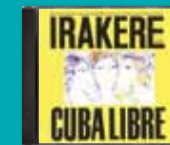
If it's vinyl you're into, the Cuban releases, all on the state-owned Areito or Egrem labels, should be approached with caution. This has nothing to do with the musical quality, which shines throughout Irakere's entire output, but with Egrem's somewhat casual approach to cataloguing. Of the 30 or so original Cuban vinyl albums, several include the same tracks over and over again, and there are even several instances of the same sleeve being used for entirely different sets of recordings. The problem is compounded by the Egrem CD reissues, which are sometimes simply direct reissues of each original vinyl album, sometimes confusingly packaged in the cover artwork of a different record and are rarely, if ever, re-mastered from the often less-than-perfect original tapes.

If you're out to build up your Irakere collection, whether via second-hand vinyl, CD reissues or both, be prepared for the inevitability that whichever albums you purchase, you will probably end up with a few duplications. It is an occupational hazard, and one more advantage of the old 7" format, where such problems rarely arose. **N**

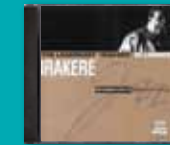
**ALBUM** *Live at Ronnie Scott's, Birmingham* is reviewed in this issue. See p73



BEST ALBUMS



**Cuba Libre** (Far Out Recordings, 2010)  
If you like Weather Report, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and the like, you'll love this. This album became a textbook lesson for jazz-fusion artists for years after its release.



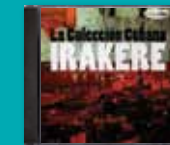
**The Legendary Irakere in London** (Jazz House Records, 1995)  
This is the CD reissue of an epoch-making live set at Ronnie Scott's in London. It's the same great music as the original vinyl release.



**Live at Ronnie Scott's, Birmingham: The 1995 BBC Recording** (First Hand Records, 2013)  
A hitherto-forgotten

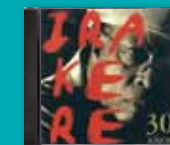
BBC live recording is lovingly scrubbed-up and remastered by David Murphy's adventurous independent label (see p73 for full review).

BEST COMPILATION



**La Colección Cubana** (Nascente, 1998)  
Rick Glanvill's compilation is an excellent selection of tracks aimed at the audience who in 1998 were approaching Cuban music with Buena Vista Social Club in mind.

BEST AVOIDED



**30 Años** (Egrem, 2004)  
Although unquestionably honourable in intention (a celebration of 30 years since the band's

inception), there's far too much distorted guitar and bland, almost poppy 70s-sounding work-outs for all but the most dedicated Irakere-worshipper.

LIKE IRAKERE? THEN TRY...

GUAPACHA



**Guapacha with Chucho Valdés and His Combo** (Warner Music Argentina, 2007)

Guapacha was one of Cuba's greatest scat vocalists (though there have never been that many, including Bobby Carcassés). Valdés' combo includes the mighty Israel 'Cacha' López on double bass and Irakere mainstay Carlos Emilio Morales on electric guitar. Guapacha burned bright and quick – dying at just 32 years of age. This is a CD reissue of a once-impossible-to-find vinyl LP, recorded around 1966.