

His Latin Beat Goes On, in a New Home

By BEN RATLIFF

Arturo O’Farrill, the burly pianist who leads the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra, sat cross-legged and discoursed about the meaning of Latin jazz recently in the top-floor study of his brownstone in Park Slope, Brooklyn. “Listen,” he said. “To me, it’s natural, because this music is about who we are: New York, jazz, Latin music, America. So it’s either a cultural mainstay or it’s not. If it’s not, I’ve made a huge mistake, and I’ll move on.”

These are the words of a gambler, and Mr. O’Farrill, 47, is in the middle of an optimistic gamble. At Symphony Space next week, his 18-piece Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra will perform for the first time since its genesis without the powerful name recognition of Jazz at Lincoln Center, where it started and where it had its institutional base.

For five years the orchestra played three concert programs each season at Jazz at Lincoln Center and toured internationally. It was the only band ever brought in from the outside by Jazz at Lincoln Center to operate under its auspices. It was modeled after the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra: a working band polishing a historical repertory and extending it into the present.

The Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra brought together some of New York’s greatest Latin musicians and created a canon in Mr. O’Farrill’s wide definition of Latin jazz. It ranged from the heavily New York-identified mambo of Machito and Tito Puente to the ambitious orchestral suites written by Mr. O’Farrill’s father, the Cuban composer Chico O’Farrill.

The orchestra collaborated with living masters like the bassist Israel (Cachao) López and the pianist Bebo Valdés. It commissioned new works and proposed a scope of Latin jazz that went far beyond the strictly Afro-Cuban, to works reflecting the music of Puerto Rico and Argentina and Brazil; hence the orchestra’s more inclusive name.

But the relationship ended mutually last year. “The long-term issues were about the scale of the orchestra’s ambitions and what we could afford,” Adrian Ellis, jazz at Lincoln Center’s execu-



JULIEN JOURDES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Arturo O’Farrill leading the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra at the Brooklyn Museum this month.

ONLINE: ARTURO O’FARRILL

Audio from this musician and the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra:
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ton Marsalis, the organization’s artistic director, for enabling the orchestra to exist in the first place. He said that the Jazz at Lincoln Center imprimatur enabled the band to play in faraway cities that have no built-in audiences for Latin jazz, like Yokohama and Shanghai. And at home, he said, he was thrilled to look in the audience and see more Latinos among the regular subscription crowd.

On the other hand, he said, he found the experience frustrating for several reasons. To keep his orchestra together — it was paid per performance, rather than on salary — Mr. O’Farrill wanted to tour more often than he felt he could under the terms of his

programs. Finally, he said, the partnership crumbled.

Last year Mr. O’Farrill met Symphony Space’s artistic director, Isaiah Sheffer, when he and Mr. Sheffer were both being honored by their alma mater, Brooklyn College. Soon thereafter they began working on a collaboration.

So far the arrangement is giving Mr. O’Farrill the leeway he was seeking. He — or rather his new nonprofit institution, the Afro-Latin Jazz Alliance — will rent Symphony Space for its concerts, at a favorable rate. And so, he said, the orchestra will operate as a separate financial institution. But the alliance will be able to manage the band’s financing for commissions, to work with whatever booking agents Mr. O’Farrill chooses, and to set up the band’s own educational outreach programs independently, as well as working within those organized by Symphony Space.

And, much as they did with Jazz at Lincoln Center, he and the orchestra will continue to

Tito Puente and Mario Bauza, as well as music previously commissioned for the orchestra by the drummer Dafnis Prieto (“A Song for Chico,” dedicated to the elder O’Farrill, who died in 2001) and the trombonist Papo Vazquez (the driving “Iron Jungle,” building on Puerto Rican bomba and plena rhythms). Concerts later in the season will center on vocal-

Adiós, Jazz at Lincoln Center. Hola, Symphony Space.

ists and on timba, the newer form of salsa played in Cuba.

“I have this dream,” Mr. O’Farrill said, “that this music is important, that it’s worth protecting and growing and keeping alive, and that it’s not dependent on an institution, whether it’s Sympho-