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 discussed 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) Lopez 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 executive director, said.

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 vocalists 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 Symphony Space, but on the people inside it.”

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:
nytimes.com/music

Arturo O’Farrill, the burly pianist who leads the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra, sat cross-legged and discussed 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) Lopez 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 executive director, said.

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 vocalists 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 Symphony Space, but on the people inside it.”

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:
nytimes.com/music