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## MUSIC REVIEW

# ‘Back to the Sunset’ Review: A Cuban Drummer Realizes His Grandest Dream

Dafnis Prieto revisits many of his works, this time with a big band of his own.



Dafnis Prieto's new album is 'Back to the Sunset' PHOTO: HENRY LOPEZ

By *Larry Blumenfeld*

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Dafnis Prieto first imagined leading a big band when he was just a boy, listening to the Orquesta de Música Moderna in his hometown of Santa Clara, Cuba—before he took up the drum kit or immersed himself in jazz, and long before he landed in the United States for good.

Soon after his arrival in New York, in 1999, Mr. Prieto became an in-demand player. He worked with saxophonists Henry Threadgill and Steve Coleman, whose brands of jazz are distinctly challenging and worldly, and with pianist Eddie Palmieri, whose distillation of Afro-Cuban dance music is as bold and complex as it gets. These and other bandleaders prized Mr. Prieto for his astonishing command—beats that are feather-light one moment, wildly propulsive the next, always finely calibrated—and for his innate musicality.

Mr. Prieto, who is 43 years old and now lives in Hollywood, Fla., often comes across less as a drummer than a painter, lending shape to music through color and texture. This is especially true with his own groups. Beginning with 2005's "About the Monks," the first of his seven albums, he established himself as a sure-handed leader and singular composer, fluent in both Afro-Cuban and jazz pedagogies yet not particularly focused on either idiom. His compositions carry narrative arcs; though not structurally abstract, they toy inventively with senses of foreground and background and feature rhythms that expand and contract in seemingly organic fashion.

Mr. Prieto's albums have explored a range of small-group contexts. His 2006 release, "Absolute Quintet" featured organ, cello and violin; he later formed the Proverb Trio, with keyboardist Jason Lindner and singer/rapper Kokayi. More than a decade ago, he composed "Song for Chico," the title track of a Grammy-winning album by Arturo O'Farrill's Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra; "The Triumphant Journey," a commissioned piece of his, appears on another Grammy-winning release from Mr. O'Farrill's orchestra.

Mr. Prieto revisits these compositions—sped up, and with new wrinkles—on “Back to the Sunset” (due April 6 from Dafnison Music), this time realizing his childhood ambition: a big band of his own. His ensemble is packed with ace players—some of them, such as pianist Manuel Valera and saxophonist Peter Apfelbaum, veterans of his small groups, most of them bandleaders themselves. On some tracks, Mr. Prieto radically reimagines material from his earlier albums. As played on a 2015 sextet release, “Two for One” was engaging and built on staggered rhythmic tensions; here, alternating between tightly scripted thematic layers and collective improvisation, it expresses the sheer force and depth of field that only a big band can achieve.

All nine compositions here are Mr. Prieto’s. Some arrive like balls of energy, such as “Una Vez Más,” a new piece that owes its force to piano figures drawn from one of his mentors, Mr. Palmieri. Others sound playful, like “Prelude Para Rosa,” or pensive, such as “The Sooner the Better.” The gentlest piece, the title track, is a bolero whose arrangement holds aloft ribbons of melody from Mr. Threadgill’s alto saxophone that sound like pleas. Another of Mr. Prieto’s alto-saxophonist mentors, Mr. Coleman, plays on “Song for Chico,” investing it with fresh urgency and new harmonic implications. Dazzling solos dot these tracks—especially from Messrs. Valera and Apfelbaum, and from Michael Thomas, who plays saxophones and piccolo—yet these are all concise, and tightly wrapped in compositional context.

Mr. Prieto’s dexterity commands the spotlight only rarely, as at the start of “Danzonish Potpourri,” which stitches together three of his previously recorded compositions using the thread of a classic Cuban dance rhythm. In liner notes, he dedicates that medley to the late Bebo Valdés, the Cuban pianist and composer who, more than a half-century ago, pioneered the use of polyrhythmic counterpoint from brass and reed sections to combine impulses from Cuba and the U.S. Mr. Prieto anchored the big band on Valdés’s powerful late-in-life release “Bebo de Cuba.” Here, he furthers not just his own long-held dream but Valdés’s too.

—*Mr. Blumenfeld writes about jazz for the Journal.*

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