

Catalino "Tite" Curet Alonso: A Man & His Music By: Aurora Flores

As the nation celebrates the historic election of our first African American president, on the Latin music side, we are rejoicing the return of Tite Curet Alonso's music back on the airwaves after a 14 year absence.

Emusica is releasing the double CD set on 1.20.09, same day as the election, while the island of P.R. has been celebrating this historic release since Three Kings Day.

Below are the liner notes I wrote for the CD. If any of you are interested in reading the extended, unedited version, they are posted on our website at:

<http://www.zondelbarrio.com/Press.php>

on the press page.

Enjoy!

Aurora

Catalino "Tite" Curet Alonso: A Man & His Music

It was in Old San Juan's "Bombonera" restaurant in 1977 when I spotted the traditional straw hat and signature daisheke on the man sitting at the counter. **C. Curet Alonso** was holding a note pad and tape recorder when I sat beside him. He was reserved, diffident and guarded, until we began talking about Ismael Rivera's, "Esto Si Es Lo Mio." That's when a glint appeared in his eyes, and a smile crossed his face, and we bonded for that moment around talk of 'Maelo, plena, bomba, poverty, race, politics, religion y música!

Curet defined a revolutionary period in Latin music. His compositions brought out the best in the interpreter. Masterworks included Hector LaVoe's "Periodico de Ayer" or "Juanito Alimaña," Cheo Feliciano's "Anacaona," Pete El Conde's "La Abolición," Andy Montañez' "El Echo de Un Tambor," Celia Cruz' "Isadora Duncan," and La Lupe's "La Tirana."

Curet's name was ubiquitous, gracing hundreds of album credits of many of the top Latin music artists of the '60s, '70s, '80s and '90s. He penned more than 2,000 songs, spawning and jump-starting the artistic careers of many, from **La Lupe**, to **Cheo Feliciano** to **Frankie Ruiz**. The most in-demand composer of tropical music, Curet's songs were guaranteed hits, and classics today.

"You had to take a number and wait on line," **Ruben Blades** told the L.A. Times when Curet passed away. "His songs could revive any career, so there was always a fight to get new material from Tite," recalled the Panamanian singer/songwriter whose interpretation of Curet's "Plantación Adentro" also hit the top of the charts.

Curet helped father the nascent salsa movement that was marking time in clave through the streets of Puerto Rico and Latin New York. His words inspired hope and faith, solace and joy during

a time of social upheaval. In more than 2,000 tunes, Curet was the musical narrator of current events and national pride, romance and religion. He reflected the face of a community in need of answers.

His talent for composing extended beyond the borders of the Caribbean dipping into Mexico, Venezuela, Paraguay, Spain and Brazil which he credits for receiving his best musical training from the "sorcerers of 'el medio tono'," (the half tone). His merengue for **Los Hijos del Rey**, "Yo Me Dominicaniso" made much noise while Tony Croatto's version of Curet's "Cucubano," became a hit, later recorded by Menudo. From **Chucho Avellanet** to **Nelson Ned**, **Tite Curet Alonso** has been a pivotal figure in the musical repertoires of many Latino superstars.

In this compilation, the music of one of Puerto Rico's most important composers of the late 20th Century now comes to light after a fourteen-year absence in Puerto Rico. This 30-tune double CD set, featuring some of Curet's most-loved works is a worthy addition to anyone's collection. His songs were unavailable since 1995 due to a separate performance rights society contract Curet signed that built an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy between the radio stations, the publishing rights organizations and the composers.

Notes music writer **Jaime Torres Torres** of El Nuevo Dia. "An entire generation was deprived of the genius of this notable and creative songwriter.

This compilation reflects several of the master composer's themes. However, Curet was most proud of his writing skills, in particular his journalistic ability often pointing to his scant use of adjectives in crafting a hit number. Tite Curet wrote for newspapers, magazines, hosted radio shows and was later writing screenplays for stage and television as well as children's songs and hymns.

He studied to be a pharmacist but through an uncle who had a print press he found journalism, writing columns and essays that he later pointed to as fodder for his musical muse. Curet worked almost all his life for the U.S. Postal Service, never fully relying on the music business even at the height of his popularity. He was proud that way. A proud Afro-Boricua negro, he wrote his roots on paper and abandoned his heart to song.

His was a hard life. Born in the pueblo of Guayama, Puerto Rico on February 26, 1926, Curet's father taught Spanish and played in the municipal band of **Simon "Pin" Madera**. Couples and singles paraded in plazas across from churches and government steeples where gazebos kept musicians out of direct sunlight.

However, his parents divorced taking the young Curet to Barrio Obrero. Those mean streets around the 'hoods of Tokio, El Fangito, Tras Talleres and Puerta de Tierra were the last forts of proletariat resistance while breeding some of the Island's biggest talents. **Tito Rodriguez**, who later recorded Curet's hit "Tiemblas," lived down the block from the fledging songwriter as did bandleader **Rafael Cortijo** featured on "Se Escapo Un Leon," singer **Gilberto Monroig** and the internationally renown composer, **Rafael Hernandez**.

A seasoned man in a time of resistance to societal norms, Curet later witnessed the worldwide rage

against Vietnam and the tsunami of civil and social change heralded by the '60s and '70s. This intense, historical climate shaped Curet's life and work.

Curet studied music as an adult. When asked for a song, he'd study the voice, tone and timbre of the singer, highlighting the phrasing, diction and enunciation. His verses were measured and restrained while bursting with assertive irony, wit and conflict. His study of music theory and solfeggio helped him come up with melodies, lyrical meters and musical arrangements that augmented the work of arrangers. Artists who retained him were also subject to his scrutiny, part of the magic and power included in the creative process of the song.

Curet's mother was a seamstress but early on she was a voice for the rights of women. Curet was able to write for women with a sensibility and feminine perspective that changed the tone of love songs from wrist cutting torch songs to empowering tunes of self-reliance.

"La Gran Tirana" is no shrinking violet song about I'll love you no matter how bad you treat me. This is a woman putting on her "pants" and saying, "When you left me, I hit the lottery!" Originally written for a male singer, it was Lupe Victoria Yoli who turned it around into an empowering act of aggression. That 1968 hit sparked Curet's commercial career and recharged Lupe's artistic profession. "Puro Teatro" followed. But it was with vocalist Joe Quijano's interpretation of "Efectivamente" where Curet got his first break in 1965.

His sympathetic admiration for singer Cheo Feliciano led to Curet's pivotal role as producer for Cheo's return as solo artist. The subsequent 1971 **Fania** recording produced five hits including the now standard, "Anacaona."

Through Cheo, Curet told the folk tale of the valiant "Anacaona," a Taino Indian "Cacica" (chief) from the Dominican Republic who speaks of a long awaited struggle for her elusive freedom and break from slavery. Knowing this would be a passionate metaphor for Cheo's own dependence, Curet writes "Anacaona" in Cheo's style making the number his. Pianist **Larry Harlow** performs one of the finest solos of his career accompanied by **Orestes Vilato** on timbales. The great **Louie Ramirez** takes a fluid vibes solo accompanied by **Bobby Valentin** on bass followed by **Johnny Pacheco's** rhythmic conga drive and **Johnny Rodriguez'** forcefull bell for a laid-back yet aggressively swinging, history making session!

Richie Viera who grew up in his father's record store recalls the many hours **Tite Curet** spent in a backroom where he would write his newspaper column and songs. "Everyday he would come in with a big bag of plaintain, alcapurrias or bacalaitos. He'd bring enough for everyone before sitting in the back office at an old typewriter. I'd watch him write as a line of one song would inspire the beginning of another. He would throw his head back and begin to sway..."

Africanized nationalistic dignity is a recurring theme for Curet who wrote provocatively on the struggles of a mulatto culture trying to progress and thrive within an American structure. **Pete "El Conde" Rodriguez** said it best in "La Abolicion:" the abolition of slavery does not mean freedom.

With **Ismael Rivera's** 1975 hit "Caras Lindas," Curet parades the multi-colored faces of the various tribes bought over to the Island. He notes their pain..."Las caras Linda de mi raza prieta.

Tienen de llanto, de pena y dolor." in verse that cuts across class, gender and race.

Rivera makes "Caras Lindas" an anthem, phrasing verses in his rhythmic vocal style accompanied by an arrangement sampling "blues riffs" on the trombones.

Curet combats the social issues of his time with lyrical laments within a dance format. An actual story, friends **Rafael Viera** and **Franklin Hernandez** introduce singer and musician **Billy Concepción** to Curet in a restaurant. Concepción was blacklisted by the music industry and couldn't find work. A father of six, he recounts the overwhelming feeling of having the world on his shoulders. Curet immediately took his pen and wrote "Lamento de Concepción" on a napkin. "Concepción eleva la vista al cielo. Va gritando hay niños que mantener." expressing the universal feeling of impotence at not being able to support the family.

Billy Concepción did leave P.R, for New York rescued by Cortijo who took him on tour. **Roberto Roena's** take on this tune has a deceiving funk and danceable swing sandwiched between pastoral samba passages that betray its tragic tale.

"Galera Tes" is a tale of injustice behind the justice system. A young Ismael Miranda gets his street 'cred in this protest song against prison violence. "Galera Tres" first appears in a **Marvin Santiago** recording without Curet's name. The composer credited Santiago's wife enabling her to receive royalties while Marvin was incarcerated.

Curet wrote many songs celebrating life, drums and music. "Evelio y la Rumba" becomes part of this collection joining other songs such as "El Primer Montuno," here interpreted by the **Andy Harlow** band. "La Esencia del Guaguanco," as expressed by the **Willie Rosario** orchestra rejoices in the essence of this Cuban rhythm.

Curet's religious compositions embrace "Tengo El Idde," (I have protection), with Celia Cruz and Johnny Pacheco warning haters about their spiritual shield, Curet's words reflect the sacred rituals of the poor communities.

In romance, Curet is at once jilted, as in "Periodico de Ayer" sung by Hector LaVoe, as he is vengeful in "Aquella Mujer" interpreted by **Bobby Valentin**. Even Piraña rages against yet another wonton woman reviled yet desired. Just as quickly as he condemns the female sex, Curet writes the lusty "Las Mujeres son de la Azucar" recorded by **Sonora Ponceña**.

Blanca Rosa Gil belts out her love song of strength in "Fue Por Mi Bien" with such passion you almost feel sorry for the guy she's breaking up with. The lush and languid arrangement behind Blanca's level headed cry for friendship to replace lost love, puts the composer in the female psyche of platonic reconciliation while Sophy's upbeat take of "Amor y Tentación" is flirty, coy and free-spirited.

In his later years, **Tite Curet Alonso** left Puerto Rico to be with family in Baltimore, Maryland. On August 5, 2003 he died of a heart attack. He was 77. The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture gave him a hero's wake. He was buried in Santa Maria Magdalena de Pazzis Cemetery in San Juan. **Ruben Blades** suspended his "Farewell Tour" to attend the funeral. **Cheo Feliciano**, one of his

closest friends served as one of many pallbearers.

It was said that like the Island's native tree frog, el coqui, **Tite Curet Alonso** died when he could no longer feel the warmth of his beloved little island.

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