

Shame on the muse!

As would be expected, Arturo Sandoval's muse has this Cuban thing about her. It's an attitude bred of rhythms and aromas, of steamy "rhumbas" and tobacco as metaphor. She was probably driving a fully restored '57 Chevy and smoking handmade Cuban cigars even before the young Arturo began to dig the neighborhood señoritas—let alone Dizzy Gillespie.

The brilliant Mr. Sandoval will be performing at the Eccles Center this coming Saturday night and, in the interim, it's all about preparation and becoming one with all things Arturo. We're heading out to the deck, just beyond the speakers and the shot-glass and the ash tray. We're on a mission from the muse.

The aura is of trumpet jazz and cigar smoke rising lazily in a thermal of pleasure-spawned heat. Anticipation has made itself at home. We've only a few days to get ready. Hence, Sandoval's "Trumpet Evolution" CD burns in the player while a "Fuente Hemingway" cigar burns in the hand. These are necessary props if one is to immerse oneself in the back-story of Arturo Sandoval. He is from Artemisa in the Pinar del Rio, a few short puffs from the Vuelta Abajo where Cuba's finest tobacco is grown. A sense of place pervades the man and his art, as does a sense of purpose.

Nothing, including the failure of his family to embrace his musical ambitions and the absence of formal trumpet lessons, dissuaded the young man's dream. Arturo began climbing a ladder of his own device, moving from classical music training at the National School of Arts to the more improvisational Cuban Orchestra of Modern Music. Not even three-years of mandated military service, which included three-months in the "hoosegow" for listening to jazz on Voice of America, could stifle the creative energy burning within. Following his release from service, Arturo and a few others in his old orchestra began playing their own jazz. The authorities were dumfounded. This just wouldn't do. Shame on the muse!

Sandoval's now famous collaboration with saxophonist Paquito d'Rivera and pianist Chucho Valdes led to the formation of "Irakere," a contemporary Cuban Jazz combo that would take the world by storm. The band's international success only fueled Arturo's disenchantment with the state of artistic freedom in Cuba, however, and he began looking for a way out. Long time mentor, hero, friend, and legend Dizzy Gillespie would jump into that void and take a larger role in Sandoval's life. Gillespie's 1990 United Nations Orchestra world tour would serve as his vehicle to creative freedom. A few bumps in the road later, with family out of Cuba, U. S. citizenship, and a burgeoning career, Sandoval doesn't even try to get the smile off his face. Sandoval is an artist and, despite a passionate outlook on life, not a politician. He is not necessarily in agreement with everything extolled by the Cuban expatriate community here in the United States, but he would dearly love to be able to visit friends and extended family in Cuba.

Saying he will "live and die a Cuban," Sandoval manifests a deep love for the culture as a whole—especially its most enduring symbol, the cigar. Going back to his youth in Artemisa where he would visit his aunts as they stripped tobacco leaves at the local cigar factory, the smells and sounds never go away. In a recent interview, Arturo remarked that "a cigar is a kind of style, a way of living, and it's a great feeling...to have a great cigar." Gillespie was also an aficionado of the smoker's art, and they would spend long hours burning cigars and candles—the latter at both ends.

Back on the deck, the smoke mingles with the sound of Sandoval's haunting trumpet. "Trumpet Evolution" is the ghost of trumpets past—a beautiful recording of, for the most part, the instrument's jazz canon. The muse is working her magic. There is a chronology of sorts here with various audio DNA samples leading, in an evolutionary sense, to the next technical innovation or breakthrough. A perfect case in point would be Sandoval's take on King Oliver's early '20s classic "Dippermouth Blues" which he follows with the more nuanced Louis Armstrong phrasing of "When It's Sleepy Time Down South." And then he brings out an exquisite sampling of Bix Beiderbecke's unique jaunt through "At the Jazz Band Ball." It's uncanny how Sandoval captures "that thing they do," the singular characteristic, the signature, that separates the creative instincts of the various artists and their times.

In that he gets his arms around the "jazz art" of the original recordings and, at the same time, imprints them with his own "ethnoscenic" interpretations, Arturo's two vocals on the recording—Bunny Berigan's "I Can't Get Started" and the Chet Baker tribute, "My Funny Valentine"—are nothing short of precious. But that might be the "nectar de agave" talking...or the deck...or the muse—they all seem to be waxing poetic. The smoke wafts. The trumpet soars. The matador enters the ring to the stirring strains of "La Virgen de la Macarena." Sandoval has now become Rafael Mendez, who, as a 10-year old, "toured" with Pancho Villa. You don't find gigs like that anymore.

In his tribute to "Diz," Arturo covers the Afro-Cuban "Manteca" in a saucy "sofrito" worthy of his mentor and his own Cuban homeland. The landscapes are, for the most part, interior, however—thus Thelonious Monk's classic "Round Midnight" serves as the perfect melancholy milieu for Miles Davis. It's really quite brilliant stuff, this "Trumpet Evolution." But nothing ever takes the place of experiencing true virtuosity in person. Arturo Sandoval is a "performing artist," with all that entails, and, Saturday evening, we will indeed be confronted by great art. But we are prepared—maybe even a bit over-prepared. Shame on the muse, and while you're at it, wipe that grin off her face.

