

was far beyond what anyone on or off the island was concocting at the time. Chucho shares some of the technical and musical influences that were critical in shaping the band's sound:

"Over the years I used a variety of keyboards and organs, based on what was available or what was in vogue. Early on and through most of the 1970s, my setup included a Fender Rhodes (which was a gift from Columbia Records), a Farfisa organ, and a Roland Jupiter-8. In the 80s I used a Yamaha CP-70, a Solina String Ensemble (also called the Arp String Ensemble), a Yamaha organ that the Ministry



Dizzy Gillespie and Chucho Valdés, ca 1990. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

of Culture provided, a Vocoder, and while we were in Switzerland, I bought a Hohner Clavinet. Back then we were totally listening to Blood, Sweat & Tears, as well as the incredible Chicago horn section, and of course Herbie Hancock, especially the *Head Hunters* album (1973). I basically 'lifted' Herbie's 'Chameleon,' changed a few notes, and created a variation of it for Irakere's opening theme! And songs we did like 'Aguanile Bonkó' were greatly inspired by Earth, Wind & Fire, with those disco-like horn riffs."

- **1977, DIZZY GILLESPIE & THE JAZZ CRUISE IN HAVANA**

Irakere's first major European tour would take place in 1976, including stints in Finland, Italy and Germany, but it would be a fortuitous week in 1977 that would prove to be a game changer in the band's trajectory. Chucho recalled this significant moment in Irakere's early years:

"In May of 1977, a cruise ship stops in Havana, and we found out that Dizzy Gillespie was on board, along with Stan Getz, Earl 'Fatha' Hines, David Amram, Billy Hart, Rob McClure (bassist) and an amazing pianist who was playing with Stan, Joanne Brackeen. Two days before the concert at the Mella Theater, we had a jam session in the Hotel Habana Libre (in the Salón Caribe room) with all those folks; this was the first time that Dizzy heard Irakere. At the concert at the Mella afterward, we all ended up playing together, along with Los Papines, where we did a tribute to Chano Pozo and played 'Manteca.' That was historic, unforgettable, and the beginning of the turning point for the band. It was Dizzy who recommended us to Bruce Lundvall (of Columbia Records), who eventually brought us to the Newport Jazz Festival in 1978 and signed us to a record deal."

Irakere's repertoire was certainly well-suited to the individual members of the band, and it was quickly apparent that a few individuals would stand out whenever the band took to the stage, among them Chucho, of course, as well as trumpeter Arturo Sandoval, and saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera.