

AXS interview: Harold Lopez-Nussa captures Cuba in 'El Viaje'



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You can almost feel Cuba on [Harold López-Nussa](#)'s new piano trio album, *El Viaje* (*The Journey*). You can definitely hear the country's brilliant Afro-Cuban rhythms and López-Nussa's own original melodic stacking on the Sept. 9, 2016, [Mack Avenue Records](#) debut release.

An award-winning pianist and composer, López-Nussa plays with unadulterated joy, brimming over with so many ideas, throwing in Thelonious Monk here, making his piano squeal over there, combining vocal chants with heroic, unfurling beats.

Playing music comes naturally. Born in Havana July 13, 1983 to a musical family, the hot, new Mack Avenue recording artist made his new album with younger brother [Ruy Adrián López-Nussa](#) and father Ruy Francisco López-Nussa on drums and percussion, along with a host of trusted musical friends, Senegalese bassist [Alune Wade](#), trumpeter [Mayquel González](#), and percussionists Dreiser Durruthy and Adel González.

Not only is López-Nussa's *El Viaje* an immediate success with critics and fans, but the conservatory-trained pianist is the first Cuban-based musician to put out an album internationally since the lifting of many restrictions in the U.S./Cuba trade embargo last spring.

Mack Avenue Records President Denny Stilwell believes in this emerging new talent from Cuba. "Harold follows in the modern day tradition of exemplary Cuban pianists who have recorded and toured internationally. We feel he is an emerging artist with immense creative potential to breakthrough," Stilwell said in a recent [DL Media](#) press release.

Harold López-Nussa paused in the midst of his world tour to give AXS an exclusive interview about his hit record and his love of country.

AXS: It's hard to stand out in the jazz field. For Cuban artists, even moreso. What do you offer that's different from others?

Harold López-Nussa: It's hard for artists all around the world. We just try like everyone else. It is true that being from Cuba it's maybe a little bit hard, but is from there (Cuba) that we get all our inspiration and strength to keep trying. I'm sure that we will give all our love to the audience who listen to us.

AXS: *El Viaje* is an impressive U.S. debut. The new Mack Avenue record really showcases you as an original, daring artist. It's filled with so much musicality, over that intricate Afro-Cuban beat. How fun was it to record with your brother and your father, as well as Senegalese musician Alune Wade, along with so many other talented artists?

HLN: We really had a great time and a lot of fun at the studio. We enjoyed playing together and this was what shows on the album, our joy playing together and making music together. We did not try to make an album with very complicated music or with a high intellectual level, we just recorded music that we like to play. Having our father, and also the other guests, was added fun for the trio. They came to the studio and shared their music and personality with us. It was great!

AXS: When you play with musicians you know very well, like family, is it easier to convert charts into beautifully rendered music? The recording sessions must've been quite enjoyable.

HLN: Yes, of course, when I play with these kinds of musicians, it's very easy to make music. They just know what I want and the music flows. It's a blessing to play with my brother and my father, and the other musicians too, they are also my family.

AXS: What would you love for American audiences to get out of your debut?

HLN: I'll be very happy if they can bring our music and spirit into their homes! And if they like it, come and see us play. That would be wonderful.

AXS: What's been the response so far, since the Sept. 9, 2016 release? Any pleasant surprises from any reviewers or fans?

HLN: I think that the response has been very good. We have very nice reviews so far and I think that people do like it. At least this is what I feel... hahaha.

AXS: What are you most proud of with the new album, any particular tracks and how they turned out?

HLN: I'm happy with the album in general. What I'm most proud of is the opportunity of sharing music with all these musicians and making a record, which is very different from my other albums. I don't feel that I have a particular song that I prefer. It would be unfair to pick just one.

AXS: In your press bio, you stand out from a lot of Cuban artists in that you're quite content to stay in your homeland, and visit far-off places from time to time. What about your Cuban heritage inspires you so much? What can you tell us about life growing up in Cuba that's so special?

HLN: Cuba is a really special place. We have a lot of problems, but from these we have created a lot of great solutions. The most important inspiration for me is Cuban people. They are so special! They have something that inspires me every day [to] do better.

AXS: Surprising elements of your new album include pieces of American jazz in the Thelonious Monk notes and the almost classical stacking of melody and musical themes. How did you come about these unique traits?

HLN: That's something that came naturally when we were playing the song "Feria" for the first time. I don't know for sure why, but maybe it's from the fact that it is a song where rhythm was a lot of presence.

AXS: What's next for *El Viaje*, a major tour already in the works?

HLN: We are trying of course. We already did Japan, we are now touring the U.S., and then we will be in Europe for November. And of course there are more dates to come!

AXS: What do you most love about playing and performing jazz?

HLN: Freedom! The freedom to do and play anything that you have in mind or in your heart. That's wonderful!

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