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HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

Where Cuban music meets bebop

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Grammy Award-winning Zaccai Curtis's Latin Jazz

Quintet coming to Vermont Jazz Center Jan. 17

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TEXT BODY:

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THE VERMONT JAZZ CENTER is excited to present Grammy Award-winning pianist Zaccai Curtis in concert Saturday, Jan. 17, at 7:30 p.m., when he will be performing two sets of Latin jazz with the musicians who appeared with him on the award-winning album *Cubop Lives!*

He will be joined on stage by his brother, Luques Curtis, on bass, plus three percussionists: Willie Martinez III (timbales),

12 Camilo Molina (congas, pandero), and Reinaldo DeJesus
13 (bongos, chekere, guiro).

14 Curtis based the instrumentation and groove of his group
15 primarily on the work of the legendary Puerto Rican pianist Noro
16 Morales, but stylistically, his music is more expansive. His
17 personal style marries the deep and varied rhythms of Afro-Cuban
18 music with the sophisticated harmonic and melodic language of
19 bebop.

20 The music on *Cubop Lives!* is Curtis's adaptation of
21 Cubop, a sub-genre of Latin jazz that was pioneered by Dizzy
22 Gillespie, Machito, Mario Bauza, and Chano Pozo (among
23 others) in the 1940s.

24 The instrumentation of piano, bass, and three
25 percussionists was used by Morales and other Latin pianists, but
26 none of them embraced the bebop language. So the serious
27 application of Cubop to this instrumentation, with piano as the
28 lead instrument, is where Zaccai Curtis makes his mark.

29 * * *

30 AS A YOUNG MAN of Latino heritage, growing up in the
31 fertile music scene of Hartford, Connecticut, in the 1980s and
32 '90s, Curtis was encouraged by family and exposed to a wide
33 variety of top-level musical experiences, especially in jazz and
34 Latin music.

35 As a pianist, he became interested in specific piano
36 styles, and he studied how to apply the instrumentation, drive,
37 and variety of Latin rhythms epitomized by Morales to the bebop
38 repertoire of Bud Powell, Charlie Parker, and others.

39 In an [interview](#) with the *In the Key of Latin Jazz* podcast,
40 Curtis discussed his decision to focus on using the piano and bass
41 in concert with three percussionists.

42 "I've performed with all the different configurations," he
43 said. "And when I have congas and timbales, that's great. [...] Or
44 even drums and congas. I love it.

45 "But when you have that guiro [a rasp-like instrument
46 played by the third percussionist], especially when you're playing

47 a cha cha, [...] the high-pitched sound that kind of just drives
48 everything,” and that the percussionists get to interact with each
49 other.

50 “In our ensemble, you get to see these musicians shine,
51 and that’s what I love — they’re all incredible and world-class,”
52 Curtis said. “The people love it.”

53 * * *

54 CURTIS’S QUINTET thrives on excitement, precision, and
55 pure musicality. The arrangements are extremely detailed, and the
56 musicians move seamlessly between sections and time feels.

57 In an [interview](#) with the Rabbit Hole Sessions podcast,
58 Curtis said that the group had been working on some of the
59 arrangements for seven or eight years before they were ready to
60 take them into the studio. He recalls that the actual recording
61 session felt to him like a “snapshot” of their musical
62 development.

63 For their Grammy Award–winning release, two of the
64 compositions were based on Latin “big band” pieces that Curtis
65 condensed into the piano, bass, and three-percussion format.
66 They include “Cuban Fantasy,” a Ray Bryant classic, which was
67 performed and recorded live by Machito in 1961, and “Minor’s
68 Holiday” which was transcribed from trumpeter Kenny Dorham’s
69 1955 album, *Afro-Cuban*.

70 Other gems from *Cubop Lives!* include a suite of Noro
71 Morales tunes, a handful of Curtis’s originals, a few Great
72 American Songbook selections, and Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf
73 Rag.”

74 In his *In the Key of Latin Jazz* interview, Curtis also
75 relayed the importance of the “Maple Leaf Rag” in his repertoire
76 and in the development of jazz itself.

77 “What Scott Joplin wrote was naturally in clave,” he said.
78 and that the connection to New Orleans clave and Congo square
79 “is such a super-deep aspect of the music.” He described it as a
80 way to show his connection with his mentors, Donald Harrison
81 and Eddie Palmieri.

82 “I dedicated the album to both of them,” he said.

83 Harrison is from New Orleans and Palmieri was
84 Nuyorican (from New York City, and of Puerto Rican heritage);
85 one can hear the confluence of New Orleans second-line and
86 Cuban/Puerto Rican salsa in Curtis’s concept.

87 * * *

88 TO ASSIST IN listening to Curtis’s music, it is helpful to
89 reference the term “Cubop.”

90 According to a [news release](#) promoting *Cubop Lives!*,
91 “Cubop refers to the cultural and musical fusion of Cuban music
92 with bebop. By referencing Cubop in the title of the album, Curtis
93 has deliberately aligned the music to acknowledge and denote
94 luminaries such as Machito and his Afro-Cubans, Dizzy
95 Gillespie, Mario Bauzá, and Chano Pozo. The implication of the
96 title, then, states that the influence of these trailblazers permeates
97 the music of the present.”

98 Curtis’s music is a 21st-century development of this
99 fusion.

100 “I wanted to make a period piece album that brought a
101 new perspective to an older style — one that wasn’t covered the
102 way I thought it could be,” he said in the news release. “*Cubop*
103 *Lives!* points out the earliest of “jazz fusion” and the combination
104 of cultures that related to each other socially, politically, and of
105 course, musically.”

106 It feels a bit contradictory that Curtis is producing
107 forward-thinking music when the two styles he gleans from (Afro-
108 Cuban instrumental music and bebop) reached their zeniths
109 between 1945 and 1965. Nonetheless, his music is decidedly
110 fresh and its influence on today’s jazz is undisputable.

111 Zaccai Curtis’s life has been a continuum of creation,
112 study, and hard work. In his interviews, he is quick to
113 acknowledge the impact of his family and his mentors — Jackie
114 McLean, Ralph Peterson, Harrison, and Palmieri. He now passes
115 that knowledge forward; he is an avid educator who teaches at
116 the University of Hartford and the University of Rhode Island.

117 During the pandemic, he served on the faculty at the VJC
118 Summer Jazz Workshop. As a composer, Curtis is a three-time
119 ASCAP Young Jazz Composer winner, recipient of the
120 Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism's Artist
121 Fellowship Grant and the Chamber Music America "New Jazz
122 Works" grant. Curtis has twice been selected for the Jazz
123 Ambassador program by the U.S. Department of State and, in
124 2020, was voted as a "Rising Star" in the DownBeat Critics' Poll.

125 Curtis also runs his own record label ([Truth Revolution](#)
126 [Recording Collective](#)), and as such has released more than 100
127 albums, including projects by Palmieri, Harrison, Julian Gerstin
128 Sextet, Jen Allen, Rachel Therrien, Andy González, Sarah
129 Elizabeth Charles, Santi Debriano, and many others.

130 As a recording artist, Curtis has appeared on albums by
131 Palmieri and Harrison, as well as Chief Xian aTunde Adjuah
132 (formerly Christian Scott), Brian Lynch, Ray Vega, Ralph Peterson
133 Jr., Jimmy Greene, Joe Ford, Lakecia Benjamin, Pedro Martínez,
134 Samuel Torres, Mambo Legends Orchestra, and many others.

135 After winning the Grammy Award for Best Latin Jazz
136 album, bandleader Zaccai Curtis commented, "I'm so honored to
137 be recognized and contribute to the Latin jazz and jazz tradition
138 (America's Classical Music). The importance of musicians such as
139 Dizzy Gillespie, Chano Pozo, Mario Bauzá, and Machito cannot
140 go unsung as we all proudly continue to build on the backs of
141 their work."

142 Come listen to Curtis fulfill that musical mission at the
143 Vermont Jazz Center.

144 * * *

145 Tickets, on a sliding scale (\$25 and up) can be reserved
146 at [vtjazz.org](#) or by calling 802-254-9088, ext. 1. Mobility access
147 is available by emailing or calling to schedule a time for one of
148 our staff to meet your party. For those unable to attend in person,
149 check out the VJC's livestream at [vtjazz.org](#).

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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150 **EUGENE UMAN** is director of the Vermont Jazz Center.
151 *The Commons'* Deeper Dive column gives artists, arts
152 organizations, and other nonprofits elbow room to write in first
153 person and be unabashedly opinionated, passionate, and
154 analytical about their own creative work and events.

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