



BOBBY SANABRIA

BOBBY SANABRIA answers extensively to 5 questions I asked him concerning his work. He thoughtfully reflects on his experience as a musician growing in New York -one of the main focuses of creation in the Latin jazz world- and his role as an educator. He's very eloquent transmitting his vision, showing a singular passion for the music he's contributing to keep alive... for the music he's contributing to shape as it evolves.

D. Navas

1. What are your plans with the big band? Is this a project you intend to keep going for awhile?



BOBBY: "The big band is another extension of all my other ongoing projects. As of now I have Quarteto Aché, Ascensión (a nonet) and the big band. It is definitely going to be something that you'll be hearing more about as well as the other two groups I mentioned. Last year we did the world premiere of Marco Rizo's last extended composition, The Suite of The Americas. I conducted and performed this piece with

the big band augmented with oboe, 2 french horns, piccolo, flute, clarinet and bassoon at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia. Many thanks to Jesse and Batia Bermudez who produced the concert with their organization A.M.L.A. and to Candido, Celia Cruz and Jose Alberto who also participated. The late Marco Rizo was Desi Arnaz's musical director and the true legitimate composer of the I Love Lucy theme. He was Ernesto Lecuona's protégé and studied composition with Igor Stravinsky. He also did many Afro-Cuban Jazz oriented recordings as well as being a phenomenal classical pianist. Your readers can read a profile on him in the Clave Chronicles section of my website.

With the big band I want to push the envelope of the big band tradition and go beyond what the great masters like Puente, Bauzá, O'Farrill, Ellington, Basie, Kenton, Rich, Ellis, Zappa, etc. have already done. In my opinion this will only happen if it comes from the rhythm section first. One that is able to be musically versatile in any context. I believe we accomplished this with the new CD. Max Roach stated that any innovation in music always starts with the rhythm section (and this refers to orchestral music as well) changing the way the music is approached, thus making the rest of the players, composers and arrangers follow suit. The music you will hear coming from my ensembles and the players that perform with me will be multi-cultural and not necessarily utilizing Afro-Cuban or Jazz rhythms although the governing factor will be the jazz aesthetic. In other words, the players, no matter what context will be featured as soloists."

2. I know you are an advocate of musical globalization, your first CD was an excellent example of the integration of different genres into the latinjazz idiom. What comments can you give us about the importance of being open to such rich variety as a musician?

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BOBBY: "This aesthetic came from my father and just being lucky enough to have grown up during the Vietnam era, I just turned 43. This time period was the period of Woodstock, the tail end of the Palladium Mambo-Jazz era, The Beatles, Santana, Hendrix, Zappa, Brazilian Bossa-Nova, hardcore soul and R & B, Tower of Power, Cold Blood, Hard Bop, Jazz-Rock Fusion, James Brown, Cumbia, Merengue and the Fania All-Stars, etc, etc. In other words, the most revolutionary time in music history. NYC radio reflected all these styles and my father who was a machinist at the time would relax by sitting in a Lazy Boy chair and listening to music. WBLS (the NYC Black station) would play a cut by James Brown, then something by Grand Funk Railroad and follow it with something by El Gran Combo. The legendary program director Frankie Crocker called it "The Total Black Experience In Sound". Jonathan Schwartz, the principal DJ at WNEW the then progressive rock station, would play the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Yes, Blood Sweat and Tears and then Tito Puente!!! Since my father's commute to his Long Island job from the South Bronx was 2 hours in each direction, he didn't want to be bothered when he got home. All he wanted to do was listen to music and chill. Guess who would be sitting next to him and soaking up the sounds while he did his homework?"

My father was very eclectic in his record buying. He had every James Brown 45 and every Ramito record!!! This is reflected in my musical vision. It is important that the musician of today, especially the Latino musician be constantly growing and culturally conscious. Our heritage is one that is an amalgam of Africa, the Middle-East, Europe and Native American roots. Therefore we should be able to draw from all of these influences and utilize them in the music that we produce. To do so requires homework and respect for ones self and past. Unfortunately many of our artists only eat rice and beans. There is just too much to draw upon to ignore. Again it goes back to the rhythm section being versed enough to explore all of these possibilities. I love rice and beans, but I dig Thai food also. I specifically look for players who have strong backgrounds as jazz, classical and latin players (in other words, well rounded) and have a global vision of music. This leads to the answer to your next question."

3. What do you think of the actual state of development of Latin Jazz music and/or musicians?



BOBBY: "We are at a crossroads in the music. Although there are many recordings coming out, many of them in my opinion leave much to be desired. I am scared that the music will become a parody of itself. Not enough players are doing their homework (clave and jazz wise) and the ones that are, are not getting the opportunities to really record and perform for audiences at major clubs and festivals, be they jazz or dance oriented. Some of the leader/artists from my generation that are doing quality things in my opinion are John Santos, Rebecca Mauleon, William Cepeda, Dr. Chris Washburne, Ray Vega, Ricardo Pons and Viento de Agua, Ralph Irizarry, Jorge Sylvester, Michael Spiro and David Sanchez to name a few. One interesting thing is that even though Ricardo, Chris, Ray, David, Jorge and William are all horn players, they are also well versed in percussion. I must say also that technical virtuosity is something that is exuded in the jazz tradition, but what is revered even more is maturity in what you say on the instrument, something that these players exemplify.

The hopeful thing I see and hear is that musicians are exploring their cultural roots. Ricardo Pons and William Cepeda are perfect examples of this in regard to their use of Afro-Puerto Rican rhythms and I just heard Alex Acuña's Acurela... CD that has Peruvian rhythms featured extensively. Of course anything coming out of Cuba, be it Timba or typical Son whether you dig it or you don't, one thing can be said, the brothers and sisters there are in tune with their heritage. One caveat though, they have no idea of the importance

that NYC and subsequently the West Coast had in terms of the evolution of their music, but that is due to political isolation and is another topic. Which of course leads to answering your fourth question."

4. On the liner notes of Afro-Cuban Dream: Live & In Clave!!! you wrote: "Mucho thanks, kudos and aché to the Italian, Jewish, African-American and especially the Puerto Rican communities of NYC who have kept Afro-Cuban music alive in the United States with little or no recognition". Can you expand on this comment?

BOBBY: "The reason I dedicated the CD to the Italian, Jewish, African American and especially Puerto-Rican communities of NYC is thus. If it wasn't for Fania Records, which was the brainchild of lawyer/ex-police officer and Italian American Jerry Masucci, the Palladium ballroom owned by retired Jewish tailor, Maxwell Hyman, the Black, Jewish, Italian and Puerto-Rican musicians, dancers and listeners who fell so madly in love with this music and supported it, well, Cuban based music in this country after the Revolution would have ceased to exist. Now some of your readers may think I'm crazy, but take a look back at how any person of our generation got involved in this music. With the whole Buena Vista explosion, the general public doesn't realize that this music existed in the U.S. from way back and that there are many artists here in the States that have played authentic Cuban based music for decades. I felt that these people (to be specific New Yorkers) deserved some acknowledgement and thanks."

5. Besides your work as a musician and bandleader, what can you tell us about the "academic" side of your professional career - being an educator, lecturer and so on?



BOBBY: "As far as the academic side of my career is concerned first let me state from the outset, I am a player that teaches, not a teacher that plays. I am a professor in the Jazz departments of The New School and The Manhattan School of Music in NYC. These two institutions I believe are the future of Jazz education and are directed by Martin Mueller and Justin Diciccio respectively. These two cats are visionaries. At both institutions I teach an Afro-Cuban Jazz Orchestra with the students being required to learn about the history of the music and how it relates to the history of Jazz itself in another course I teach. The New School band regularly performs at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe during the school year exposing this tradition to college age kids and of course the general public. Both ensembles also do school concerts with a featured guest soloist. Some of our past guests have been Bobby Watson, Slide Hampton, John Patticucci, Randy Brecker, Hilton Ruiz, Candido, Michael Phillip Mossman, Ronnie Cuber, to name just a few. My students have played the charts we recorded and I worked out the kinks with them before my own big band recorded them. They are all very talented but some of them you should particularly look out for. In the drumming department Tony Devivo from Venezuela, Jaz Sawyer from San Francisco and Marlon Sobel from Long Island, NY. These three guys will be showing up on a lot of stuff you'll be hearing in the future. Karolina Strassmayer from Austria, a former student and graduate, is the finest lead alto player on the NYC scene and is a beacon for young women in Jazz. She's featured on the CD because she played the shit out of the music and knows the lead alto tradition. Her nickname is "Cannonbolina", in reference to Cannonball Adderley. Mike Rodriguez on trumpet represents the best of the Cuban and bebop trumpet traditions and already has a fine reputation in Miami where he is from and is making waves in NYC. Nuyorican Carlito Enriquez on bass is on the first Birdland CD with Tito Puente and is touring with everyone from Dave Samuels to Danilo Perez. He is completely adept in bebop, cubop and beyond on both electric and acoustic basses. I remember Carlito subbing for Andy Gonzalez in the Ft. Apache band when he was 16!!!

On the horizon, pianist Manuel Valera is coming to the New School this year. He is the son of alto saxist Manolo Valera whom your readers know was part of Gonzalo Rubalcaba's Grupo Proyecto. Manolo subbed many times in my group Ascensión, but he left to move to Miami. I remember when his son Manuelito was 13 years old, he's 19 now and a serious jazz player who knows his Cuban roots. At MSM, lead trumpeter Bill Dunn is a force to be reckoned with and alto saxophonist Kenny Shanker is only a sophomore but has an incredibly unique voice as does Masters Degree graduate on alto, Alex Aviles, who is Cuban American. I'm very proud of these young lions. They know the roots of the music and are going to make great contributions to both Jazz and Latin music. I'm just fortunate to have had a little something to do with their development. They will tell you themselves that I am a tough taskmaster. I expect excellence, nothing less. That is something that I learned from Tito Puente Art Blakey, Max Roach and Buddy Rich. That's in case any of your readers are wondering what my teaching ethic is.

Getting back to what I was talking about, you see Jazz is an Afro-Caribbean form of music, something that the Jazz community with all their elitism is still unconscious about. I guess ignorance is bliss. Where I come from we call it "being blind with two good eyes". Or if they are conscious, they won't admit to it. From being part of the scene, I can honestly say that it is just a lack of respect for Latino music traditions. What separates Jazz from all other forms of Caribbean music is the Blues tradition, which is unique to the African-American experience. But the rhythmic roots of both styles are in West Africa. So what do I say to the Jazz community? Which ironically, I am part of, deal with it motherfuckers, or else you're going to be left with your heads in the sand!!! That is what I am doing at The New School and at MSM, making the younger generation of players deal with it.

My philosophy is that (and I said this before in Downbeat Magazine) Jazz and Latin music are two branches of an old African tree, except the Latin branch is a lot closer to the trunk. I also am on the faculty of Drummers Collective (although I'm on a leave of absence since I've become so busy) carrying on the innovative work of the late, great Frankie Malabe. We teach a ten week course where drum set students have to deal with Afro-Cuban, Brazilian, West Indian and New Orleans styles applied to the kit, which in my opinion is the most versatile percussion instrument in the world. Why? Played properly, it can fit in any context. But here again I go back to the aspect of doing your homework. Many students come to me wanting to learn some basic patterns applied to the drum set. Boom, teach me some of that hip songo stuff!!! You can teach anyone who is a good student of the instrument the aforementioned, but their playing will be superficial because to do this correctly you have to first deal with the vocabulary of the timbales. I'm very strong in my opinion about this. If you study with me, you must go through the timbales in conjunction with the kit. What good is it if you can play a complex timba style drum set part but can't play a basic baqueteo for a danzón arrangement on the timbales. It goes even deeper. Many people have commented to me how many well known "outside of the realm of latin music" drummers can play songo, etc. I always say, "ask the guy to play for you some machete on a guiro", then we'll talk. This is what I mean about homework, a lot of students and well known players just don't get it. Everyone who plays percussion should play some drums and every drummer should play some percussion. In the future, this will be the norm and will contribute to the evolution of the music, again I go back to Max Roach and his thoughts on the rhythm section. Oh, and by the way, the same holds true for Jazz drumming. You've got to learn about New Orleans second line drumming before you can deal with the so called Jazz drumming of today. What do Cuban drumming and New Orleans second line have in common? CLAVE!!! But that's another topic."

Siempre y aché,
Bobby Sanabria

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