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**Omar and Paquito: Two Cubans with a Pan-American Vision.**

By Gregory (Goyo) Pappas  
posted on April 28, 2002

Latin Jazz has become a central force moving jazz in a world direction. It was first Afro-Cuban (in the 1940's) then in the 1960's it took a Brazilian turn with Bossa Nova but by the 80's it began to open itself to the rich variety of rhythms, styles, and instrumentation of the rest of the Americas. Paquito D'Rivera and Omar Sosa are two Cuban musicians that although belonging to a different generation continue to move Latin Jazz in this Pan-American direction.

Havana-born (1948) saxophonist and clarinet player, Paquito D'Rivera was one of the founding members of two of the most important bands in the history of Cuban music: Orquesta Cubana de Musica Moderna and Irakere. He always had the musical curiosity for non-Cuban music but it was not until his defection to New York City (in 1981) that he was able to participate in the musical interactions that would change the character of Latin Jazz. "The "seeds" of the new turn of Latin Jazz that we are still enjoying are in the historic jam sessions in a loft in NY called Soundscape. I contributed but I also learned about Brazilian, Argentinian, and Puerto Rican music as well as the new developments in jazz." Paquito quickly became the leader of bands that reflected this same fertile multi-ethnic interaction. "The bands that I formed during the 1980's were 'escuelitas' (schools) with musicians coming from very different places and musical backgrounds in Latin America. For example, Danilo Pérez (Panama),



LIVE ...Soundscape  
PAQUITO D'RIVERA

Audio samples:  
1. [Estamos Ahi](#)  
CD: Live ...Soundscape

Claudio Roditi (Brazil), Michel Camilo (Dominican Republic) would interact and learn from each other."

Dizzy Gillespie was an important influence.

"Dizzy more than any of his contemporaries in the jazz world had an openness and interest in taking jazz in a more global direction. He was

influenced by the message of global unity, openness and interaction of the Bahá'í faith."

Paquito became first a member and later the leader of Gillespie's fifteen-piece all-star

group, the United Nations Orchestra. He

stands between the first generation of Latin

Jazz musicians (e.g., Mario Bauzá, Tito Puente) and the new one that started

to explode during the 90's (Danilo Pérez, David Sánchez, Michel Camilo) and

he is very proud of his role. "I am very optimistic and excited about the new

generation of Latin Jazz musicians. I am also proud that many of them started

their careers in my bands, either in the small bands of the 80's or in the

United Nation Orchestra that I directed after Dizzy passed away."

Today Paquito's music and his concerts continue to explore how jazz can be enriched by Caribbean rhythms and a diversity of South American musical elements. "The Afro-Cuban tradition is fine but doing the same thing over and over again gets old, just as eating rice and beans everyday. In my bands I still keep the same diversity and broad vision. For example, my current band has Diego Urcola and Dario Eskenazi from Argentina, Oscar Stagnaro from Peru, and Mark Walker from Chicago."

Historically the relation between Jazz and Latin Music is older and more intimate than has been assumed by jazz "purists". "Before Louis Armstrong there were Cuban trumpet players in New Orleans. New Orleans was part of the Caribbean. Fats Navarro was a Cuban-Chinese. And let us not forget "Jelly Roll" Morton assertion about the "Latin tinge" of jazz." But Paquito is more interested in what to do musically with these two musical traditions than with their history. "The greatness of Jazz is that with it you can take any Latin rhythm (for example, Tamborito from Panamá, Bomba from Puerto Rico) and elevate it to a different level. You have to keep a learning attitude otherwise you stagnate and your life and your music becomes boring. There are still many unexplored possibilities left in the marriage between Jazz and Latin Music."

Paquito says he came to New York to learn but it is clear now that he also contributed to the development of Latin Jazz in an unprecedented way. His discography includes over 30 albums. He has won three Grammys. In 1991 Mr. D'Rivera received the Lifetime Achievement Award for his contribution to Latin Music. One of his compositions "The Pan Americana Suite" is a jazz oriented piece that combines the sounds, rhythms and elements of the music of the Americas. It was commissioned for the Jazz @ Lincoln Center "As of Now" series at Alice Tully Hall that premiered on February 10th and 12th, 2000. Paquito has also carried his vision into classical music. He has composed for Chamber Orchestras but by exploring the wealth of resources of the Latin-American repertoire. One more aspect of Paquito's talent deserves to be mentioned. It is one the jazz world is just beginning to recognize. He is one of the most remarkable clarinet players in the history of that instrument.

Pianist Omar Sosa was never a member of Paquito's band but he is also a Cuban (from Camagüey) interested in applying his Cuban

## 2. [Wapango](#)

CD: Celebration

## 3. [Portraits of Cuba](#)

CD: Portraits of Cuba

## 4. [Mambo a la Kenton](#)

CD: Tropicana Nights

## 5. [Dizzyness](#)

CD: The Clarinetist



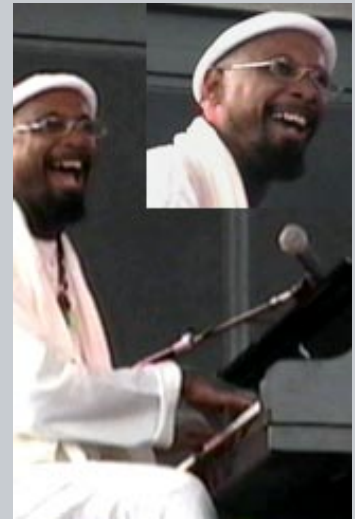
background only as the starting point to a Pan-American and Pan-African excursion. His career has just started but he has already received rave reviews from the critics who appreciate risks that work. "Since I was a kid I was interested in strange stuff and was exposed to a variety of music, including jazz, through my dad's LP's, but there were two LP's that made a mark on me and that got me curious about the rhythms from the rest of the Americas. One from the Conjunto Folklorico Nacional and one by Paquito D'Rivera."

Omar Sosa moved to the San Francisco area in 1995 and has already recorded seven albums. In each one he builds a new layer or dimension to his music by making a musical connection with some unexplored Afro-Latin region. This musical journey reflects in part his own travels and personal experiences. "Before you experiment you have to know and live the roots. I was not ready to assimilate the Gnawa music until I visited Morocco. In my two years in Ecuador I learned about the black folkloric music tradition of its north coast, and I recently came from Brazil." More important than the places for him are the people he has played with and learned from. "I have played with people from Peru and Venezuela and I am still learning from every new musical relationship I make. I am now looking forward to the right opportunity to record with William Cepeda and his Afro-Rican Jazz. He is as open-minded and as crazy as I am."

Omar lives in Barcelona now. He is part of a recent wave of Latin Jazz musicians that have moved to Europe because they have found a very receptive audience. He just began an eight-city tour of the western U.S. and his new septet reflects the breadth of his approach to Latin Jazz. "To Texas we are bringing vocalist Martha Galarraga from Cuba. Bouchaib Abdelhadi from Morocco will provide the Gnawa vocals. Gustavo Ovalles is a master percussionist from Venezuela. Our bass player and drummer come from the straight ahead and free jazz world."

Omar Sosa was trained as a percussionist at the prestigious National Music School in Havana and it shows in his piano playing and compositional style. "I try to stay away from the standard forms of composition like the pattern of theme and improvisation. I am very interested in the communication between piano and percussion. One thing is to play piano on top of the percussion and another to play with the percussion in the music as it unfolds." This does not mean that he bangs the keys. His piano playing is often delicate and precise. He can play lyric lines as well as rely on some angular phrasing. In Omar's music every instrument including the human voice (sometimes even rap) contributes to a percussive layer. He catches his listeners off guard by shifting from any particular groove, adding a different color, accents, and tension.

In music there are fusions where the result is mere eclecticism or a juxtaposition. In the case of Omar Sosa's music he manages to integrate all of his resources into a coherent rhythmic whole. He uses the analogy of cooking



OMAR SOSA

Audio samples:

1. [Un Congo en Sevilla](#)

CD: NFUMBE For The Unseen

2. [Cha Cha Du Nord](#)

CD: Free Roots

3. [Marimchacha](#)

CD: Bembón-Roots III

4. [Cha-Amarillo](#)

CD: Prietos



to describe the process and what is needed. "The food from Brazil may taste different than the one from Africa but the difference is not in the condiments but in how it is made. There is nothing new about the ingredients. The challenge is to unify or integrate. One must find the right condiments to use and at the appropriate time. It cannot be rushed but even before you start you have to be well prepared. You must know your ingredients well."

In comparison to Paquito, Omar Sosa has been more interested in exploring the Afro-Latin traditions as they connected to other African rooted music, but this emphasis is not motivated by an Afro-centrism but a universalism. "All the best formal musical training in the world is worthless if you have an egocentric or a nationalistic attitude. We are all connected in one way or another to Africa."

Omar and Paquito cover a lot of musical territory but what is most impressive about them is not the mere length of their reach but the musical depth in what they do. There is plenty of "World Music" today that is nothing more than musical tourism.

Related links: [www.paquitodrivera.com](http://www.paquitodrivera.com) | [www.omarsosa.com](http://www.omarsosa.com)