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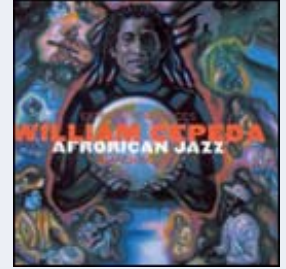
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William Cepeda - His Roots and Beyond

by Thomas Peña



In 1989, Dizzy Gillespie and his United Nations Orchestra visited Puerto Rico and through a chance encounter, met and hired Cepeda to play with his band. Cepeda was also invited to tour Europe...



William Cepeda
Afrorican Jazz
BRANCHING OUT
EXPANDIENDO RAICES

The music of Puerto Rico is rich and diverse. Unlike Cuban music, which is tremendously popular the world over, the music of Puerto Rico is rarely heard outside the island. Musician William Cepeda's objective is to advocate for change: "I want to reach out through my music and make Puerto Rican music more universal. That is my mission, to broaden the consciousness of Puerto Rican music... it is time for our music to be heard and its evolution to be given new support."

Cepeda is no stranger to the struggle. Don Rafael Cepeda, the 86 year-old patriarch of William's family, and his wife, Doña Caridad, are world renowned for dedicating their lives to the preservation of folkloric Puerto Rican music and they have passed this tradition down to their 12 children.

Cepeda's concept is to expand on the current folkloric traditions by experimenting with new, innovative concepts, "My foundation is the traditional music of Puerto Rico; whatever I put 'on top' is a blend of different expressions and impressions of my experiences. I've added jazz harmony, more complex and developed melodies, as well as more contemporary melodies. It also has influences from diverse sources, such as free jazz, world music, rap and funk."

Cepeda - The Musician



Cepeda began his career by playing percussion at the age of ten with his friends in the barrio of Loiza Aldea. As a teenager, he was introduced to the trombone and it became his instrument of choice. He studied at "La Escuela Libre de Musica" and also took private trombone lessons for three years before beginning his formal training.

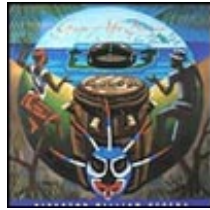
Cepeda's formal training includes two Bachelor of Arts degrees; one in jazz composition and arranging from the Berklee College of Music in Boston and another in music education from the Conservatory of Music in Puerto Rico. Cepeda was awarded a full scholarship to the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College in New York, where he received a Masters degree in Jazz performance, and studied composition and improvisation with jazz greats, Donald Byrd, Jimmy Heath and Slide Hampton.

The American Composers Orchestra selected Cepeda, as one of today's most important and influential Puerto Rican composers. His talent has been recognized with commissions, grants and awards from "Meet the Composer," American Composers Forum, and the Association of Hispanic Arts and the Latino Arts Advancement Program.

In addition to being an accomplished trombonist, Cepeda plays the bomba drums, conch shells and pandereta (hand drum). He continues to arrange music for many different kinds of groupings, from duos to big bands. He is currently on the faculty of The Brooklyn Conservatory of Music, where he conducts seminars and workshops.

Cepeda began experimenting with Puerto Rican music after graduating from Berklee in 1984-85. He returned to Puerto Rico, where he began composing and arranging his concepts. Later, he moved to New York and began organizing a band.

Cepeda's Recordings as a Leader



Cepeda's first recording as a leader, "Bombazo" (with Grupo Afro Boricua) is pure percussion, African call-and-response, singing and chants. With "Bombazo," we experience a side of Puerto Rican music that is not often heard. Traditional genres, such as plena, bomba and verso negro are explored. Also featured is regional music from Loiza, Ponce, Santurce and Mayagüez. "Bombazo" evokes images of a drum circle, playing, singing and dancing under the palm trees. The strong African sound, Spanish lyrics and call-and-response achieve a spellbinding effect.

"My Roots and Beyond" is much more cerebral than "Bombazo". Here, we get the Nuyorican (mainlanders) perspective. Many of the same rhythms drive the music, but that is where the similarity ends. This is a jazz album with plenty of attitude. Horns work together in complex harmonies and soaring solos. Trap drums and electric guitar provide the rhythmic foundation. These are the African rhythms of Puerto Rico with a modern, urban twist.

William Cepeda speaks about his most recent recording, "Expandiendo Raíces/Branching Out." "In Branching Out, I have opened my music to influences from other cultures, such as Africa, India, Andalucía, Arabia, Japan and Gospel. Some of them form the roots of our own tradition. The repertory and the styles I have included on this CD, encompassing traditional forms, mainstream jazz and world music fusions, are broader. In addition to the musicians in my group, I have chosen a special combination of invited guests from different cultures and traditions to achieve the fusions I sought in the compositions."

William Cepeda - The Sideman



In 1989, Dizzy Gillespie and his United Nations Orchestra visited Puerto Rico and through a chance encounter, met and hired Cepeda to play with his band. Cepeda was also invited to tour Europe with Dizzy on his world tour with the great South African singer, Miriam Makeba. The United Nation Orchestra is now under the direction of Paquito D' Rivera and Cepeda is still a member of this outstanding, Grammy award-winning group.

Other jazz artists Cepeda has toured with include Lester Bowie and his Brass Fantasy, David Murray, Bobby Watson, and Slide Hampton & The Jazz Masters. Equally well-known in the Latin music scene, Cepeda has worked with legendary figures such as Oscar De Leon, the five-time Grammy award winner Eddie Palmieri, vocalist Celia Cruz and Tito Puente. When he is not touring, Cepeda is busy recording. He appears on over 100 recordings, as well as jingles and movie soundtracks.

Folkloric Music - Afrorican Jazz



The foundations for Cepeda's experiments are derived from a variety of traditional genres. The first and perhaps the most vital, bomba, was developed at the end of the 17th century. It flourished along the coast of Puerto Rico where west Africans and their descendants worked on the colonial plantations. It was at the "bailes de bombas" (bomba dances) where enslaved Africans celebrated baptisms, marriages, and planned rebellions in secret. The celebrations were only permitted on Sundays

and Feast Days for fear of uprisings.

Plena is known as the "periodico cantado" (the sung newspaper) because it contains stories about history and everyday life of the people. Besides having its musical and social roots in West Africa, plena was also influenced by jíbaro music, the native Taíno Indians, the music of the European-style salons and the music of displaced freed slaves who traveled to Puerto Rico from English-speaking Caribbean Islands seeking work.

Jíbaro music is Spanish-Arabic in origin and was developed by the white peasants (farmers) who accounted for the vast majority of the population until the 1930's. This Creole music is regarded as the epitome of traditional Puerto Rican identity and remains virtually undiluted. However, its popularity has diminished over the years.

The jíbaro music repertoire consists of several forms of European origin, such as the waltz and mazurka, along with Cuban-derived guaracha and the occasional Dominican merengue. However, the backbone of the jíbaro repertoire consists of purely local seis and aguinaldo. The most important aspect of the seis and aguinaldo are the lyrics, which for over a century have chronicled the joys and sorrows of the Puerto Rican people. There are other obscure regional forms as well. However, they are rarely heard, even in Puerto Rico.

The evolution of traditional Puerto Rican music began in the 1930's when pioneers such as Manuel "Canario" Jimenez and Mon Rivera introduced a modernized plena to large audiences in New York. Mon Rivera had the first international hit featuring plena, "Allo, Quién Llama?" (Hello, who's calling)? In the 1950's Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera bursts onto the music scene with a raw version of bomba, which was tremendously popular. However, after the breakup of Cortijo's band in 1962, its popularity declined.

Today, bomba is heard mainly in the barrio of Loiza Aldea. Aguinaldo and jíbaro music are heard at festivals and during the holidays. However, plena is experiencing a resurgence due to the efforts of groups like "Plena Libre" and "Los Pleneros de la 21."

The Future



The next phase in Cepeda's evolution is to learn about the music business. His future goals include developing and producing new talent; "Right now I have a lot of projects I would like to realize. I would like to produce a lot of people that do Puerto Rican music. I have concepts I would like to see done with Puerto Rican music that have never been done before." Cepeda is also committed to attracting investors, "The more people that play this music, the more attention it will bring. Like what has happened in Cuba. We need people to invest money in our music. Right now, I'm thinking about money, creating and developing our music. I know that in the future it will happen."

Cepeda sums up his philosophy: "This is my contribution to Puerto Rican music - nothing like it has ever been done before, because while there are many great jazz albums inspired by Cuban rhythms, Cuban jazz-fusions and such, there's nothing out there of the same caliber for Puerto Rican music and jazz. And there should be. It's about time... traditional Puerto Rican music isn't heard that much outside of the island and it's a shame... I'm putting a little fire into it, with the result, I hope, of offering a dynamic and beautiful music for many, many people to enjoy."

A World View



Jack O'Neil, the president of Blue Jacket records -Cepeda's record label-discusses the goals of his company: "The artistic goals of Blue Jacket can be summed up this way. We are involved with artists that understand the traditional music from their countries but push the artistic envelope, so to speak, by using their knowledge of traditions to create contemporary music. What results, we hope, is music that sounds new, yet rooted in tradition."

Sue Steward, the author of, "Musical!" comments on the current international appeal of Latin music: "Latin music has entered a post-modern, post-salsa age, with unimagined fusions invigorating Latin, dance and jazz. "

Steward continues with a commentary on the music scene in Puerto Rico: "Just as Cuba has rediscovered its old "son" champions, so Puerto Rico has witnessed a renaissance of bomba and plena styles and neo-traditional bands, and also the birth of rap."

Peter Manuel, author of "Caribbean Currents" comments on the future of Latin music: "In general, music like salsa, reggae, and zouk have taken on lives of their own outside the Caribbean, becoming truly international. For the most creative artists, Caribbean music now involves combining international sounds and Caribbean cross-fertilizations, while often reaching deep into local traditions for inspiration."

Purists warn of the dangers inherent in experimenting with the cross-fertilization of genres. The evils of commercialism, capitalism and the potential loss of cultural traditions are certainly something to consider. Others argue that these hybrid forms of music are healthy and in line with the times. In either case, change is inevitable.

In the meantime, (Puerto Rican) musicians such as David Sánchez, Papo Vásquez, John Santos, Bobby Matos, John Benítez and Bobby Sanabria continue to push the musical envelope. Their music suggests an organic blend, a reflection of their bilingual, bicultural experience, which comes at you from new and unexpected angles.

In closing, I think it is time to take a musical leap of faith. Consider for a moment how the public must have reacted when the great Arsenio Rodríguez broke with tradition and committed the unthinkable act of introducing conga drums to the Cuban conjunto format in 1938 (the forerunner to today's salsa bands); or when Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo introduced "Cubop" (a fusion of big-band Jazz, Bebop and Cuban music) in the 1940's. It is important to keep in mind that these concepts were considered revolutionary in their day.

I can think of no other artist whose lifestyle and career embodies the past, present and future of Puerto Rican music more than William Cepeda. "That is the great blessing of music," says Cepeda, "It seems to me that the best way to make our music is to use all the musical influences, vision and experiences that have formed our lives since childhood." In my opinion, Cepeda has all of the necessary qualifications to represent the next generation of Latin musicians.

To all the young Turks who are pushing the musical envelope and converting new listeners, I say, "Pa'lante, siempre pa'lante!"

Thomas Peña
New York City, 2001

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