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Conversation with Adela Dalto

by Thomas Peña



"My latest recording "La Crème Latina" is Latin Jazz and jazz tunes. But my CD's are Latin Jazz 'cause of the players and the approach. The variety of tunes can only help widen the Latin Jazz category to help bring more audiences our way..."

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**Your late husband, Jorge Dalto, had an enormous impact on your career. In fact, he was the one who encouraged you to pursue a career in the music business. Had you ever entertained the thought of being in the music business prior to meeting Jorge Dalto?**

When I met Jorge I was 19 and working in a dance studio. I wanted to be a model but wasn't the height nor was the "Latin Look" accepted then. Someone suggested I should take acting lessons but I never got started. Jorge and I took an apartment one month after we met. He learned that I began singing in the grade school choir but then was offered a seat in the orchestra playing the violin, which was a good choice because I learned to read music at this early age. By my senior year in high school I returned to the choir because I really wanted to sing. Jorge heard me always singing around the apartment and in the car, and was surprised that I knew so many lyrics. He introduced me to music I should start listening to from his collection, which was Sarah Vaughan, Astrud Gilberto (Café A GO GO); I also discovered his CTI collection of Flora and Airtio, Freddy Hubbard, Jobim and Benson were also among Jorge's music collection. I was raised listening to R&B music even though in Gary (Indiana), the stations would always throw in some Wes Montgomery. But I wasn't familiar with jazz until I met Jorge. After we got married we came to New York (in '74), and once here I saw Graciela singing with this huge orchestra and Jorge playing an 11 foot grand piano. I realized I had to take it seriously and began studying solfeo

ADELA DALTO - BIOGRAPHY

The most important talent that any creative artist can have and develop is the ability to touch the heart and soul of the listeners. It is precisely this talent which differentiates singer Adela Dalto. Having been immersed for several decades in the highest levels of creative Latin and Brazilian music, makes the music of Adela Dalto a very unique and moving experience. Mixing sophisticated elements of this music with the most contemporary styles of American jazz, she creates a compelling blend of sensuous fiery rhythms with sultry vocals in her Latin jazz music.

Born in Texas to Mexican parents, she grew up with the influence of R&B and a growing interest in jazz. It was her late husband, Jorge Dalto, former pianist for George Benson, who encouraged her musical career. Jorge, introduced her to the subtle and exciting rhythms of Latin and Brazilian music. Adela's career has been greatly inspired by personal favorites such as Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, Latin singers Graciela and Celia Cruz, as well as the Brazilians Elis Regina and Leny Andrade.

Adela has been performing in the local clubs in New York City with her band

and learning jazz lyrics. I would get bored studying solfeo but found myself writing lyrics, which led to the several lyrics I have written for my CD's. But in also helping Jorge with his bookings and business affairs, I did learn all that I know about the "music business" as producing CD's and concerts, publishing, marketing, and also teaching to maintain my business, Adelante Productions, Inc.

**Since its inception, the music business has been dominated by men. Women have had to deal with all manners of roadblocks, misperceptions and male performance norms. What has been your experience as a woman in the music business?**

It's all about how well you perform and if you have the freedom to go about following your desire. The roadblocks are the ones we put up ourselves out of fear or lack of motivation but family obstacles are the primary reason there aren't more Latina performers. I will say it comes from the strong male domination of the household, coming not only from the father but also possibly from a brother or a lover for sure. In searching for women players for my "Mujeres Latinas" band I'm finding younger players because this domination is breaking down with this generation.

What is male performance norms? In Latin music we play with more than one drum, which can create a powerful sound forcing the accompanying instruments to play or blow harder. Technique would eliminate a lot of unnecessary force. Many times I've heard pianists complain how hard they have to play and seen fingers and nails banged up because the rhythm section is working it to the max. Some drummers hit too hard, driving the percussion to hit harder and the whole sound gets louder, making the bass player turn up his amp and the poor acoustic pianist has to bang on the piano because perhaps it's not miked sufficiently for all the sound around the piano. Suddenly, I find myself having to sing with more force. A better sound setup could help but an understanding of nuance could make music more interesting. The problem is that the "kick ass" attitude of playing has been set and it's hard to knock it down.

However, your breathing, your technique and your physical condition reflect the physical strength you use to play an instrument. So how can you compare men against women norms? I've seen musicians play with a lot of force, but it's really not needed if they had better technique. A lot is just part of the visual show.

**You were born in Texas and are of Mexican and Indian descent, however, you are often mistaken for being of Brazilian descent. There seems to be a strong connection between you and Brazil. Explain.**

I began singing jazz and pop music, but the Brazilians Helcio Milito and Aloisio Aguiar

and as a special guest. She has performed alongside great Latin musicians such as Jerry Gonzalez and Hilton Ruiz. She has also performed with jazz trumpeter Roy Hargrove in Japan, Brazilian pianist Aloisio Aguiar in Rio and with Mauricio Smith's Latin Jazz Orchestra at The Rainbow Room in New York City. Adela toured as featured vocalist with the late Mario Bauzá's AFRO CUBAN JAZZ ORCHESTRA at the Pori Jazz, North Sea Jazz, Umbria Jazz and the Montreux Jazz festivals and with Carlos "Patato" Valdes' AFROJAZZIA ensemble as they hit Europe's top nightclubs.

Adela tours with her own group performing festivals as the Chivas Regal Latin Jazz Festival in Puerto Rico and performing at clubs such as S.O. B.'s, Visiones and Birdland while living in New York City.

Her recordings have included some top names in the field such as Chucho Valdez, Lee Konitz, Dave Valentin, David Sanchez, Claudio Roditi among others. Adela's latest CD release, Papa Boco on Milestone Records is a mix of Latin, Brazilian and jazz tunes containing several of her lyrics. She also has three Japanese CDs on the Venus Records label titled Exotica, Peace and A Brazilian Affair.



**CLICK HERE** to read liner notes and hear audio samples of Adela Dalto's new recording, La Crème Latine.

called me for a gig they had back around '78. Brazilian bands had to have a singer for "The Girl From Ipanema" request. I found steady work for several years singing Brazilian music working in the village and in Soho. But I also got to travel to Brazil singing and speaking Portuguese. I learned a lot of the Jobim collection and have recorded some of his tunes. "Falande De Amor" on my "PaPa BoCo" CD is a beautiful tune that unfortunately hadn't been recorded much and is one of my favorite Jobim tunes. The Brazilian influence reflects the lyrics I've written from the Pixinguinha tune "Menina Moza" -also on my PaPa BoCo Cd retitled "Sad Love Song"- which could be a standard. And I guess I look like I could be Brazilian.

I didn't start singing Latin music until I started singing with Jorge's InterAmerican Band doing gigs at the Village Gate around 82'. It was Carlos "Patato" Valdés who encouraged Jorge to make me sing the Latin material. I didn't know any Salsa lyrics and so I suggested using the ballad "Vanidad" as a Salsa for a Village Gate gig coming up. Later I heard a recording by Ray De La Paz of "Vanidad" in Salsa. I believe I must have been responsible for starting that whole phase of recording boleros in Salsa in the 80's. My Latin singing continued with Mauricio Smith at the Rainbow Room, working every night, and then came the big gig with Mario Bauzá's Afro Cuban Jazz Orchestra, where I stepped in for Graciela. Until my latest project of Toña La Negra with the 22 string orchestra, Mario's big band orchestra had been the greatest experience.

**Your music is generally classified as Jazz. How would you categorize your music?**

My recordings have many different styles. It's the selection of songs I've recorded. It's all about the influences I've come in contact with. I consider myself fortunate to have been working among a selection of the best musicians. Most are Latinos, which include the Caribbean, Brazil and Latin America. My latest recording "La Crème Latina" is Latin Jazz and jazz tunes. But my CD's are Latin Jazz 'cause of the players and the approach. The variety of tunes can only help widen the Latin Jazz category to help bring more audiences our way. We need a broader acceptance of what Latin Jazz covers so we can attract a larger audience.

**Over the years you have had the good fortune of collaborating with some of the world's finest musicians: Mario Bauzá, Graciela, Carlos "Patato" Valdés, Jerry González, Chico O' Farrill, Roy Hargrove and Freddie Hubbard, just to name a few. What is it like working with musicians who have achieved legendary status?**

Legendary means they've been around putting forth good work. They've built their mountain of knowledge that rubs on to you by working with them and putting you on your way to legendary status as well. I've been around since 1975. I feel as if I'm legendary already.

**Your son, Miles, is a gifted pianist. Apparently, he's chosen to follow in his father's footsteps. How do you feel about that?**

I feel fine with the careers both my sons have chosen. My oldest son, Billy, chose politics even though he showed natural talent in singing and likes to play the guitar, flute and drums for his own pleasure. However Miles chose to study the piano professionally. Jorge had started him with his lessons at a young age. Miles didn't take it seriously though until he entered college. He is very talented and I encouraged him at a young age by letting him know he had the magic touch that comes from the heart. Besides, I wanted to hear someone play Jorge's Steinway in the house. Miles is practicing but he has one more year of college before he can fully concentrate on piano practice. He plans to go on to his masters studying music composition and arranging. He does spend a lot of time producing tracks from my requests to his Hip-Hop friends, making him a producer and pianist.

**Your Tribute to Toña La Negra (last Mother's Day at Aaron Davis Hall) was**

**absolutely breathtaking. Could you recap the events leading up to this marvelous tribute and explain why you chose to interpret Toña's music?**

Breathtaking... thank you very much for this beautiful compliment. I wish we had had more publicity to attract critics from the wider distributed newspapers. The New York Times would have been heavenly. The musicians that participated were in awe after the show. They couldn't believe we had put on such a "breathtaking" show using 22 string players. Their contentment just poured out into the audience. The audience was entirely pleased.

I was quite a wreck putting the show together. I hadn't realized I was the producer when I presented the concept for production. But as the weeks went on, many tasks had to be taken care of. I would finish one and say, "okay done, what's next?" There were so many details to take care of, from getting the arrangers, conductor, musicians, taping of music charts together, and even finding the time to check on the design of my dress. I had to put all my other work aside to be able to meet the concert date.

After having released my last CD "Papa Boco" in '95 and seeing that the jazz radio format was clearly jazz, not a mix as they had been playing since the '70's of fusion, Latin, Brazilian... Public radio stations had to define more clearly what type of radio stations they were for them to solicit grants. So us, questionable category artists got left out. If we weren't straight jazz, you could only get played during programs that were designated specifically for either Latin or Brazilian. Which directly affected me with having a CD that crossed from jazz to Latin to Brazilian.

So I thought it was time for me to define myself since most people thought I was Brazilian. I started searching for my Latin identity. It was at the painter's house of Ricardo Domínguez in Caracas, with my friend César Bogadi, that the Toña project came to mind. César had been encouraging me to do something with strings. I had been thinking of doing a tribute to "Mujeres Latinas" (Latin women), but as the music of Toña La Negra came up among the selection of music we were listening to, as we drank Venezuelan rum and posed for the painter, we immediately said that's it, a Mexican Idol. I could now relate directly with someone from my roots, music from my father's records played in the house as I grew up. Also in listening to her closely, I felt I could interpret her music creating the mood, and my voice matched her alto voice as hers with the rich lows to compliment the music.

The rest was research; tracing her sons to be able to interview them and learn more about her music. I traveled to Veracruz and visited the museum of Agustín Lara to see pictures of her with Agustín

#### **TRIBUTE TO TOÑA LA NEGRA** Short Review by Aurora Flores

Aaron Davis Hall treated mothers and their families to a Sunday afternoon of music, nostalgia and tears in this movingly emotional tribute to Toña La Negra. Described as Latin America's Billie Holiday, owing to her smoky voice and passionate phrasing, Toña La Negra became a diva of songs on the Mexican movie scene of the 30s through the 60s.

Twentyfirst century vocalist, Adela Dalto carries the lovesong torch in this tribute to Toña complete with guest artist Graciela, vocalist for the late Machito and his Afro-Cubans who sang Noche de Ronda in duet with Adela, while later, Dave Valentin improvised over his Latin jazz rendition of "Obsesion" as the 22 string strong orchestra followed the flautists' cue, breaking into a mambo. Latin jazzy Steve Turre blew them away with shells of various tones and spirits. While Adela brought us back to Toña projecting clips from vintage Mexican movies featuring La Negra with other artists such as Cuba's Miguelito Valdes and Puerto Rico's Bobby Capo. By the afternoon's end, sons were dancing with mothers in the aisles.

A lovely tribute to a lovely lady,  
Toña la Negra.



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#### **SEE VIDEO CLIP**

Adela Dalto sings "Vereda Tropical" with Strings Conducted by Maestro Francisco Zumaque. Special Guests: Graciela, Steve Turre, Dave Valentin, Mario Rivera from "Tito Puente's Golden Men of Latin Jazz Band" and Rolando Briceño from "Mario Bauzá's Afro Cuban Jazz Orchestra".



and Pedro Flores, to try and capture a little bit of the spirit that was so strong in the 30's and 40's, which was the highlight that XEW radio station created and where Toña's career was started.

### Let's discuss your new projects...

I've been singing many years now and have been requested to sing the various types of music for different occasions, which is why my projects vary in style. A few years back I was asked to perform at the conference in Washington, D.C. "Hispanic Women in Business". Realizing my audience would be mostly women I wanted to sing songs of empowerment. I wrote a song that turned out to be an anthem to the Latin women, "Mujeres Latinas". During my performance of this song the women approached the stage and started to give me the power sign. I realized then that I had to continue singing this song because of the empowerment motivation behind it. So, I created a website and started a women's musical group to expose the role of the Latin women and her achievements. I feel the exposure of the musical group will motivate young women into feeling confident in wanting to play instruments like the sax or bass or trombone. It will open a door that many Latinas thought was closed to them or shy to admit they'd like to play an instrument that they have only seen men play. We just started rehearsing, but we have been performing on the Goya Foods float at parades, singing our theme song. Check our performance schedule at [www.mujereslatinas.com](http://www.mujereslatinas.com)

### Who are some of your current influences? What CD's are in your player at home as we speak?

I've been listening to NPR radio lately because of the variety of music, including classical, which I've been enjoying very much lately. The variety is wide and I've always wanted to hear this variety... Those I don't know names... I heard a bassoon and guitar duo that was extremely interesting. I was also at a world festival to hear some groups that came in from Europe. One group was from Sardinia, Italy. They used the accordion. I heard the relationship between so many countries that use this instrument, including my own Mexican roots, brought together with even Polish music. You know the story about the building of the cross country train and the German's bringing the accordion and influencing the other cultures that worked also on the tracks. The CD you sent me was also so refreshing (**Sakésho**). I do have Mozart played by some Egyptian musicians. It was on my player the last two days, and Adtou Daghour as well (Adtou Daghour is a Moroccan artist that mixes traditional instruments and voice with modern techno sounds from computers). I like very much these days the Arabic rhythms.

### Now that the recording is in "the can" and all is said and done, how do YOU feel about the results?

I'm content with the recording under the circumstances of no formal arrangements and no rehearsals. I think that's what gave this CD its sincerity. Like playing the last set after a few nights in a club. Nice and relaxed, this recording adds another side of my singing experience to my discography. I don't know when I'll record again, but I hope my son Miles will play the piano for me.

### Related links:

**La Crème Latina** - CD info: liner notes, tracks, audio samples.

**Tribute to Toña La Negra** - Photographs courtesy of Aurora Flores.

**www.mujereslatinas.com** - Adela Dalto's website

## CO-EDITOR'S NOTE: ADELA DALTO - THE INTERVIEW

Some time ago I came to the conclusion that my time would be better spent interviewing the musicians (artists) as opposed to writing reviews. The logic was simple, why not go straight to the source? Not to mention the fact that I would get the rare opportunity to meet and greet the artists on a one-on-one basis.

My interviews with saxophonist Miguel Zenón, pianist Osmany Paredes and bassist Eliseo Borrero are proof positive that there is no substitute for allowing the artists to speak for themselves. For example, during the course of an interview with saxophonist Miguel Zenón I inquired about the significance of one particular track on his latest recording ("Looking Forward"). The track was titled, "J.S.B." When Miguel commented that J. S. B. are the initials of Johanne Sebastian Bach (one of his favorite musicians) I was taken aback. Who knew?

I learned quickly that often times there are misconceptions between what the artists are attempting to express and how the music is perceived by the listener.

Which brings me to the interview with songstress, Adela Dalto. Adela and I communicated (via e-mail) over the course of a month or so. It was through these communiques that I learned of Adela's involvement with her all-female band, that she plays the guitar (she was practicing "Santana licks" for the Mexican Day Parade) and about her composition entitled, "Mujer Latina," which has become an anthem, of sorts, for Latinas.

In short, I learned that Adela Dalto is a woman of many talents. In addition to her vocal talents, Adela is a composer, arranger, producer and business woman. Moreover, Adela is not shy about stating her views when the occasion calls for it. Adela is a perfectionist who consistently strives for excellence in everything she does.

Thank you Adela for making beautiful music. As they say in the business, "break a leg!"

Hasta La Próxima!  
Thomas Peña  
Co-Editor

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