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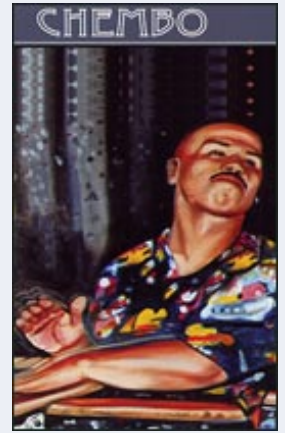
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Conversation with Chembo Corniel



Posted on June 15, 2004



Wilson "Chembo" Corniel, Jr. was born in Manhattan on November 22, 1953 of proud Puerto Rican parents. Chembo was raised in the humble streets of Red Hook, Brooklyn. It was during these years, as a quick-witted youngster, that he had the privilege and honor to study with such percussion luminaries as: Tommy Lopez Sr., "Little Ray" Romero, Louis Bauzo and Cachete Maldonado. Chembo honed his skills at The Harbor Conservatory for the Performing Arts in New York, and also at the prestigious La Escuela Nacional de Arte in Havana, Cuba under the direction of the great Chucho Valdés. His intense studies with such legends noted above channeled his energy onto a path where Wilson "Chembo" Corniel has now created a reputation for himself among musicians and the public. Today, he is considered as one of the best hard-hitting, versatile percussionists around.

Chembo teaches percussion to students at the SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Music, and leads numerous clinics throughout the United States where he brings awareness to others of the rich Afro-Caribbean traditions. Among his credits, Chembo was chosen to create his own instructional DVD called, "An Introduction to Hand Percussion: Volume I—Congas". It was released in December of 2000 and with distribution by Warner Brothers it has been a success. He's been a vital endorser of Latin Percussion instruments since 1982 as he is currently for Remo drum heads and Istanbul cymbals. His touring credits are as long as his performing credits. Chembo has toured with many major artists throughout Europe, Asia, North & South America, and the Caribbean. Television credits include an appearance on the "Bill Cosby Show" and a recurring recording gig on Nickelodeon's children show, "Dora the Explorer". Chembo continues to perform and/or record with many artists of different genres. He is currently concentrating on leading his own Latin Jazz sextet, "Chembo & Grupo Chaworo". This is a well-balanced Latin Jazz group that incorporates many rich traditions, such as writer Aurora Flores states, " a sprinkling of be-bop, a touch of swing with a dollop of bomba, rumba, tango and danzón topped with 'un chin' de charanga."

Just recently, we learned that "Portrait in Rhythms" had made it into the pre-selection for the coming Latin Jazz Grammy Award. Congratulations Chembo!

Interview with Wilson "Chembo" Corniel

Portrait In Rhythms (Chemboro Records - 2004) **by Tomas Peña**

Congratulations on Portrait in Rhythms. A very impressive debut recording. I understand your CD release party (at Satalla) was one of the musical events of the year.

My CD release party was one of the highlights of my career. I am grateful to all of my friends and the musicians who participated in the event.

You have been on the music scene for quite awhile. Describe the chain of events that led up to your latest project.

I have been on the music scene for over 30 years. I have recorded and/or performed with just about everyone in New York (salsa, Latin, jazz, pop, etc). I decided to record an album that shows the different styles I play. Also to capture (on disc) the music I love so much, Latin jazz.

What does "Chaworo" mean? What is the significance of the band's name?

Technically, "Chaworo" are the bells that are strapped around the Batá (Iya) drum (the largest of the three Batá drums).

Co-Editors note: The Batá drums are double-headed hourglass-shaped sacred drums that are used in sacred ceremonies.

Describe your latest project - Portrait in Rhythms.

My new recording features a wide variety of tunes and rhythms (Latin jazz, Bomba, Plena, Danson, Tango, 6/8 Bata toques, straight ahead jazz, R & B, etc). Together, they form a Portrait in Rhythms.

Your music has been described as: "New York Latin Jazz, Afro-Caribbean Jazz with nods to Jerry Gonzalez & Fort Apache, Chucho Valdez and Paquito D' Rivera." How do you describe your music?

My music is straight up in your face Latin jazz!

Why this particular repertoire?

In a nutshell, the repertoire was created by some of the most talented people in the business. Each one of them contributed their soul and imagination to this project. All the musicians are extremely talented and professional. I am grateful to all of them.

Would I be correct in saying that the late, great Mongo Santamaria influenced you? Tell me about your homage to Mongo, titled: Adios Mongo.

I met Mongo Santamaria through a close friend (and talented percussionist), Steve Thorton. Steve took me to Mongo's apartment in New York around 1992. I was inspired by Mongo's presence and way of being. Adios Mongo is my way of sending a message to Mongo in the language he understands best - the drum.

You assembled an impressive roster of musicians for this recording. Moreover, it is always refreshing to see veterans such as the multi-talented Mario Rivera collaborating with young-lions such as saxophonist Iván Renta. Who are the core members of your band?

The core members are: Iván Renta - saxophone, Vince Cherico - drums, Enrique Hanine - piano, Carlo De-Rosa - bass and myself on congas, Batás and percussion. The personnel

may change from time to time, however, this is my working group.

Independent recordings seem to be norm rather than the exception these days. What prompted you to go the independent route?

After completing this project I shopped it around to a number of the major record labels. The record companies wouldn't even listen to it. They claimed that they weren't signing any new artists. So, I decided to release the album on my own and I am glad I did. An independent recording requires a lot of hard work, patience, devotion and most of all, money. A lot of musicians are taking the independent route these days.

Over the years, the music scene has changed drastically. As an active participant and survivor in the music scene you have witnessed many of these changes first-hand. What is your take on the current music scene? In your opinion, where is all this headed and what is in the future for Latin jazz?

Things have changed (drastically) since the 1970's. Back then there were plenty of clubs. We were doing doubles and triples nightly. Many of the venues are apprehensive (scared) to feature Latin jazz. Also, the radio stations that used to feature Latin jazz, such as WBGO are disappearing. I am currently focusing on performing abroad to survive. My philosophy is I will always have hope no matter what. As long as I am strong I know I can't go wrong!

Great cover-art! Who painted your portrait for the album cover?

The artist that painted my portrait is Raphael Hernández from Puerto Rico and New York City. My daughter Andrea Corniel had a hand in designing the rest of the CD.

You teach percussion to students at the SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Music and lead numerous clinics throughout the United States. In addition, you have your own instructional DVD called, "An Introduction to Hand Percussion: Volume 1 (Warner Brothers)." You also endorse a number of percussion instruments (LP, Remo, Istanbul cymbals, etc). How do you do it all?

In short, it has taken me years to get a handle on my career. Somehow, I manage!

What is in your CD Player (or portable device) as we speak?

Some of the artists that I am currently listening to are: Yoruba Andabo, Ilu Ana, Lázaro Ros, Emiliano Salvador, AfroCuba (Latin jazz group and rumba group), the Chucho Valdés Quartet, Klimax, Chano Domínguez, Susana Baca, Jerry González and the Fort Apache band and Tony Martínez.

Where can your recording be purchased?

On the web: www.cdbaby.com, www.descarga.com and www.oasissalsero.com (where you can listen to the recording as well).

Chembo, thank you for chatting with me and best of luck on your debut recording with Grupo Chaworo.

Tomas Peña - Co-Editor
Latin Jazz Network
June 2004

For more information about Chembo Corniel visit: www.chembocorniel.com



CHEMBO CORNIEL - PORTRAIT IN RHYTHMS
2004 Chemboró Records

Musicians

Wilson "Chembo" Corniel: tumbadoras, quinto, bongó, batá, chekere, guataca, clave, misc. percussion
Iván Renta: tenor saxophone
Vince Cherico: drums
Tino Derado: piano and accordion
Yunior Terry: acoustic bass

Invited Guests

Steve Wilson: alto and soprano saxophones
Carla Cook: vocal on "After the Dance"
Ray Vega: trumpet, flugelhorn
Mario Rivera: soprano sax and flute
John Walsh: trumpet
Rubén Rodríguez: acoustic and electric bass
Carlos Gómez: batá (iya)
Chris "Fatoye" Theberge: batá (itotele)
Lisa María Salb: orisha singer
David Oquendo: orisha singer
Willy Torres: guira

Tracks: (click on titles to listen)

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Chemboró | 6. Inocencia |
| 2. The Age of Pisces | 7. Primera Rumba |
| 3. Café Mario | 8. After the Dance |
| 4. Papillon | 9. Adiós Mongo |
| 5. Nuevo Bieke | 10. Nadya |



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