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A Conversation with drummer, composer, arranger Dafnis Prieto
by Tomas Peña

TP: Not much has been written about your formative years in Santa Clara, Cuba. What was it like growing up in that environment?

DP: I grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood. Music was everywhere; on the radio and in the streets. From my home I could hear the comparsas rehearsing for the carnivals just a few blocks away. Sometimes the comparsas would rehearse right in front of my house . . .

TP: How old were you then?

DP: I was six or seven years old. Whenever the comparsas used to rehearse in front of my house my mother would get nervous because she knew I was about to get lost (laughter). I would always find a way to sneak out of the house and follow the comparsas.

Also, during the same period, I started going to a social club that taught music. It was there that I learned the basic Cuban rhythms - son, rumba and guaguanco. I started out as a guitarist . . .

TP: Really, what kind of guitar?

DP: The Spanish guitar. It's funny the way things turned out. There were six guitar students. At one point the professor decided to start a band and we each were told to pick out a different instrument. I picked the bongos. At one of our performances the guy who played the clave didn't show up. Intuitively, I started playing the clave (by mouth) while playing the bongos. After the performance, the professor urged my mother to enroll me in the school of fine arts. That is when I began to take drumming seriously.

TP: You developed an affinity for avant garde jazz at an early age. What prompted your interest in avant garde jazz?

DP: When I was about 14 or 15 years old I went to Havana to obtain my formal

education. In Havana I had access to a lot of information and I started listening to Chick Corea and John Coltrane. In fact, I used to listen to John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" just about every day. I also started listening to Indian music because I had heard that there was a relationship between Coltrane's music and Indian music. Around that time I also started listening to Ornette Coleman.

For my graduation ceremony I put a group together and we performed an avant garde piece that I composed. The group consisted of four horns, a bass and me on the traps, kettle drums and whistle. It was kind of a revolutionary concept for its time.

TP: How was the piece received?

DP: Good, people really liked it, however, I don't think they really understood where I was coming from. They had no idea that I had been listening to Coltrane and Ornette Coleman. None the less, It was a lot of fun to have the freedom to compose and perform the piece. Some of the guys in the group are still playing. Two of the guys played with Irakere.

TP: You have stated that there was "nowhere to go" with your music in Cuba. Is that one of the reasons you decided to come to the United States?

DP: Suffice it to say I was feeling a bit suffocated, musically speaking. The only groups I was playing with at the time were "Columna B" and Bobby Carcasses. It was fun but I was interested in doing more progressive material. There is no avant garde scene in Cuba. Moreover, there is no way to make a living as a musician there. To survive you have to travel out of Cuba, make money (American dollars) and spend it in Cuba. Besides, I was living like a tourist in Havana. All of my family was in Santa Clara.

TP: At some point you became involved with Jane Bunnett & the Spirits of Havana which led to trips to Canada and the U. S.

DP: I got involved with Jane Bunnett and traveled to Canada a bunch of times. However, my decision to leave Cuba once and for all occurred when "Columna B" traveled to Spain. My wife Judith, who is a professional dancer, had a two year contract to perform in Barcelona, Spain. I decided then and there that I would not return to Cuba. I stayed in Spain for one year. Then Jane Bunnett invited me to tour with her in Canada and the U.S. During that time I applied for a visa to return to Barcelona and my request was denied. The situation forced me to consider living in New York. I had visited New York with "Columna B" and we performed at the Knitting Factory and the Zinc Bar . . .

TP: I am sorry I missed that. "Columna B" is one of my favorite bands from that time period. What year was that?

DP: 1996. Those were some fun times . . .

TP: I would like to digress for a moment and inquire about "Columna B." Who were the original members? Any possibility of a reunion and/or a recording?

DP: I would like that. "Columna B" had a very revolutionary sound. The original members were myself, Roberto Carcasses, Yosvany Terry and Descemer Bueno. The original Columna B was originally a quartet. However, we featured special guests such as Don Pancho Terry and Miguel Anga. The first album was recorded in Barcelona, Spain, however the album is currently unavailable.

TP: That is too bad.

DP: Getting back to New York. At first, I didn't like living in New York at all.

TP: It is understandable. You originally hail from a small town . . .

DP: Yes, at the time even Havana was a bit too much for me. However, it's funny the way things turned out. I remember saying to myself, "New York is the last place I want to live." Three years later I was not only living in New York but enjoying it (laughter).

TP: Despite your feelings, you can not deny the fact that you were well received here . . .

DP: Yes, that's true. In the end I am really glad that I made the decision to live in New York.

TP: As New York Times journalist Ben Ratliff said, the timing of your arrival was nothing short of perfect. Keep in mind that there are musicians who come to New York and don't enjoy the success you did. You have been in demand since you arrived.

DP: I always felt like something was pushing me to come to New York so I just went with the flow. I also felt that it was time for me to make some important decisions about my career.

TP: How do you feel about New York these days?

DP: I feel good. I am doing what I like to do. I am playing with people I admire. I am performing avant garde jazz, straight ahead jazz, Latin music, classical music. All in all, living in New York has been a very good experience.

TP: Let's talk about your drumming. Eddie Palmieri referred to you as "a rhythmic stimulus who comprehends the two most incredibly difficult rhythmic genres, Cuban (Latin) music and jazz." What is your take on that statement? What is the difference between drumming in a jazz context and in a Cuban (Latin) context?

DP: In my opinion, it is mostly about attitude. I have all of the rhythms internalized. When I play, I use different methods to motivate myself. For example, when I think of swing I think of Tony Williams, Jeff Tain Watts and Jack De Johnette. However, for me there is no difference between the two. To reiterate, it is all about one's attitude.

TP: That makes you the exception to the rule. There are drummers out there who are highly proficient in one area yet weak in another. . .

DP: Perhaps they feel more comfortable playing in a certain context. I don't feel that way.

TP: Obviously, you have internalized the rhythms to a degree where they have become second nature. How do you feel when you hear it said that you are "revolutionizing the art of drumming?" Do you feel that you are revolutionizing the art of drumming?

DP: Let me put it this way, I worked something out and this is the consequence of my actions. I always wanted to do something else with the drums. I never wanted to imitate anyone. I wanted to take the drums to another level. You know, as a composer I make it my business to listen to all types of music. That gives me a lot of different strategies to work with when I am in front of the drum set. I guess whatever you said about revolutionizing the art of drumming is the consequence of what I have been working out over the years. There is nothing that comes to you and says "this is what you are going to be." You have to work for it and decide how you want to sound. It's a conscious choice not to be like anyone else. After all, life is about making choices. For example, do you want to smoke or not? Do you want to have a drink or not? Do you want to go out or not? It's a matter of making choices and deciding what you want to do.

TP: How important has the Jazz Gallery been in the development of your career?

DP: It has been one of the most important, if not the most important place in New York for me. It is a venue that has always opened its doors to me and given me the artistic freedom to do whatever it is I want to do.

TP: The Jazz Gallery and a hand full of other small venues are the exceptions to the rule.

DP: You know how it is with most jazz clubs. It's all about money.

TP: Not so when it comes to the Jazz Gallery. It steadfastly remains the exception to the rule. On another note, let's talk your debut recording as a leader, "About the Monks."

DP: "About the Monks" is dedicated to the many people and artists who have inspired my soul. In my own way of thinking, they are Monks. Meaning, they are dedicated, have discipline, and are giving persons with a lot of willpower and a mission in life."

TP: On first listen, I observed that this is not just another run-of-the-mill commercial recording. Obviously, Zoho Records gave you total artistic freedom. I should also mention that the repertoire is all original compositions, penned by you. Let's go through the tracks. About the Monks (track #1) is self-explanatory. How about (track #2) Tumba Francesa?

DP: The idea comes from Tumba Francesa. French/Haitian percussion with voices. This is the music that emigrated to the eastern part of Cuba from Haiti. I was listening to this tune where there was singing on top of the rhythm. So I actually grabbed some of those melodies and arranged them in a different rhythmic structure.

TP: I noticed that your music goes through a lot of rhythmic changes (sections). Moreover, the arrangements are very complex. How about (track #3) Ironico Arlequin?

DP: (Laughs) Before I go any further, I want to mention two artists who have had a great influence on me as a composer: Hermeto Pascoal and Egberto Gismonti. I was introduced to the music of Pascoal and Gismonti by Carlos Maza, a Chilean piano player who lives in Cuba. He was into the avant garde scene and was combining avant garde jazz with Latin American rhythms. You cannot imagine what it's like when you only know one color and all of a sudden you see/hear another color! You keep wondering how it could be possible that something could be so different. Listening to Coltrane, Ornette, Miles and Chick Corea, then listening to Pascoal and Gismonti. It was completely different from anything I had ever heard before. Pascoal and Gismonti really inspired me. At the time my dream was to perform with them. In fact, I memorized all of their tunes by heart . . .

TP: Have you ever had the pleasure of performing with Hermeto Pascoal or Egberto Gismonti?

DP: Not yet. I spoke with Hermeto three months ago. I was playing with Steve Coleman in Brazil and we performed a double-bill. Pascoal is a lovely guy. We are in contact.

TP: Back to Ironico Arlequin . . .

DP: It's very Latin because it includes cascara and clave. It has kind of a tumbao feel inside then it opens up. However, I prefer not to stay in the typical Latin mode . . .

TP: Danzon Santa Clara (track #4) is a homage to your home, Santa Clara, Cuba. How about (track #5) On and on?

DP: This tune has various sections. It reminds me of people you meet that never stop. It could be in a good way or a bad way but they never stop having something to say. The

tune starts out one way then goes in another direction. The solo section is harmonically related but not rhythmically related.

TP: Mechanical Movement (track #7)?

DP: The tune is dedicated to my wife, Judith, who is a professional dancer. I composed this music for a dance piece. I started writing the tune and as fate would have it there was a composer's competition in Spain. I submitted the piece and it won an award. One of the guys who influenced me to write this type of material is Henry Threadgill. It is very polyphonic, one melody against the other, sort of contrapunto.

TP: Interrupted Question (track #8)?

DP: Interrupted Question and Tumba Francesa are two of my earliest compositions. Interrupted Question revolves around the interruption of ideas. The tone goes in one direction, is interrupted, then goes in another direction.

TP: How about Conga En Ti (track #9). I am really enjoying this one . . .

DP: It is all me. I over dubbed the percussion, played the keyboards, the voices are all mine, I also play the recorder.

TP: What about the band members, what did each musician bring to the table?

DP: I got to know Luis Perdomo and Hans through Yosvany Terry. They have the ability to interpret my music. They can play anything: swing, Latin, straight-ahead jazz.

TP: You guys seem to think out of the box and ahead of your time. However, I am not so sure that the general public has caught up with you musically speaking . . .

DP: It is nothing new. We saw this same phenomenon with Charlie Parker and John Coltrane. Their music was misunderstood. Musicians have the opportunity to educate the public and that is what they should be doing. However, we need the media to help us educate the public as well. What's happening now is that people seem to be getting more ignorant about what is going on in the world . . .

TP: Do you have any words of wisdom for aspiring drummers?

DP: Yes. You always see people that inspire you to play. However, you have to see yourself there as well. In other words, you have to visualize and do a lot of work in your head. Your head is what gives you the optimism and the point-of-view to make it. If you feel that drumming is your passion then do it. With respect to mastering the various rhythms, the rhythms in and of themselves mean nothing. The drummer is the one who gives meaning to the rhythms. For example, clave in and of itself is just clave. It's the person who plays the clave that breathes life into it. I have seen people play "dead clave" (laughter). So the question is, what do you want to do after you learn a rhythm? In order to understand rhythm you have to internalize it. The meaning of playing swing is to swing. The meaning of clave is to play with the clave. It's an attitude. That is the essence of music. I listen to folk music from Asia, Africa, Indonesia and various parts of the globe. When I listen, I attempt to capture the essence of what the musicians are trying to do. The rhythm is a way to say something but it's how you interpret the rhythms that make the difference.

TP: Any up and coming drummers on the music scene that grab your attention?

DP: There are a lot of young drummers out there. I like Eric Harlem, he is very musical and I like his attitude. Also, Roy Haynes' nephew, Marcus Gilmore. He is performing locally.

TP: What kind of music are you listening to at home?

DP: Man, that is a hard one. Whenever I can, I listen to Silvio Rodriguez. I also like Caetano Veloso (the old stuff) and Hermeto Pascoal. I also listen to folk music: African, Indonesian and Indian, for professional purposes. I have a bunch of tapes that I listen to . . .

TP: "About The Monks" is currently due to be released in February 2005. The CD release party will be held at the Jazz Gallery on February 18th and 19th. Can the CD be purchased anywhere prior to its release?

DP: Yes, the CD is available through my website: www.dafnisprieto.com

TP: What is on the agenda for Dafnis Prieto?

DP: I am going to Uruguay with Michel Camilo . . .

TP: I caught you with Michel and Charlie Flores earlier this year at Lincoln Center. Great show.

DP: I just started learning Michel's music. The performance at Lincoln Center was my third gig with Michel.

TP: Will you be recording with Michel in the future?

DP: We don't have any plans to record, however, we will be performing at the Blue Note (New York) in April (2005). Also, I will be performing with Don Byron at Symphony Space, followed by a recording with Conjure (Kip Hanrahan). It's going to be a drummer's delight: Horacio El Negro Hernandez, Robby Ameen, Richie Flores, Milton Cardona and myself.

TP: Sounds like it is going to be reminiscent of the "Deep Rumba" series. On a personal note, do you ever get back to Cuba at all. If so, how do you feel when you go home?

DP: I visited Cuba in May. I went there to introduce Lucian (my son) to my mother. I have no desire to live in Cuba, however, I enjoy visiting, seeing my friends and the natural beauty of Cuba.

TP: Do your relatives and friends have any idea of what you have accomplished in the U. S.?

DP: The people in my neighborhood still call me "Kiki" (a nickname - laughter). Actually, I go to Cuba to visit my mom. One of the things that I am happy and proud of is the fact that I am my mother's only son and I understand what she feels. Meaning, the price that we are both paying for my being here. I make every effort to demonstrate to her that I am doing something worthy with my life. I am all my mother has so there has to be a good reason for my being here. I think she understands.

TP: Would your mother would ever consider living in the U.S.?

DP: She has an upcoming interview for a visa in January. I want to bring her here for a little bit and show her around. Judith's mom came here last year. As for living here, probably not.

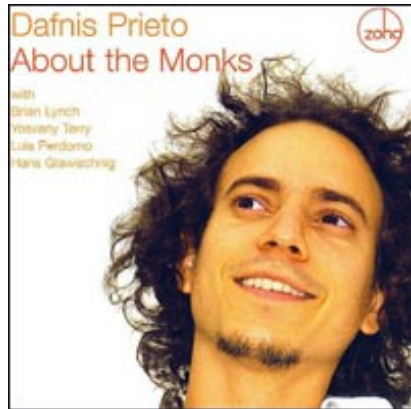
TP: So getting back to 2004, it's been a good one, no?

DP: Yes, it's been a good year. I am very happy about my new album.

TP: Dafnis, it's been a pleasure speaking to you. Best of luck with your new recording.

Contact Dafnis Prieto at: www.dafnisprieto.com

Tomas Peña - Co-Editor
Latin Jazz Network
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DAFNIS PRIETO - ABOUT THE MONKS
2005 ZOHO Music

DAFNIS PRIETO: drums on tracks 1-8; percussion on tracks 1, 4, 9; melodica on track 5; keyboard and vocals on track 9.

BRIAN LYNCH: trumpet on tracks 1, 2, 5, 8; flugelhorn on track 4.

YOSVANY TERRY: alto sax on track 1; tenor sax on tracks 2, 5, 8; soprano sax on track 4; chekere on 6.

LUIS PERDOMO: acoustic piano on tracks 1-5, 7, 8; Fender Rhodes on track 6.

HANS GLAWISHNIG: acoustic bass guitar on tracks 1-8.

ILMAR GAVILAN: violin on track 7.

Tracks: (click on titles to listen)

1. **About The Monks**
2. **Tumba Francesa**
3. **Ironico Arlequin**
4. **Danzon Santa Clara**
5. **On And On**
6. **Trio Absolute**
7. **Mechanical Mouvement**
8. **Interrupted Question**
9. **Conga En Ti**



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