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Jerry González - European Dream



Interview by Pablo Larraguibel. Late fall, 2001, at the Berlin Café, Madrid, Spain. Translated with the precious help of Richard John Cadena and Luis Moreno.

Entrevista original en Español: www.anapapaya.com

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The Berlin Café, located in the central Plaza de El Callao, has become a point of reference in Madrid's musical life, a few years after it opened. Their program ranges from salsa to jazz, and of course, Latin jazz. There, Jerry González has spent several of his nights during his new life in Madrid. Since the spring of 2001, when he toured the peninsula with the Fort Apache Band while promoting the movie Calle 54, he left his parents' residence in San Juan (Puerto Rico), where he had relocated from his native New York. Now, he stays for long periods in Spain's capital.

During one of his performances at the Berlin Café at the end of fall 2001, in between sets somewhere between 1 and 2 in the morning, with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, this bilingual conversation took place and strolled along a musical street in the Berlin kitchen. The band was waiting for our conversation to end. As he was about to come out for the second set, Jerry, with his trumpet in hand, concludes: "I feel lucky to be here man because all the people I have met here have opened up their hearts to me because they wanted to ."

Cooking at the Berlin Café

I remember the first time I came to Germany with Tito Puente. The popularity reached by this music here caught my attention. Twenty thousand Germans listening to us! And after more than 20 years since that time, I'm pleased to have found the same receptivity.

I wasn't doing anything in New York. I think very few interesting things are happening there, musically speaking. In any case, I felt I was working for nothing. So, since long ago, I was saying to myself : "Let's go to Germany, or wherever. Twenty thousand folks watching you. Then you start playing 'Oye Como Va' and they flip out. So, what the fuck are you doing here, man? We have to go back there'."

Discography



CD: Ya Yo Me Curé (1979)

Audio sample: **CARAVAN**

I was always interested in coming to Europe, but I didn't have the necessary connections to set things up. When the LP "Ya Yo Me curé" was released in 1980, the producer and the people at Enja Records gave me some help.

One day while I was relaxing at home in my apartment in the Bronx, some folks knocked my door and invited me to perform at the 1982 Berlin Jazz Festival. They wanted to record a CD from the concert. That was the first time I led a group on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. It was even recorded for TV. I've never seen that video. I'd like to...

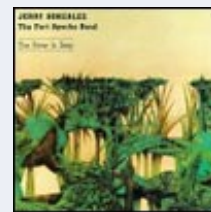
After that, years went by and I never came back to Europe. Although I was offered a tour, I had to turn it down because I wasn't getting what I thought was fair. I couldn't bring 14 musicians paying them less than what they were making in New York. I was disappointed because I really wanted to do it. Oh well! They shit in their pants when I told them it was \$150.00 (US) per week!

Rumba Para Monk

Nothing happened from 1982 to 1989. A couple of things here and there at small places, playing in a trio or quartet; me, Andy (González), Larry (Willis), Steve (Berríos)... And one day, I got a gig for the first time at "Fat Tuesday", 3rd Ave. & 18th St. Big room, you know?, I was there for a whole week. Wow! I was getting recognition for the first time in New York. So, I took John Stubblefield, Papo Vázquez, Nicky Marrero, Edgardo Miranda, Steve Berríos, Andy, Larry Willis... there were about nine of us. That week, the guy who later produced the CD came to see us. During the break he approached me and said, "listen, this has to be recorded". I replied, "When? I will be ready tomorrow".

When we were looking for songs for the CD, we broke into playing Thelonius Monk and we said, "let's do a tribute to Thelonius Monk". We were rehearsing Jackie-Ing and at that moment Rumba para Monk was born. "Let's work out the songs and put some timba into this thing".

The last day at "Fat Tuesday" we called it the Saxes' Night. John Stublefield was there, Willie Williams and others, and even Carl Jefferson showed up like a ghost –we went to college together, and we were in a big band, the New York College of Music Jazz Ensemble. We toured and Carl and I used to play everything, six nights a week, man. We played Top 40, soul, funk. Me, Carl and René McLean, Jacky



CD: The River is Deep (1982)

Audio sample:
BEBOP



CD: Rumba Para Monk (1988)

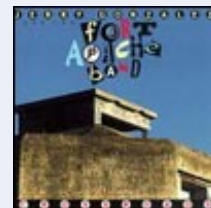
Audio sample:
NUTTY



CD: Obatalá (1988)

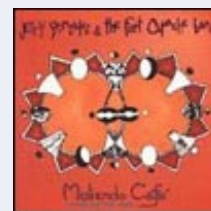


CD: Earth Dance (1990)



CD: Crossroads (1994)

Audio sample:
THELINGUS



CD: Moliendo Café (1995)

Audio sample:
VERDAD AMARGA



CD: Pensativo (1995)

Audio sample:
MIDNIGHT TRAIN



CD: Fire Dance (1996)

Audio sample:
ELEGUA

CD's available at [AMAZON.COM](https://www.amazon.com)

Participated in:

Son and a horn section. Those days at "Fat Tuesday" got us off and running somewhat, and some CDs came out in the following years. It was good work.

From San Juan to Barajas

Well, after the movie, I didn't know what was going to happen here. We made Calle 54, which is an honor for me to be included in that project because, you know, I'm the badass who always gets left behind. You know, "this guy is a crazy motherfucker" and that is how it works out.

You know, Gloria Estefan and all those people down in Miami with their clan, they throw the Latin Jazz awards, right? And they don't call me. What the fuck is that? They don't know what Latin Jazz is then. You know, if Arturo Sandoval is Latin Jazz, kiss my ass! He is just learning how to play jazz, you know?

The people from Miami are a mafia, man. They're putting their own image on the thing. I don't fit into that image. Besides, everytime we have played in Miami, the crowd you expect to come see the concert does not show up. They prefer to see Willie Colón, Celia Cruz or something like that. And that's cool! But you know, it's a specific gourmet crowd that comes to see my shit. You know what I mean.

The Club or the Dance Hall

A club is always more intimate. The audience is right in your face, and the people are actually watching you live. They can almost touch you. That's the big difference. At big concerts, you are more distant. It's like being at a sports arena watching the baseball players. But, both ways are all right. Either way, it's cool, although I've always liked to play at clubs live, with the people right there. Those have been my best experiences.

However, as a spectator, I find some concerts are brilliant and very influential to me. I can't deny that fact. Sometimes you feel that what you're seeing is the best thing ever happened to you. You are convinced it's the best thing you have listened to in the whole world. I had never seen Max Roach doing a solo on the drums, just him, by himself. Three hours, man ! Music. A lo largo de todo el asunto, man. The whole thing, man. He played a concert for drums, which sounds a bit ridiculous, but after seeing him... I said to myself, "this is the best drummer of the world". I couldn't believe it. Él solo, man. That was a test of... genius, you know? Just hit up there by himself, and be able to create and compose very logical and nice, evolutionary things, man, just kept getting bigger and bigger and more intense.

Well, at concerts you can make good money. At clubs you only make enough to buy cigarettes, gas... the money lasts perhaps for one week.

Calle 54

I'm sure that all the movie's potential hasn't come out yet. A lot of people have not seen it.

I'm not sure the distribution company is doing a good job in United States. We were supposed to play with the Fort Apache Band for the release in Puerto Rico, but the show was cancelled and only the movie was premiered. And they didn't say anything! It was only shown for 2 weeks, and I suppose that around 80% of the musicians from the



Deep Rumba
CD: This Night
Becomes a Rumba
(1998)

Audio sample:
**THE BRONX WITH
PALM TREES**



CD: Calle 54 -
Soundtrack (2000)

Audio sample:
EARTH DANCE



Diego El Cigala
CD: Corren Tiempos
de Alegría (2001)

Audio sample:
GITANOS DE LA CAVA

island didn't have the chance to see it. I said to my mother "make sure you go, 'cause it's on for two weeks". That movie should run for a whole year in Puerto Rico. That could bring about a lot of things.

Well, over here it was shown at good movie theaters for a longer period. I hadn't realized what could happen until I came to Spain. We came to play a short time after the movie had been released. We did 6 cities: Barcelona, Madrid, Zaragoza, Granada... The Palau in Barcelona was wonderful. That was the best job we did during that tour. It was magic, the fucking shit, because of the sound in that place. It was something quite good.

The Last Night in Madrid

The last concert of the tour was in Madrid. We were very tired. That was the last gig and the piano was getting flat. It was difficult to play that concert and afterwards, I didn't feel happy. I felt depressed. That was the worst gig we played, but the people gave us a standing ovation. I didn't get it. I thought we sounded like shit, but the people were there pouring their hearts out to us. Man; I was freaking out.

Bebo Valdés was there. It was the first time he had seen us live and direct. He already knew my brother Andy somewhat, but he hadn't heard me very much. When we finished, he came up and said to us: "Mucho aché, coño" (Right on, Bro), and he kept talking to me. Talking about my music! To be recognized by people like those giants, like Mario Bauzá, is something very deep and meaningful for a guy, man.

After that, (Fernando) Trueba approached me and introduced me to Javier Limón, Diego El Cigala, and other people who were there. "Well", they asked me. "What are you going to do now?" I told them I was going home the next day. Soon after they asked me why I didn't stay. "I can't" I told them. "I can't pay the hotel and all that..." Then they said, "no problem, you can come with us and make yourself at home. No problem."

So, I decided to stay one week to see what happened. Week after week went by and I've been here six months. I stayed six months, man! I started to gig with Javier and El Cigala, getting to know their music. It was beautiful.

The Flamenco Pirates

We went to the studio, Josele, Piraña and El Cigala, with Javier. All of us were doing our sound checks when Javier says, "Let's do something." OK. So, Piraña and me were doing a drum duet, and then, you know. Me on congas, Piraña on the cajón.

The next day we came back. Javier and Josele were listening to the drumming stuff we'd been doing. They were digging it, they were checking the shit out. They were just freaking by the way it came out, and they understood! They understood, man! Then Josele started playing a riff he made up while listening to the recording. Me on my my congas. And that is how it started: "la la la la, doo doo... alone. So I do my drums: tuc pac pac tuc..." And I fit right in there, and I said OK.

He said, "I've got this idea. You play this," and I said OK. And he played the first thing when we played cajón, just to set up the rhythm. And this is how we found the melodic line for that. And then we started doing the shit up there. It was just me and Josele. The majority of the album is just me and Josele, you know. I'm doing the horn shit, the percussion shit, and he's doing the guitar shit, you know. I taught him some shit ; he taught me some shit, you know. And we did the record, man! When we were in the studio, Piraña wanted to come in and do something. The next afternoon, Javier called Diego el Cigala and recorded the vocals over what we had already done. And then, here we go! The shit started happening, you know!

My Home Here: The Berlin

I'm always hanging around The Berlin Café. This is my home here. I live at Eric's apartment (the Berlin manager). He lets me stay at his place every time I come to Madrid. The people here are so wonderful to me. It's the first time I feel famous.

It's the first time I feel that, like, for real. I can be standing in Gran Vía making a telephone call and ten motherfuckers will come up to me, and say "Yo, man, I saw you in a picture, can I have your autograph, let me shoot a picture with you." And it is like that all the time! I can be in a car, in a taxi at four o'clock in the fucking morning and some people crossing the street, they look in, and they go "Wow", and I go "Hey, hi. How are we doing?". It has happened to me consistently ever since I've been here. When I get to the airport, like when I just get here at the airport, I'm coming out with my bags and shit, and somebody that goes by goes: "Hi Jerry How are we doing?" ¡Coño!, (Man) I'm at home. I feel good, like a motherfucker, man. I get treated well like a motherfucker, man. The respect I've received here has never been given to me anywhere else. And that makes me feel good.

It is different in Puerto Rico. They love me and respect me in a different way, but nobody gives me a gig.

Flamenco and Latin Jazz

This shit is growing up. Definitive, definitive. It is growing. I am wanting to do something with the Fort Apache Band, Josele, Cigala and other people. I need someone to get interested in financing such a project. And I'm thinking of some people who might like to do it.

Man, like is this gonna be impressive in New York? Yeah. They're gonna get fucked up. They're gonna get fucked up by this shit. When I play what I play what I've done here... If the people have sat down to listen to the recording, I've said it, "Yo, check this shit out, man", and they have freaked out. I did a version of Mo's dreams which is a bulería. Just with a cajón, palmita, and horns. And the shit is a motherfucker, man! In fact, listen to it. I've got the recording right here.

Short Biographical Note

Jerry González, born in New York in 1949, is the brother of Andy (González), with whom he has worked closely in both of their musical projects. He developed as a musician at the "High School of Music and Arts" public high school (the same that served as a backdrop for the movie "Fame" by Alan Parker). Conga drummer and trumpet player, Jerry has worked with Dizzy Gillespie, Eddie Palmieri, Grupo Folklórico Experimental Nuevayorquino, George Benson, Paquito D'Rivera, Jorge Dalto, Jaco Pastorius, McCoy Tyner, Patato Valdés, Hilton Ruiz, and David Sánchez among many others. Of course, he has been a member of Conjunto Libre, where he has participated as an active member, since it was formed during the mid-seventies, and as a special invited guest.

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