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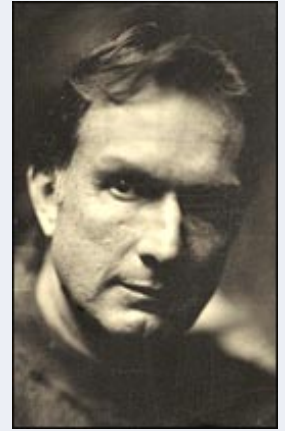
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Conversation with Luis Muñoz

by Danilo Navas

"My love affair with Latin music has been constant from the very beginning. Not only with the "Afro Caribbean" stuff like Fania, Arsenio Rodríguez, Los Muñequitos, Eddie Palmieri or Willie Colón, but also with Violeta Parra, Mercedes Sosa, Milton Nascimento, Gilberto Gil, Silvio Rodríguez, Astor Piazzola... and many other artists, all great, all with their own voice, all Latin..."



Posted on June 5, 2004

Luis Muñoz, composer, arranger and percussionist, was born in San José, Costa Rica. Coming from a very musical family, Luis showed an early interest in the arts and spent his youth performing in Rock and Jazz groups. In 1972 Luis entered the University of Costa Rica where he studied both Architecture and Music. He studied privately at the National Music Conservatory and with the principal flutist of the National Symphony Orchestra. In 1974 Luis emigrated to the United States and there completed his Degree in Music Composition at the University of California, Santa Barbara, under the tutelage of renown British composer Peter Fricker. For the last 30 years Luis Muñoz has written music for educational and sports documentaries, animation films, radio and television jingles, dance and theater. In addition, Muñoz has worked as a music producer and arranger, as well as a percussionist for numerous artists such as Airto Moreira, Etta James, Flora Purim and Jim Messina.

Just recently, Luis released his new CD, entitled simply "VIDA", his best recording to date. We present here an online chat with him about this project and about his music and artistry. Enjoy.

Conversation with Luis Muñoz

You had a great deal of input in the creation of this CD, in all stages of the project. Can you elaborate a little bit?

From the very beginning, I thought of this recording as a "concept" album and as such, I needed to maintain a certain continuity and unity in all aspects of its creation. Musically, I am the composer, arranger and producer of the CD. I also played percussion, some keyboards and designed the CD cover. For the inner sleeve, I used a portrait of my parents and myself taken in 1960. It is the passport photo we used during our trip to Mexico, where I went to have open heart surgery. I was six years old then. I also had a wonderful photographer friend of mine take a new portrait of me. His name is Luther Gerlach, and he is one of the few contemporary photographers still working with Ambro Types, a photo technique of the 1800's. The front cover, a digital image, is the result of a collaboration between three people: Blayne Frantzen, who is a model and PhotoShop artist; Nelly Recchia, who painted the model's naked body, and myself, who took the photograph. The image represents the "Phoenix Raising."

Let's talk about the music. Can you briefly tell us the story behind the songs you included in this production?

There are 10 songs in the CD. It starts with "Mad Bop", an Afro/Latin Jazz piece and ends with "Los Ojos De La Ausencia", a duet for acoustic guitar and marimba, which is the closest thing I have ever done to Costa Rican folkloric music. These songs reflect my journey through life so far, pausing of those elements I consider to be most transcendental: "Mad Bop" is about the fast pace of modern life, and the need to remain in touch with the past, with tradition. "Journey of Saint Augustine", about true friendship. "Carmesi", the color of blood, of life. "Myth and Resurrection" about the ultimate mystery, what happens to the soul, the spirit, after the physical body dies. "Palito" about love. "Between Birth and Dying", "Los Ojos de la Ausencia" and "Pasión" are self explanatory.

I usually tour with either a six or a seven piece band, but when it comes to writing, I do not limit myself to the orchestrations that such groups offer. I see the recording process as a separate experience altogether, from playing the music live. However, oftentimes a composition dictates its orchestration from the beginning. Sometimes I write with an specific instrument in mind. Case in point, on this CD, "Journey of Saint Augustine", for the Chromatic harmonica, "Seveveves" for the pedal steel guitar, "Between Birth and Dying", for the accordion or bandoneon. Stylistically, I have no limitations neither. The entire spectrum of Latin Music feels like a very natural and comfortable medium for me to work with, as well as the Classical and Jazz idioms. For example, "Mercedes en Reposo" has elements of a Venezuelan "Joropo". "Carmesi" is based on a Dominican merengue. "Pasión" is a Brazilian Bossa Nova. "Mad Bop", as the title says, is influenced by Be Bop. "Between Birth and Dying" has an undeniable Astor Piazzola influence.

Tell us about the musicians who participated in this recording.

Most tracks were performed by Chris Judge on acoustic guitar, Randy Tico (Airtó Moreira) on electric bass, Nico Abondolo on acoustic bass, Adam Asarnow and myself on piano, Charlie Bisharat (Strunz & Farah) on violin, Ron Kalina (Linda Ronstadt), on chromatic harmonica, Tom Buckner on bass clarinet and saxophones, Jonathan Dane and Adolfo Acosta (Tower of Power) on trumpets, Kevin Winard (Sergio Mendez) and myself on percussion, Brian Mann (Larry Carlton), on accordion and Bill Flores on pedal steel guitar.

The song "Pasión" has an interesting story. I had recorded an instrumental version of it in my previous CD "Compassion," but I wanted to do a vocal version. I started contacting poets and songwriters I admire, to see if someone would be interested in writing words. I sent Rómulo Castro, whom I have never met in person, an e-mail. He is a Panamanian singer/songwriter, who has also won several Grammys with Rubén Blades. They collaborated in Rubén's last three CDs: "La Rosa de los Vientos", "Tiempos" and "Mundo". Long story short, he liked my music and a few months later he sent me the beautiful poem that became the lyrics to "Pasión". Romulo also recorded a version of the song in Europe, and included it in his new CD "Travesías". My version is actually sung beautifully by Teka Pentiriche, a singer from Brazil. Ms. Jana Anderson, who tours with Don Henley and Fleetwood Mac among others, did the background vocals. I must say it was pure joy working with every one of them. Thank you guys!

While doing this CD, you went through difficult times in your personal life. Can you expand on this topic?

I parted ways with my previous record label in the year 2000. I started writing material for a new recording immediately after that. I wanted to go full circle back to Costa Rica, to record with old friends and musicians I hadn't played with in years. I went ahead and contacted whom I considered to be the greatest musicians in the country: the trio Editus and the "Sexteto de Jazz Latino," all of them members of Rubén Blades' group. However, just when I was getting ready to go into the studio, I was hit by two very difficult situations. Fifteen years ago, my only brother Julio was struck by a terminal neurological disease named Shy Dragger's Syndrome. My brother's health suddenly took a turn for the worse and at the very same time, to the day, I found out that my wife needed open heart surgery. I was faced with having to choose between spending time with my brother during

his last days, or staying with my wife during her surgery. Needless to say, that was a life changing experience.

My brother passed away and my wife had surgery. She is very healthy now. After that happened, I ended up scratching all the material that I had written before, since it no longer represented where and who I was. Inspired by that experience, and with a new perspective on both, life and death fresh in my heart, I went ahead and wrote brand new music. I found a beautiful line in a poem by T. S. Elliot that became my "mantra" during that process. It remained glued to my studio wall, in huge letters, for almost 3 years, until the CD was released. It reads: " The Dreamcrossed Twilight Between Birth and Dying."

Tell us about your beginnings as an artist. When did you realize you wanted to become a musician? Why did you choose drums as your main instrument?

I was born and raised in San José, Costa Rica. My father had 17 brothers and sisters and each one played a musical instrument. They used to gather on Sundays after Mass and "jam". There were also some professional musicians in the family. My grandmother's sister and two of her cousins were very well known composers in Costa Rica in the early 1900's. I guess I did not end up becoming a composer by chance. I started playing drums after experiencing the power of Beatlemania and seen Ringo on "A Hard Day's Night". That was it for me!

What are your major artistic, musical influences?

I believe I've been influenced equally by four major musical sources: Latin Music, Classical Music, Rock and Jazz. My first musical recollections are of my father playing Stravinsky, Beethoven and Debussy records, while at the same time, my mother would listen to people like Daniel Santos, Agustín Lara and Pérez Prado on the radio. During my early teens I remember dancing to what was popular in Latin music at the time. I was not aware of the name of the artists playing the songs just the titles or part of the lyrics: "Mariposas amarillas, Mauricio Babilonia", "La Hiedra", "Virgen Negra", "El negrito del Batey", " Apágame la vela, María" "María Bonita", "Sabor a mí", etc.

Rock and Roll music was also present in my childhood, as much as Latin music was. My teen-age cousins had records by Little Richard and Elvis. However, the winter of 1967 was a turning point for me musically. A friend of my brother was driving his VW van from Boston to Tierra del Fuego. At the time, the Pan-American Highway did not go through the "Tapón de Darién", in the Costa Rican border with Panama, and he had to leave his car with us for six months while he went to South America. Inside the car, he had left the most wonderful collection of Jazz: Miles, Coltrane, Monk, Eric Dolphy, Roland Kirk, Ornette Coleman, Bill Evans, Bobby Timmons, Mingus, Ella, Billie. It was a total eye opener. My musical universe flipped upside down, expanding and suffering a transformation in a matter of days. It wasn't just a piece of music or a recording in particular that changed my world, although "Kind of Blue" "Sgt Pepper", "A Rite of Spring", and "A Love Supreme" were very close to doing it. It was the sudden introduction to a brand new musical idiom. I was 14 years old then.

My love affair with Latin music has been constant from the very beginning. Not only with the "Afro Caribbean" stuff like Fania, Arsenio Rodríguez, Los Muñequitos, Eddie Palmieri or Willie Colón, but also with Violeta Parra, Mercedes Sosa, Milton Nascimento, Gilberto Gil, Silvio Rodríguez, Astor Piazzola, Lucho Gatica, Egberto Gismonti, Hermeto Pascual, Antonio Lauro, Los Tres Ases, Javier Solís, Caetano Veloso, and many other artists, all great, all with their own voice, all Latin. I mean, can you think of a richer musical world than the world of Latin Music? I feel so lucky and privileged to have grown up being a part of it. Recording and playing with Aírto Moreira off and on for several years was also an extremely educational experience.

The influence of Classical music is also prevalent in my compositions (I have a degree in Classical music composition from UC Santa Barbara). I just happen to be a composer who writes mostly Latin music, although not exclusively. That takes us to the concept of the "tradition" as your musical starting point, your spiritual framework, your intellectual and

emotional basis from which all begins to take shape.

What music/artists do you listen to these days?

I only listen to music in the car. As a matter of fact I don't even have a stereo at home, and often I go through periods where I don't listen to music for months. I don't seem to find too many new recordings that excite me. Right now I have in the car "Triángulo", by Michel Camilo, "Alumbramento" by Djavan, Al Green's Greatest Hits. "The Gathering", by the Caribbean Jazz Project. "Social Call", by Betty Carter, "Thrust" by Herbie Hancock and "Malpaís", a wonderful new Costa Rican band.

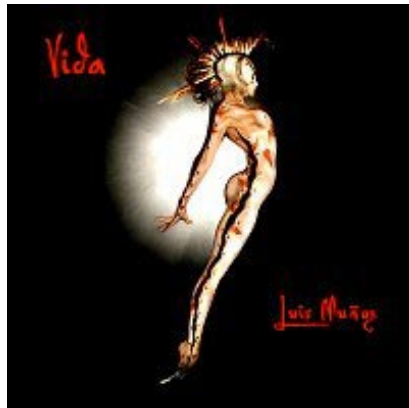
What's in the near future for Luis Muñoz and his music?

I am in the process of putting together a tour for both, the USA and abroad. It will start at the end of the year in Costa Rica and extend on until the summer of 2005. We will have a full schedule posted on my official web site: www.luismunoz.net. I am also re arranging some of my old material to be performed by my new ensemble. This time I will be touring with a seven piece band: piano, acoustic guitar, acoustic bass, drums, percussion, woodwinds and violin. It is too soon to plan my next CD, although I already have two pieces in the can. Perhaps this next time I'll do an all vocal CD. Who knows? Right now, I am just enjoying life, every single second of it!

Thank you Luis for taking the time to speak with Latin Jazz Network. Best of luck with your latest and future endeavors.

Danilo Navas - Editor
Latin Jazz Network
3/6/04

For more information about Luis Muñoz and his music go to:
www.luismunoz.net



LUIS MUÑOZ - VIDA
2004 Pelín Music

All Music composed, arranged and orchestrated by Luis Muñoz, except "Pasión": Music by Luis Muñoz, lyrics by Rómulo Castro. Arranged by Luis Muñoz. Produced by Luis Muñoz.

Musicians:

Luis Muñoz: drums, all percussions, synthesizer, piano, organ, electric piano
Adam Asarnow: piano
Tom Buckner: tenor sax
George Friedenthal: synthesizer
Randy Tico: electric bass
Chris Judge: acoustic guitar
Nico Abondolo: acoustic bass
Charlie Bisharat: violin
Ron Kalina: chromatic harmonica
Tom Buckner: bass clarinet and saxophones
Jonathan Dane and Adolfo Acosta: trumpets
Kevin Winard: percussion
Brian Mann: accordion
Bill Flores: pedal steel guitar

Tracks: (click on titles to listen)

1. **Mad Bop**
2. **Journey of Saint Augustine**
3. **Seveneves**
4. **Between Birth and Dying**
5. **Carmesí**
6. **Myth and Resurrection**
7. **Pasión**
8. **Mercedes en Reposo**
9. **Palito**
10. **Los Ojos de la Ausencia**



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