

## OUR MAN FROM HAVANA: PAQUITO D'RIVERA (1993)

The date: May 6, 1980. The place: the airport in Madrid, Spain. As the passengers board their flight to Stockholm, the man at the end of the line suddenly turns and walks briskly away from the gate. His bag has been checked and he is holding his ticket, but now he seems determined to miss the plane.

On board, the rest of the party notices that he's gone, but it's too late. The door is latched and the plane begins to taxi. "What happened to him?" they wonder with growing alarm. "Maybe he was kidnapped," someone suggests. "Who would want to kidnap me?" Paquito D'Rivera laughs thirteen years later from his table in a Greenwich Village sushi restaurant. He was not a politician or businessman, just a musician. No, he missed that plane because he *wanted* to miss it. His destination was the American embassy. He was going to defect.

You see, Paquito D'Rivera isn't "just" a musician. He is a jazz musician from a country where jazz has been officially disapproved of and discouraged. Too often he suffered the government's wrath simply for playing his music. Finally he felt forced to abandon his beloved Cuba. But despite all that he had to endure, the saxophonist-clarinetist still loves and misses his homeland. "All Cubans are my friends," he declares, "except Fidel." And while he peppers his conversation with frequent jabs at Castro, he tempers his righteous anger with a sense of humor. D'Rivera is not, by nature, a bitter person.

He is, by nature, a musician. Born in Havana on June 4, 1948, D'Rivera began playing a curved soprano saxophone at the age of five. By the next year, he was performing in public, thanks to his first teacher, his father, Tito D'Rivera. Maestro D'Rivera was a classical saxophonist, conductor, and the Havana representative for Selmer instruments until, his son comments, "the man with the beard came to 'liberate' us – to liberate us from everything, even food and freedom." He also was, in D'Rivera's words, "a born teacher."

"My father taught himself how to play the clarinet so he could teach me," he explains. "He never quite got to sound like a true clarinet. He sounded more like a saxophone on it. But he taught me scales, arpeggios, long tones. He taught my brother the rudiments of piano without ever playing it himself. And my father taught me to love all music. The first jazz recording that I remember he played for me was Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall – the famous 1938 concert with Lionel Hampton, Gene Krupa, Harry James, Teddy Wilson. I fell in love with

this music, deeply. I learned all the Goodman solos. Music was like an obsession for me, the only passion in my life.”

A stern taskmaster, Tito D’Rivera insisted that his son practice four hours each day. “If I missed one hour one day, he would tell me that I owed him five hours the next day.” He knew he had a gifted child, a true prodigy, and soon most of Cuba knew it. At the age of seven young Paquito became a Selmer endorser. Posed with his saxophone, his picture appeared in ads that proclaimed, “*Even a child can play a Selmer.*” When he was ten he performed the Weber *Clarinet Concerto No. 2* at the National Theater. He entered the Havana Conservatory at twelve, began working in the orchestra for El Teatro Musical de la Havana at fourteen, and performed as a soloist on television with the Cuban National Symphony at nineteen.

In 1970, after three unhappy years in an army band, D’Rivera became director of the Orquesta de Música Moderna. He wanted the Orquesta to play jazz, but the government squelched his plans. “Everything had to be part of the revolution, ‘music for the proletariat’ and so forth.” Castro, he notes, “felt that jazz was ‘imperialist music’ – still they call it that.”

It was a strange irony, to be sure, since many have argued, and quite rightly, that jazz has not received its due here in United States because it is perceived as “black music” and therefore unworthy of attention and respect. “Extremists are the same son of a bitches on the right or on the left,” D’Rivera comments. “Same bullshit. They have the same ignorance.” In any event, the Orquesta de Música Moderna, under D’Rivera, was reduced to little more than a backup group for singers. He even was paid *not* to perform. Labeled a “suspicious” person, he was watched and harassed. “ ‘Anarchist’ and ‘Paquito Gringo’ they called me.” It was a humiliating experience.

But out of the Orquesta emerged the nucleus for one of the legendary bands of Cuban music, Irakere. Founded in 1973, the eleven-piece ensemble was the brainchild of pianist Jesús “Chucho” Valdés. “I remember when Chucho called me,” D’Rivera recalls, “and said, ‘We want to create a band, but we want to avoid the name *jazz*.’ ” D’Rivera knew all too well what Valdés was getting at. Their new band simply could not have “that four-letter word” in its name. “We had to flee from the term. We saw other musicians getting to go around the world, and we knew it had to do with the word.” They came up with *Irakere*, which means “jungle” in the Yoruban language of West Africa.

Valdés told D’Rivera that they would have to disguise the music, as well. “I said, ‘All my life I’ve been playing this music.’ He said, ‘You can

keep playing whatever you want to play. We will cover it with Afro-Cuban drums.’ So we created that marvelous Irakere sound that revolutionized Latin music around the world by having the wind players play bebop lines backed by the Afro-Cuban thing in the percussion. It was an extraordinary combination.”

He took Irakere’s musical fusion even further than that. “My composition ‘Adagio,’ ” D’Rivera continues proudly, “introduced European classical ideas to the sound. The tune is based on the second movement of the *Clarinet Concerto* by Mozart. ‘This is just an experiment,’ I told them. ‘No one’s going to like this. It’s not pop.’ We played it that night at a nightclub. Well, everyone loved it. That was the first instance of including classical elements in our music – part of why we were singular.”

But as much as they worked to conceal it, Irakere was, in essence, a jazz band, and that ultimately led to trouble with the authorities. “They accused us of being American-oriented individuals,” D’Rivera laughs, “jazz lovers. They were right! We tried to hide it behind a cordon of Afro-Cuban drums. But it was hard for us, very hard, because still some people knew that we liked jazz music. And they were right – I have to ‘confess’ that now.”

It’s not that jazz was expressly forbidden in Cuba. But playing it earned you a spot on the government’s blacklist. “The dream of every musician in Cuba,” D’Rivera points out, “is to travel, period. If you’re perceived as someone that doesn’t integrate into the political order, you don’t travel. And it wasn’t that you officially couldn’t leave. They just wouldn’t call you for any foreign gigs. The government books the gigs, you see. If you were to call them to request a band, say, for a festival in Puerto Rico, they would tell you that the band just wasn’t available. ‘But I haven’t told you the days yet.’ ‘Well, they aren’t available anyway.’ They would recommend other bands instead.”

Cuban musicians had to take care not to offend Fidel’s ever-vigilant culture bureaucrats. “We had written a tune where the melody had some bebop things in it. A gentleman named Montero, who had been an engineer but later went into politics, was one of the principal enemies of jazz. We said, ‘No, look. There are these Afro rhythms.’ ‘You can’t fool me. That’s jazz.’ He was the director of the ministry that handled music production and publication. A meeting was called and we eventually recorded it.

“We had a song that was called ‘*Fiebre*’ [‘Fever’],” D’Rivera goes on. “They denied us the use of the name because no one in Cuba is supposed to get sick. We changed it to ‘38 ½,’ which is the centigrade temperature at which one is diagnosed with fever. So you really had to

watch what you were writing. They let you record whatever you wanted, but if you taped something that was past what they were willing to accept, they would arrest you. A group of young guys wrote a song called '*Este Viejo Está Loco*' ['This Old Man Is Crazy']. They arrested them. 'No, no, we were talking about another old man, not Castro.' They were still arrested."

For most of its early years Irakere was confined to the island. In 1978 things opened up somewhat and they were allowed to make their first major foreign tour – "it was a way for Castro to get some dollars" – capped by triumphs at the Newport–New York and Montreux jazz festivals. They also recorded for Columbia and won a Grammy, which Valdés, who has remained in Cuba, finally received last year.

But even though Irakere could travel, the Castro government remained as intolerant as ever. And so that spring day in Spain, D'Rivera took his giant step toward artistic freedom. (Ten years later Irakere's star trumpeter, Arturo Sandoval, would join him.) One of the first people to help D'Rivera once he arrived in the United States was fellow Cuban émigré, long-time musical director for Machito's Afro-Cuban Orchestra, and the founding father of Afro-Cuban jazz, the late composer-arranger Mario Bauzá. (Bauzá died on July 11, 1993 at the age of eighty-two.)

Bauzá, who came to the U.S. in 1930, first encountered D'Rivera twenty years earlier. "I met Paquito," he remembered, "when his father brought him to New York when he was about twelve years old. He played a concert with the Machito orchestra when I was conductor – we accompanied him. We accompanied him in Puerto Rico, too. His father was a very, very, very close friend of mine." (D'Rivera's parents and sister left Cuba in the late 1960s and settled in New York.)

Bauzá, a savvy veteran, advised D'Rivera on his first recording sessions and put him in touch with Dizzy Gillespie. "The greatest trumpet player that ever lived," D'Rivera declares, casting his eyes skyward. "They have him up there. Life will never be the same without Dizzy." With the help of people like Bauzá, Gillespie, then-CBS Records head Bruce Lundvall, and composer-conductor David Amram, D'Rivera began recording for a major label, traveling extensively, and performing with American jazz giants like Tito Puente, singer Carmen McRae, saxophonists Arthur Blythe and Phil Woods, and pianist McCoy Tyner. His life and career were on track, but one thing was missing.

When D'Rivera left Cuba he also had to leave his five-year-old son, Franco. He desperately wanted the boy to join him in the U.S., but was blocked by Castro's government. He spoke to his son whenever he could

get through, aware that the calls were being monitored. “Tell Mr. Castro I am going to get my family here,” he would announce to Fidel’s eavesdroppers. His ex-wife played bootleg tapes of D’Rivera’s music for the boy – the government had suppressed his recordings. Emulating his father, Franco took up the clarinet.

D’Rivera spent “eight years and several thousand dollars” trying to get his son and ex-wife out of Cuba. “Education is free there,” he laments, “but freedom is not free.” He nearly succeeded in 1988, but Castro suddenly changed his mind and refused to issue the exit visas. So D’Rivera shifted his tactics. Maybe if he went public, the musician reasoned, he might shame Castro into giving in. He told his story on *The Today Show*. He published an “open letter to Castro” in newspapers throughout Europe and Latin America. Finally, Castro yielded, and on January 3, 1989 the thirteen-year-old boy and his mother, Enieda, arrived in Miami. D’Rivera, on tour with Gillespie in Japan, flew in to meet them. Franco’s first music teacher in the U.S. was Mario Bauzá.

On stage D’Rivera is a vigorous and dynamic performer, exuding the same sunny energy that infuses his music. A genuinely funny man, like Dizzy, he loves to joke with his audiences, and if there are any Latinos in the crowd – and there invariably are many – he will ease from English into Spanish and back again. An alto saxophone whirlwind with a huge, bright sound and an apparently unlimited technique, musical ideas flow effortlessly from his head into his horn. His fleet, fluid clarinet provides a pleasant contrast, just as dazzling, but in a more subtle way.

“I had not played the clarinet for many years,” he admits. The instrument didn’t fit Irakere’s format, D’Rivera felt, so he put it down and took up the flute. “But when I came to this country I found too many great flute players, like Hubert Laws, Mauricio Smith – the Panamanian player – and Nestor Torres and, of course, Dave Valentin. So I said, ‘I ain’t going to pay this shit anymore.’ Then Dizzy asked me why I didn’t play the clarinet. Mario Bauzá contributed to that, too, because Mario used to be a classical clarinet player.” And Bauzá’s encouragement went beyond mere words.

“He is a heck of a clarinet player,” Bauzá declared, “symphony man, and a jazz man. When he came here, I said, ‘Paquito, where’s the clarinet?’ ‘Oh, I left it in Cuba.’ I said, ‘I’m gonna lend you my clarinet. Man, you gotta play clarinet. There’s no clarinet player like you around here.’ He’s a virtuoso on the clarinet.”

D’Rivera couldn’t resist that offer. “I said, ‘You and Dizzy, you want me to play the clarinet? All right.’ And now I am back. The clar-

inet is an instrument I love very much, but it's a very hard instrument to play – that's why there's so few of us around. The clarinet keeps me in very good shape for other instruments. It makes the saxophone feel like a toy."

Today his clarinet stands alongside the saxophones, equal partners in the musical world of Paquito D'Rivera, a domain that once more includes classical music. He appears with orchestras and chamber ensembles throughout the U.S. and Latin America, and in 1991, the bicentennial of Mozart's death, D'Rivera performed the composer's *Clarinet Concerto* with the Brooklyn Philharmonic. But he also wants to expand the clarinet repertoire beyond its European boundaries.

"I like to promote the classical Latin American composers. I think they are as valuable as Brahms or Mozart or Weber," D'Rivera maintains, "people like Heitor Villa-Lobos or Carlos Franzetti or Ernesto Lecuona." He had planned to record some of their compositions with cellist Yo-Yo Ma for CBS Masterworks, "but for some reason – they changed the ownership of the company, or something – that never happened."

Although the classical project remains on hold, one of D'Rivera's current CDs, *La Habana-Rio Conexión*, showcases diverse forms of Latin popular music, like the *danza* and *filin* from Cuba, the Brazilian *chorinho*, and, of course, the Cuban *bolero* – "a ballad," he likes to tell audiences, "with a little black beans on the side." It's both a loving presentation and a valuable document, rendered with reverence and passion for Latin America's rich cultural heritage.

"One of Paquito's main contributions," notes Brazilian trumpeter and frequent collaborator Claudio Roditi, "is this exposure of different kinds of Latin music. In most of his records you find these different styles. You'll find something that is in a Cuban bag. You'll find something in a Brazilian style. And you'll find a waltz that sounds Venezuelan or maybe from Peru. And he's been including some classical composers of Latin American origin. So one of his main interests is to expose the music of Latin American countries because he sees beauty and depth in these works."

His other recent release, *Who's Smoking?!*, is a healthy serving of bebop with Cuban seasonings – call it "Cu-bop." The CD features Roditi, as well as a long-time Gillespie associate and one of D'Rivera's heroes, saxophonist James Moody. "Ahhh," he exclaims, "Moody! He's one of my favorite persons! For a long time I wanted to do a straight-ahead album. And then I choose Moody because he's a very special person, a very fine player, and we have this common link that is Dizzy Gillespie. So I decided to invite him to join the band and play a couple of tunes dedicated to

him and his wife, Linda. *Who's Smoking?!* is dedicated to him because he hates that shit.”

D’Rivera is typically enthusiastic about another forthcoming labor of love. “There was a famous series of albums from the ’50s called *Cuban Jam Sessions*,” he explains. “I decided to do one called *40 Years of Cuban Jam Session* with some of those old players, some of the middle-aged players, and some of the young players, like Juan Pablo Torres, the Cuban trombone player who defected in Spain a year ago. So I put together a recording in Miami with all those old and young people playing together – some of them, they haven’t seen each other in thirty-five years. It was a beautiful experience.”

In the thirteen years that he has lived in the United States, D’Rivera has seen the musics of Latin America spread far beyond their original borders. Just a week prior to this interview, for instance, he played a gig in New York with Orquesta de la Luz, a salsa band from Japan – yes, *Japan*. “I said something that night,” he recalls. “I said, ‘This orchestra, they come from the other side of the world. They have nothing to do at all with a person from the Dominican Republic, from Cuba, from Puerto Rico. And they are doing this music so beautifully, and they are paying so much respect to our culture.’”

But as gratifying as that experience may have been, it was, for D’Rivera, more the exception than the rule. “Latin Americans have been in this country forever,” he goes on “and Americans, black or white or whatever, still they don’t know who we are. And then these Japanese people, they have so much love for this music from our culture, and they play the music so correctly, man. Americans should be ashamed of that.”

It’s a question of respect, he insists, of being taken seriously as a culture, as a people. A proud Latino, D’Rivera complains that many North American musicians – “even big names, *mainly* big names” – approach Latin music superficially. “*Extremely* superficially,” he emphasizes. “I remember that Dizzy Gillespie said, ‘Latin American musicians understand our music better than we understand theirs.’ I don’t agree with Dizzy at all – I told him. It’s only that we have a lot more *respect* for other types of music. We studied the music.

“But when you say here in this country that you are from ‘South of the Border,’ it doesn’t matter if you are from Cuba or Nicaragua or from Argentina. They sing to you ‘La Cucaracha,’ which is a *German* song. No respect.” D’Rivera has labeled this “the Carmen Miranda syndrome,” after Hollywood’s “Brazilian bombshell” of the 1940s, a Latina caricature known for her shrill voice, frenetic screen persona, and fruit-laden headwear. “Our culture, our music is ‘cute,’” he laments, “but it’s not serious.”

He illustrates. “I remember a movie called *Havana*. It was about Havana, it took place in Havana, and in the opening was a Brazilian singer singing a *bossa nova*! Come on, don’t give me that shit! You see, it’s the Carmen Miranda syndrome. (At least in *The Mambo Kings* they played the real music – not only by Tito Puente, but the music of Tito Rodriguez, Beny Moré, Mario Bauzá.) So using the elements of our culture in the wrong way is ‘just fine.’ But for us, it’s a real insult.”

“I agree one hundred percent with that,” says Claudio Roditi. “Within Latin America, the different countries, we have different kinds of music, and it takes a long time to understand each other’s music. There are some similarities, but Cuban music is one thing, Brazilian music is a completely different style.” It’s a telling point – what North Americans call Latin music is actually Latin *musics*. “Exactly,” Roditi concurs. “That’s why it’s difficult *for us* Latin Americans, so imagine someone on the outside. It takes even more studying and research for them to understand the music well.”

There is no magic formula for playing Latin music (or musics), D’Rivera maintains, short of taking it seriously, treating it with respect, and really learning it. “So when Dizzy said that we understand the music better – no,” he insists. “We are not smarter than Americans. We are just paying attention to what we are doing. We have studied the music of Bird and Dizzy and Copland and Bernstein and all that. This is what I mean by ‘the Carmen Miranda syndrome’ or ‘the banana republic mentality.’” Grinning, he looks up from his plate of raw fish and wasabi. “You see? We eat a little more than bananas. We eat sushi, too.”

In Cuba today Paquito D’Rivera is officially a nonperson. A few years ago Castro’s government deleted his name and that of singer Celia Cruz – who left in the early 1960s – from a dictionary of Cuban music. How absurd is that? Try to imagine an “encyclopedia of jazz” without Ella Fitzgerald and Charlie Parker.

And so, if “the man with the beard” were to go the way of Eastern Europe’s tinhorn ex-dictators, would D’Rivera consider moving back to Cuba? “No,” he answers emphatically. “All my life I wanted to be not only in the United States, but in the city of New York. I love this city.

“But I would like to go back and forth,” he quickly adds. “Yes, I would exercise my right to go into my country and out of my country when I want. I would go there immediately.” From the look in his eyes, it’s clear that D’Rivera can’t wait until that day. Scores of thousands of Cuban music lovers, left with only memories of the original Irakere and their precious, well-played bootleg tapes, can’t wait either.