

Trombonist, Composer, Arranger, Papo Vázquez Celebrates 40 Year Anniversary and Musical Legacy

By Tomas Peña - Apr 4, 2015 892 2

AND THE RELEASE OF SPIRIT WARRIOR (PICARO, 2015)

“Although his name is not as heralded as Eddie Palmieri, Tito Puente, or Fort Apache Band founders Jerry and Andy González, New York-based trombonist Papo Vázquez is as central to the development of Latin jazz as any of those legendary figures.” Ezra Gale – miaminewtimes.com

Papo was born, Angel R. Vázquez in 1958 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He spent his early years in Puerto Rico and grew up in the heart of North Philadelphia’s Puerto Rican community.

By the age of fifteen, Vázquez was performing with local bands in Philadelphia. At the age of seventeen he moved to New York and was hired to play for the legendary Cuban trumpet player, Chocolate Armenteros. Soon after, he began playing and recording with top artists in the salsa scene, such as The Fania All-Stars, Ray Barretto, Willie Colon, Larry Harlow, and Hector Lavoe among others.

During the late 1970s Vázquez was a key player in the New York’s burgeoning Latin Jazz scene. He studied with the legendary trombonist, Slide Hampton and eventually recorded and performed

with Hampton's World of Trombones. In addition, he went on to perform with jazz luminaries Tito Puente, Dizzy Gillespie, Frank Foster, Mel Lewis, Hilton Ruiz and toured with the Ray Charles Orchestra. By the age of twenty-two Vázquez had traveled the globe.

Vázquez is a founding member of Jerry Gonzalez's Fort Apache Band, Manny Oquendo's, Conjunto Libre and Puerto Rico's popular fusion band, Batacumbele. From 1981 to 1985 he performed and recorded several albums with the group. Upon his return to New York, he joined Tito Puente's Latin Jazz Ensemble and traveled with the band as the principal trombonist and toured with Dizzy Gillespie's United Nation's Orchestra.

Leader, Composer, Innovator

Vázquez has always been deeply moved by jazz. He specifically cites the music of John Coltrane and J.J. Johnson as having the most influence on him. His appreciation and knowledge of the indigenous music of the Caribbean provides him with a unique ability to fuse Afro-Caribbean rhythms, specifically those from Puerto Rico, with freer melodic and harmonic elements of progressive jazz.

During his time in Puerto Rico with Batacumbele in the 1980s, he began to experiment with, "Bomba Jazz," a mixture of jazz and traditional Puerto Rican Bomba. In 1993, he recorded his first album as a leader titled, *Breakout*. He continued collaborating with a variety of Latin Jazz artists, contributing the tune, "Overtime" to Hilton Ruiz's *Manhattan Mambo* and "Contra Mar y Mareo" for the album, *Descarga Boricua Volume 1*.

Interest in Vázquez as a composer grew. It was the first artist to receive a composer's commission for the tune, "Iron Jungle," for the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra, then a resident Jazz Orchestra at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

The same year, through a grant from The Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia, Vázquez was asked to expand Pirates Troubadours, and was commissioned to compose music for a nineteen-piece, Afro-Puerto Rican Jazz Orchestra. The 2008 event was recorded live, resulting in *Papo Vázquez Mighty Pirates Marooned/Aislado*, which received a Grammy nomination for the Best Latin Jazz Album. Vázquez also

shared his compositions with Panamanian vocalist, Rubén Blades (Tengan Fe/Antecedente), Hilton Ruiz (Overtime Mambo) and Dave Valentin (Tropic Heat).

Interview

Tomas Peña: Congratulations of forty distinguished years in the music business, the release of *Spirit Warrior* and for doing it your way.

Papo Vázquez: Thank you, Tomas.

How do you wrap your head around forty years in the music business? What comes to mind when you look back?

I've been lucky and blessed to record and play with some of the greatest musicians alive during my lifetime. But I wouldn't have made it this far if it hadn't been for the people that believed in me and never judged my mistakes. As a creative artist, I believe there are no coincidences, and there is something unseen, call it what you like, that guides our actions. I choose to believe in a supreme spirit that lets us know if we are on the right path.

Everyone must decide what path to take, but the most important thing is to surround yourself with people that care and love you. Believe me, once you get to the stage, and you're missing the element of love and respect the Holy Spirit will not embrace the music, and the audience will sense it. Of course, you can go on stage and try to impress the audience with your skills, but that has nothing to do with the magic that music can be.

Allowing something larger than your self to drive the music takes courage and faith. I've been a witness to such things many times. Mysterious things happen onstage, and everybody looks at one another and says, "How did that happen?"

I thank God for blessing me with a wonderful wife that has stuck with me through thick and thin. The greatest thing in life is love. It absolves

everything.

What's the significance of the title, *Spirit Warrior*?

It's the human struggle that each and every one of us has in life, right or wrong, good, versus evil. We are all Spirit Warriors at different levels. Some battles bring us to the edge of destruction. The important thing is, not to let it destroy one's spirit. Life can be very difficult, and some never make it back from spiritual battles.

You've been studying and analyzing Puerto Rican music for the better part of your career. What have the years of analysis taught you?

Our culture is rich! You could spend year's learning one style: *Danza, Plena, Bomba, Musica Jibara* or romantic Trio music. They are microcosms; the more you dig, the more you find.

In addition to leading the band and performing, *Spirit Warrior* showcases your skills as a composer and arranger. What's your *modus operandi* for composing a tune?

I sit for months and even years composing the basic ideas, but it's a collective effort. I couldn't do it without the input of the guys in the band. For example, I'll put something down on paper, and if it has to do with the percussion section I'll ask Anthony Carrillo or Carlos Maldonado to tell me what they think. Some ideas work right from the beginning, others don't.

Willie Williams has been with the Pirates for more than fifteen years. We always discuss the compositions as a whole as well as tonalities, grooves, etc. That's my approach to composing, and arranging. Before I make final prints for rehearsal everyone has seen their individual parts. When I see that they feel good about what's on paper, we move forward. The materials have to be ready months before we go into the recording studio. The final part is the months of preparation on the trombone. The great J. J. Johnson said it best, "The trombone is a beastly instrument, and we'll leave it at that for now. The trombone is

a world unto itself.”

I studied the trombone briefly. It’s a “complicated” instrument. What inspires you to compose a tune?

I listen to previous recordings. I cross out the stuff we have done before and make lists of styles or rhythms we haven’t explored. The inspiration for the tune, “El Morro” came from Anthony Carrillo, who mentioned that we didn’t have a *Bomba Sica*. Other times, I’ll sit at the piano and start something there. It depends. If it’s a ballad the piano is basically where I begin, or I work with something on my “bone” (trombone). Other times I sit at my computer and write ideas until something makes sense. After I have a basic idea on paper, I send it to the guys for their input on their particular instruments. I feel very fortunate to have very good friends like Sherman Irby, who is also my co-producer and who gives me his point-of-view. So, there are many layers to what you’re listening to. It’s a collective effort. As a composer and arranger, you have to make sure that what you are putting down on paper works for the individual performer. You don’t just write something and shove it in someone’s face and say, “OK, this is what you have to play!” That would be counter-productive. About seventy-five percent of the ideas make it to the final product. There are a bunch of ideas in the vault. The repertoire runs the gamut.

Tell me about the repertoire.

Here’s a rundown of the tunes.

Huracán (Hurricane) is a fast plena. It’s a different twist on what we have come to know as *descarga*, using the rhythms of the plena as a base, with a bridge.

El Morro is a *Sica* and it has an Arabian melodic feel. I guess there were some melodic ideas from (the album) *Oasis* (2012) that seeped into the composition. At first, I thought of calling it *El Moro*, like the Moor (s) because of the Arabian melodic concept but I finally decided on *El Morro* in honor of San Felipe, a fort in old San Juan, Puerto Rico. That *sica* rhythm has a powerful drive, it feels like an army or a fleet of ships coming to attack. When I listen, I can easily imagine cannon

blasts. It is one of the most descriptive compositions.

Bumbo con Bamba was inspired by the *Punta de Clavo*, similar to the way *plenero*, Marcial Reyes played. According to El Maestro Anthony Carrillo, "We created another version of plena." We call it, "Plena Pirata." Bumbo was a Pirate's drink, made with rum, water, and cinnamon; Bamba was a good friend who loved being around musicians.

The Little People is a very simple composition that sounds like a children's song. It starts out as a *Danza* then goes into a medium jazz swing. It also reminds me of Christmas, the holidays.

The Mole is a jazz waltz, which, for some reason, reminds me of a spy movie.

No Goodbyes for You (for Hilton Ruiz). Hilton was a very good friend and an early influence, when I moved to New York from Philadelphia.

The tune is heartfelt and moving. Tell me about your relationship with Hilton.

I remember visiting Hilton at his apartment in Manhattan with my good buddy Miguelito Colón, a genius musician and trombone player, also no longer with us. Hilton was one of my heroes since my arrival in New York in 1975. He was playing with Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and I would sneak into the Vanguard to listen to the band. The fact that he was Puerto Rican was a source of inspiration. It gave me something to strive for. Before I left Philadelphia, mentor Jimmy Purvis said, "What you need to do is get a gig with Thelonious Monk, and then you'll be accepted." Man, what a tall order! I guess the best I was able to do was hook up with Hilton.

Here is one of the many stories I have about Hilton Ruiz. I go visit him, and he had just recorded a new record and he plays one of his original compositions on the piano titled, *Message from the Chief*. I said, "Man you can't play that on the trombone!" And he responded, "Slide Hampton was the one who recorded it." Thanks, Hilton!!! At the time, I was unaware of the fact that Slide would become my teacher.

In my humble opinion, I believe that Hilton Ruiz was the greatest Puerto Rican Jazz piano player, ever.

Salto Angel is a tribute to Venezuela, the first country I visited outside the U.S. as a member of Larry Harlow's band in 1975. Since then, I've traveled there as a soloist and with different bands, many times.

Palo Incao is a tribute to the birthplace of my father and grandfather (Palo Incao, Barranquitas, Puerto Rico). It gives me a melancholy feeling, a place in time that no longer exists or something we have lost.

McCoy (for Mc Coy Tyner) – I have always loved McCoy Tyner's piano playing. There is a bass and piano vamp that reminds me of McCoy.

In This Lonely Place was previously recorded as an instrumental on the recording *At The Point Vol. 1 or Vol. 2*. We play it once in awhile, it has evolved into what you hear now.

According to your wife, you composed the tune as a Valentine's Day gift.

My wife had been after me for years to record it! I would always say no-no-no-no! Once in a while I would sing it at gigs to make her happy, but I don't consider myself to be a singer. Now let's be totally honest, Jack Teagarden, Billy Eckstine were all great singers, of course, the one, and only Louis Armstrong.

Roller Coaster is a Blues with *Bomba Holande'* as a base.

Despedida is an *Aguinaldo Fajardeño*, which is the music that was part of my musical surroundings at a very young age. My grandfather, father, and uncle were all troubadours. *Jibaro* music seeps into my music.

Kerepakupai Vena' is the indigenous name of Salto Angel. I wanted to finish the recording with mother earth talking to us. Here is the landscape of *Kerepakupai Vena'*. *Despedida* fades into *Kerepakupai Vena'* leaving city dwellers behind. The main actors in this piece are the Waterfall, Forest and the creatures that live in it. That low sound you hear is the heart of the dragon that has fallen in the middle of the forest and is slowly dying. Those are his final breaths. On top of the waterfall is the Arch Angel Gabriel playing his horn in triumph over good and evil. At the end is the Shaman singing the song for the Cascade or Waterfall (*Canto de Cascada*).

I owe a debt of gratitude to Jeff Jones, "The Jedi Master". He's the man who spends hundreds of hours bringing our ideas to life.

How many years has Pirates & Troubadours been in existence?

We have been making music for about thirty-one years. My first band, Papo Vázquez Bomba Jazz, was created in 1984 in Puerto Rico. My second band recorded on Breakout in 1991, I guess I was still using the Bomba Jazz name for that Band. The first time I used the name Pirates Troubadours was on my second and third CDs titled At the Point Vol.1 & 2, 1999. Then came Carnival in San Juan in 2002, From The Badlands 2005 and the Grammy Nominated CD Marooned/Aislado 2007 – and Oasis, 2012.

This is a list of my different bands and the evolution of the band. As you can see, it runs the gamut, from small band Afro-Caribbean Jazz Groups to my Mighty Pirate Afro Puerto Rican Jazz 17 piece Orchestra and Dance Band. What's not on the list is my Oasis Project, created in 2010, which is a multimedia piece that earned me a NEA Latino Master Award.

Someday I'd like to document it properly but that's a big project. It's a company of 27 performers that includes, Poets, Dancers, High Def Videos of Beaches from all over the world, guest artists, a string section, woodwind section, horns, 5 percussion players, etc.

There's also my suite Sube El Rio/ River Rising, which was

commissioned by the Bronx River Arts Center that has never been recorded. Music commissioned by Jazz at Lincoln Center, my commissioned piece for the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra – Cimarrón. There is also all the commissions from the Arts Ensemble chamber orchestra. All of this work is part of the evolution of the Mighty Pirates Troubadours.

Congratulations on the world premier of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* at the Pregones Theater in the Bronx. Tell me about the origin of the project, how it came about.

That's a special project Associate Artistic Director, Alvan Colon commissioned on my behalf. Initially, I turned it down because I didn't feel qualified. Once we sat down and he explained his vision I understood what he wanted, so I asked (pianist) Rick Germanson to help me out. It was a learning experience and it turned out very nice. Sometimes you have to have faith in the people that are steering you in a certain direction, but it can get pretty scary, especially when you are taken out of your comfort zone.

My compliments to the members of the quartet: Pianist Rick Germanson, drummer Joel Mateo and bassist Alexander "Apolo" Ayala Berrios. They were magnificent.

Any final thoughts?

I'd like to say, "Thank you," to your readers. I believe the interview will give them some insight into our process and serve as an important source of information for anyone who is interested in learning more about our music.

I have a final thought that just occurred to me. Some years back I interviewed you on the air for WFDU, 89.1 FM (Under the Radar). Towards the end of the broadcast you gave me a black baseball cap with Pirates Troubadours logo and a stern warning. As I recall, you said, "Once a pirate, always a pirate, there is no going back!" I still have the hat and wear it proudly.

On a more serious note, your discography, awards and commissions speak volumes. Congratulations on a long and distinguished career. Thank you!



SPIRIT WARRIOR

Tracks: 1-Huracan, 2-El Morro, 3-Bumbo con Bamba, 4-The Little People, 5-The Mole, 6- No Goodbyes for You, 7-Salto Angel, 8-Palo Incao, 9-McCoy, 10-In This Lonely Place, 11-Roller Coaster, 12-Despedida, 13-Kerepakupai Vená.

Band of Pirates – Personnel: Papo Vázquez: Trombone, Leader, Willie Williams: Tenor Saxophone, Rick Germanson: Piano, Dezron Douglas: Bass, Alvester Garnett: Drums, Anthony Carrillo: Percussion, Carlos Maldonado: Percussion, Gabriel Lugo: Percussion.

Invited Guests: Sherman Irby: Alto Saxophone, Flute: Orlando "Maraca" Valle, Roberto Quintero: Tambores Culo e' Puya, Victor Jones: Drums, Pete Nater: Trumpet, Piaroa Shaman, Rufino Po'nare: Canto de Cascada.