

Latin Side of Hot House by Emilie Pons

Papo Vazquez: Musical Mofongo

Trombonist **Papo Vazquez** is a highly creative, versatile composer and band leader who was looking for a new sound. “What I was interested in creating was a new brand of jazz,” Vazquez explains. “I wanted to break away from Latin jazz, which was mostly Afro-Cuban jazz.” Vazquez’s music is Afro-Puerto Rican jazz and, as such, a tribute to the magic of improvisation.

Vazquez, 58, has used his experience of playing, touring and recording with giants such as Dizzy Gillespie, Tito Puente and Hilton Ruiz to hone his own voice, influenced by the Puerto Rican musical genres bomba and plena. With all those influences, “you make a mofongo,” he says, referring to the popular Afro-Puerto Rican plantain dish. “A new mofongo, with the blues, the bomba and the clave.”

Vazquez performs this month in the Bronx at Hostos Community College with his band the Mighty Pirates Troubadours. For the occasion, he has invited two guests: trumpeter/vocalist Jerry Medina and vibraphonist Joe Locke. The concert is a celebration of Vazquez’s four decades in music and will feature tunes from his new album, *Spirit Warrior*, as well as some Mighty Pirates Troubadours standards. A few surprise guests will also perform with the band.

Music was in Vazquez’s life since early on. “In my grandfather’s house there was always music,” he says. “And my aunts, they were all salseras.” Some of the luminaries Vazquez has performed with are Ruben Blades, Eddie Palmieri, Ray Charles, Slide Hampton, Ray Barretto, Chucho Valdes, Wayne Shorter, Michael Brecker and the Jerry Gonzalez Fort Apache band.

Vazquez grew up in a black neighborhood and feels thankful for having

been accepted by that community, he explains. “We were the only Puerto Rican family in that neighborhood,” Vazquez says. “We used to own a little bodega.” He first heard the trombone played live at a Willie Colon and Hector Lavoe concert and that was when he decided trombone would be his instrument.

Today, he advises younger musicians to seek out and respect their elders since “they have all the information they need to succeed,” he says. “I wouldn’t be where I am at without the support of *all* the musicians that I’ve played with or who have played in my band,” he says, referring to Arturo O’Farrill, Michael Brecker, Mario Rivera, Milton Cardona, Roberto Cepeda and Anthony Carrillo.

Vazquez, who is also drawn to Hermeto Pascoal and Sonny Rollins, believes in history, knowledge and spirituality. “When you come with the wrong intention in music, God leaves the stage,” Vazquez says. “And when the holy spirit leaves, the magic goes away too.”

But this performance at Hostos will certainly bring some magic to the stage.

The Mighty Pirates Troubadours will perform at Hostos Center for the Performing Arts on April 30. The band features Willie Williams, Rick Germanson, Dezron Douglas, Joel Mateo, Gabo Lugo and Reinaldo de Jesus.