



Arturo Sandoval: Former Prisoner for Love

by John Radanovich

No matter what anyone told young Arturo Sandoval, he knew he was destined to be a trumpet player. His family held the usual justifiable beliefs about the difficulty of a musician's life, but also they worried that he would get tuberculosis. The 53-year old laughs when he tells the story—a little hoarse from his daily cigar, but not from tuberculosis.

The stubbornness of little Arturo, who grew up in the Cuban countryside, was unbreakable. Eventually the family gave in, and Sandoval studied classical music from age 12 on, and later played in the Cuban Orchestra of Modern Music. But one of the most important moments in his life was hearing a Charlie Parker/Dizzy Gillespie compilation at age 16. He knew then that jazz was his calling. Much later, the flesh and blood Dizzy Gillespie would play a major role in his life, and not only as a professional role model. Without the great bebop trumpeter's help, Arturo Sandoval might still be in Cuba.

Countless prisoners claim to commit crimes out of love. But who can say he went to jail for listening to jazz? While doing obligatory military service, Sandoval couldn't stay away from his beloved but forbidden American jazz. It was his first taste of political repression.

To hide his love for jazz, Sandoval founded Irakere in 1973, along with Paquito d'Rivera and Chucho Valdez. The group put an Afro-Cuban face on what was essentially jazz with classical and rock influences. It made several world tours, grew in stature, won a Grammy, and lost d'Rivera to defection. In 1981, Sandoval left Irakere to lead his own band and bided his time until he applied for political asylum at the US embassy in Rome in 1991.

Dizzy Gillespie first heard Sandoval's blazing speed and extraordinary range on a visit to Havana. He was so impressed that he asked Sandoval on several world tours with the Dizzy Gillespie United Nation Orchestra, and became a musical and personal mentor.

The story of Sandoval's defection to the US reads like a spy novel, with Dizzy Gillespie the mysterious man in a trench coat. Although a grown stepson had to be left behind, Sandoval was lucky to get his wife and young son out; Paquito d'Rivera waited 10 years to be reunited with members of his family.

Aside from earning his American citizenship in 1998 [denied twice previously], the genius trumpet player has won 12 Grammy nominations, 4 Grammy awards, 3 Billboard awards, and an Emmy for scoring "For Love or Country," the story of his own life. Andy Garcia and Gloria Estefan starred in the HBO movie released in 2000.

During a week in March at the Blue Note in Greenwich Village, Sandoval released his newest record, "My Passion for the Piano." Listeners who have seen him live were aware of his prowess on piano because often plays one or two songs solo in an evening's concert. But for many in the audience of international jazz pilgrims, it was a bit of a shock. His piano style is similar to his trumpet style, all-out and as fast as possible, a withering display of pure technical ability. While touring to support the record, he now ends his shows with one of his piano compositions. Audiences sit in their seats after he finishes, unsure if they really heard a trumpet



player play piano at such a level. It is a stunning surprise from a man who long ago earned his place in jazz history.

Recently, he spoke about music from his Miami living room. He had to talk on speaker so he could keep jumping up to play something for illustration on trumpet and on his beloved piano.

When I taught in New Orleans, I would always ask horn players in my classes who was the greatest sax player, or trumpet player. Usually they said Trane or Miles, and often the trumpeters said Louis Armstrong. But once I asked a trumpet player to quickly name the greatest trumpet player alive and he surprised me by saying “Arturo Sandoval.” This was a kid who played in brass bands and was studying classical and jazz.

Wow. A black trumpet player?

Yes.

Wow. That is amazing. That is one of the best stories I ever heard. Damn, that’s a real compliment.

How did you become a jazz musician?

I was 7 or 8 when I knew that I wanted to be a musician, and that I didn’t have a choice. My family didn’t want me to be a musician. They thought that a musician is going to starve, be poor, get involved in alcohol and drugs, get tuberculosis. I have no idea why they thought musicians got tuberculosis, but that’s what they said. So with all that I still said, “No, I’m going to be a musician.” Once I heard Dizzy on a record, it was all over.

Music is my passion but it has also been my salvation. I believe that music saved my life, and my family as well. I was hopeless at one time in my life. Music helped me give an education to my children, to make a decent life for my entire family.

You were once imprisoned for jazz.

For four months. I was listening to Voice of America in the barracks, Willy’s Carnival Jazz Hour. The sergeant heard something in English and so he accused me of listening to the voice of the ‘enemy.’ You are only supposed to listen to one radio station and read one newspaper.

Besides Dizzy, Clifford Brown was a major influence on you. So much so that you recorded “I Remember Clifford.”

Every tune on the whole record is four trumpet parts plus the solo. Gary Lindsay who teaches at the University of Miami did a beautiful job of transcription, and then he harmonized the four trumpets. I had to spend many hours in the studio but I cannot take credit for the job that he did.

“Study in Brown” [Clifford Brown, 1955] was the second or third jazz record I heard in Cuba. A friend of mine had it. There was only one record store, but sometimes people have things from before 1959. Maybe people travel and bring records in, but the rest is just whatever you can catch on the radio.

You are famous for playing fast in the upper register. Was Dizzy’s music or classical music more influential on this?

To me a note is a note, no matter how high or low. How much passion and intensity you play the note is what matters. When you see a piano in front of you with 88 keys, which are more important—the ones on the left or the ones on the right? With the trumpet it’s the same thing.



Sometimes people just pay attention to the high notes, but what about the low notes? The middle? I try to explore the whole instrument. As many notes as you can play, the less limitation you'll have in your improvisation.

That's why I love piano. You got all kinds of notes. What counts in the end is how you put them together.

Tell me about Dizzy

What a great guy. I miss him everyday, man. He was a happy person, and he loved music. He enjoyed every minute of his life, people, talking about this and that. He never was in too much of a hurry to go to the piano, play some chords, explain this and that. At more than 70 years of age, he was hungry to learn. That's what really influenced me more than anything else: his love and passion for music.

In the movie when he sees your car, he makes a smart comment. Did that really happen?

Yes, but he thought it was a Russian car. The car in the movie was actually too good for what I had. I really had a 1951 Plymouth, in bad condition of course. He took one look and said 'What the hell is this thing, some kind of Russian car?' He didn't recognize it. I said no, it's a Plymouth.

You have taught music at the university level for a long time, at Florida International University and other places.

I strongly believe that when you are teaching, you are learning at the same time. When I say not to play something a certain way, I take out my trumpet and show them the right way. If they aren't going to respect you, they won't believe what you say. That forces you to stay in good shape.

Once I heard you say how you hate the expression "latin jazz."

When Chano Pozo, Mario Bauza, and Dizzy Gillespie started to play their music, that mixture was called Afro-Cuban jazz. My question is: "Who in the hell changed the name of that style, and with whose permission?" Those people own that style, to mix bebop with Cuban rhythm. That's it. And musicians from Mexico, South America, they don't have anything to do with it.

Tito Puente hated the word "salsa" as a marketing invention.

It's a matter of keeping the little things that we have, our culture. In Cuba there's nothing else left. We don't have a country, we don't have freedom. All we have is our music. Keep calling a cha cha cha a cha cha cha. I don't want to hear a mambo called a salsa; that pisses me off. Mambo is mambo. All those Cuban rhythms are authentic. They have creators, their own patterns. Those people [the players] should have our respect. When a disc jockey plays samba, he doesn't know the difference between that and cumbia. So when somebody asks what it is, they just say "salsa." They put everything in one sack.

Cuban music can be very complicated and there are so many different styles. Take danzón for instance.

It is complicated but I love it. It has an original form from the French and Spanish, from two or three centuries ago. It's very specific. [He runs to the piano to play a beautiful and complete danzón of his own composition]. In the dance, it's not an easy mission. There are a lot of steps.

You recently recorded on a CD by one of the greatest living Cuban musicians, Generoso Jimenez who is 85.



I met Detlef Engelhard [producer] a long time ago in Germany. He produced my record, "Tumbaito." He called and said he was going to produce a record for Generoso. I knew Generoso from Cuba; he is a celebrity in our music. I said I'd love to. They brought in the rhythm track and I did a trumpet track [Jimenez is still in Cuba, Sandoval would not be permitted entry and probably wouldn't go anyway]. We call him "El Tojo." He played with Beny Moré for many years. Generoso has his own style, beautiful. It's like a macho kind of playing with a tough attitude, cocky. When you hear his playing, it doesn't sound like anyone else. It's like when you hear Clark Terry, you say, oh, "CT."

I understand you own a special piano.

"It's a Bösendorfer Imperial that they made for Oscar Peterson. It's 9.6 feet, and the biggest Steinway is 8.11. It has ten extra keys."

Your new record is all piano songs, "My Passion for the Piano."

The stuff on the new record I've been playing for some time. One is a song I wrote for the HBO movie. You know I won an Emmy for that score. It's very pretty and I'm very proud of it. Two songs were written by my bass player, two are standards: "Stella by Starlight," and "All the Things You Are." There's something by Michel Legrand I love, "The Windmills of Your Mind." The rest of them are my compositions.

Mostly I like to compose on the piano. Every day when I wake up, I try to put together a little melody before I do anything else, even trumpet [he leaves the phone to play some absurdly fast Oscar Peterson runs]. Man, that's a great instrument.

What's your favorite cigar?

I'm very lucky because I became friends with the guy who makes it. I'm talking about Arturo Fuente. He died many years ago, but Carlos, Jr, is one of my best friends. He invented Opus X and all those great cigars. I have been smoking cigars since I was 14 or 15. If I die from smoking a cigar, I'm going to die happy.

How often do you smoke?

I smoke maybe 1 or 2 a day; I don't have any more than that. After lunch today I'm going to burn one. But never before lunch. Usually never.

I guess we should talk about politics now.

No, no, no! Never before lunch. Never ever.

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