

The Record

Paquito D’Rivera

by John Radanovich

At the beginning of the jazz film “Calle 54,” a crazy man goes into his garage in the dead of winter. With the frozen Manhattan skyline across the Hudson, he backs out a white 1973 VW convertible and drives down a snowy New Jersey street, the top down on his bug.

Later in the film, Paquito D’Rivera leads his orchestra on alto sax. Apparently, he survived his winter ride. “I know that was nuts. But when I went for my other VW, the director told me to get in the convertible. I’m like ‘oyeme, are you crazy? It’s 20 below out here!’ But Fernando [director] is a genius. He said it would be good for the heart, so I did it.”

In a way, D’Rivera is known for doing things that other people won’t or can’t. He defected from Cuba in 1980 to escape a totalitarian regime. “It’s not easy. I lost my marriage to it. I lost my kid’s childhood. It was too dangerous to stay because I have a big mouth.” A founder of Irakere, D’Rivera had little choice but to leave for his career as well. He first performed at age six, and came to love jazz, still not sanctioned in Cuba.

One of the best soprano sax players and possibly the best jazz clarinetist in the world, D’Rivera is also an enormously prolific classical composer arranger. The North Bergen resident is a constant jokester, his mind racing all the time. And he couldn’t be nicer.

Cuban musicians are often well-schooled in classical music, and D’Rivera has a long history in European forms. A recent project is adding Latin American elements to Stravinsky’s “The Soldier’s Tale,” for an upcoming performance in Spain. “The original piece is very hard, and then we have to put the Latin elements in it. That’s even harder. It’s so hard it’s making me paranoid. But this morning I killed the devil,” he laughed, referring to the roles in the Tale.

But D’Rivera’s greatest love is jazz. His father, a classical saxophone player who retired to direct his son’s education, first introduced him to jazz. “He played Benny Goodman ‘Live At Carnegie Hall,’ recorded in 1938. I was eight or nine, and he explained what it was, but I thought he said “Carne-Frijol” instead of Carnegie Hall.” Never too shy to laugh at his own jokes, he laughed himself hoarse at this one. “Still today that’s one of my favorite CDs.”

Jazz, Afro-Cuban, and classical musics all contribute to D’Rivera’s sound on soprano, alto and tenor saxes, and clarinet. His solos are exciting and full of invention, and show his own fusion of three musical traditions. “I like to learn,” he says. “The problem with many young cats now is they are very good but all sound alike. These days it’s Bird, Trane, and Michael Brecker. It’s the same thing with New York salsa bands. People say I have a unique voice, but remember that voice is made up of a thousand other voices: Parker, Stravinsky, Machito—I put a lot in.”

D’Rivera has recorded, produced, and played with everyone and has most music awards (including the first Latin Grammy) you can name. For some years he co-led Dizzy

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Gillespie's United Nations Orchestra, and led the group after Gillespie's death. In goatee and glasses, he has led his own influential quintets and sextets ever since. Notably, he wrote a great arrangement for Mario Bauza's "Mambo Inn," one used by most small combos today and was largely responsible for Bebo Valdez' comeback after 34 years of silence in Sweden. Hear D'Rivera's hot, post-bop playing on three of his four Grammy winning CDs: "Portraits of Cuba," "Tropicana Nights," and "Live at the Blue Note." Aside from his numerous music projects, he is searching for an English publisher for his autobiography, My Saxual Life, already published in Spanish.

Paquito D'Rivera's upcoming show at the New Jersey Performing Art Center, where he is artist-in-residence, will touch on all his musical loves: Cuba, Brazil, Venezuela and other forms of the Americas, jazz, and classical. He is sure to throw in a few jokes for good measure.