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FUNK MEETS TANGO

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Talking with New Jersey's Own Paquito D'Rivera

2007 has been a particularly stellar year for the peripatetic composer and multi-instrumentalist Paquito D' Rivera. For starters, he was awarded a coveted Guggenheim Fellowship for an opera project he is currently composing. And on March 3 of this year, he participated in a *Jazz in Our Time* event at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.



He was among a group of jazz masters (including Ornette Coleman, Dave Brubeck and Cecil Taylor) who received the prestigious "Living Jazz Legend Award." D'Rivera also received the honor of being named Composer-in-Residence at Caramoor Center for Music and Arts in Katonah, NY, for that institution's ambitious, two-year Latin American music initiative called "Sonidos Latinos."

If these activities weren't enough for one busy calendar year, D'Rivera also started up his own record label, Paquito Records, and the label's first release, *Funk Tango*, received critical acclaim in many quarters, including the almighty *New York Times*. After a lifetime as a professional musician (he was performing in public at age five and endorsed Selmer saxophones at age eight in music magazines that proclaimed, "Even a child can play a Selmer!"), *Funk Tango* is surely hard evidence that D'Rivera is still engaged in music, still seeking news paths for his creativity. The music from *Funk Tango* will be a front and center when the Paquito d' Rivera Quintet performs in NJPAC's Victoria Theater on Saturday, October 27 as part of the *Alternate Routes* Latin Jazz Weekend.

"*Funk Tango* is the name of a tune on the album by my pianist, Alon Yavnai," D'Rivera explains on the new CD. "I used that title to reflect my interest in different kinds of music and the combination of these different kinds of music—funk *plus* tango, for example. Funk is about the African-American music I began to hear all around me when I first came to live in the U.S., and tango was something that was part of my growing up in Cuba. I grew up in the culture of Argentine films, and the tango soundtracks were just part of an atmosphere that I loved and that enriched my imagination." There is also a piece of authentic tango on the CD, "Revirado," by that great genius of tango, Astor Piazzolla. "Piazzolla was a fantastic individual," D'Rivera says. "I played on the 'Tango Apasionado' sessions late in his life. It was a great experience!"

Funk Tango includes only two pieces that were written by D'Rivera himself—rather unusual for someone with such a strong reputation as a composer. "I

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only wrote two pieces because I wanted my talented band members to write and arrange the music,” he explains. D’Rivera is particularly proud of his current band, three members of which have been working with him since 1991. “This is an international band,” he explains. “My bass player, Oscar Stagnaro, is Peruvian and is a master of all styles of Latin American music. My trumpeter, Diego Urcola, is Argentine. Alon is Israeli, and my drummer claims that he is from Central America – although that is actually Chicago! I want musicians who want to learn different styles – and that includes me. You see, I am only the director of this group, not the leader. But you need to know your stuff. If you attempt to apply elements of music that you are not educated in or committed to, it just doesn’t sound right in the collective. What we have here in this group is our commitment to what we do.”

D’Rivera’s own life story is a prime example of the current international flavor jazz. Born in Havana in 1948, he was taught saxophone by his own father, who was a classical tenor saxophonist. He received formal training at the Havana Conservatory, where he studied clarinet, composition and harmony. In 1961, he got his first professional job with the house band of Havana’s Teatro Musical, where he worked alongside the great pianist Chucho Valdes – who would later have a great influence on D’Rivera’s career.

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Talking with New Jersey’s Own Paquito D’Rivera (continued)

In 1967, he joined the all-star Orquestra Cubana de Musica Moderna, eventually rising to the position of music director. Although he wanted that ensemble to play jazz, the group became little more than a backup band for vocalists, so D’Rivera and seven other members broke away to form Irakere, under the leadership of Chucho Valdes. That group would go on to revolutionize Latin music with its innovative combine of jazz, rock, classical and traditional Cuban idioms.

After years of being confined to the island, Cuban officials allowed Irakere to make a foreign tour. Their sensational performance at the Newport and Montreux jazz festivals led to a recording contract with Columbia Records. Their 1979 debut on that label sold well and won a Grammy Award. But D’Rivera was not entirely happy despite the relative freedom he was allowed as a prominent musician in a Communist society, and he grew dissatisfied with the Cuban government’s overall political constraints. In May of 1980, during a European tour, he sought asylum in the U.S. embassy in Madrid. By 1981, he was living in Union City, NJ, with relatives, and set about creating a career in this country. He was signed to Columbia as a solo artist and soon found work in a remarkably wide arena that ranged from Tito Puente to McCoy Tyner. In addition to leading his own groups, he became co-music director of Dizzy Gillespie’s ambitious United Nations Orchestra. Gillespie, a hero to D’Rivera, was already busy moving Latin rhythms into the vocabulary of jazz. After Gillespie’s death, Paquito took over full leadership of the ensemble.

For many serious jazz fans, the term “Latin jazz” carries a negative connotation – they think of old Herbie Mann and Cal Tjader albums, David Valentin smooth-jazz offerings, and a genre that is more salsa-with-solos than “real” jazz. For D’Rivera, is it worth holding onto the “Latin jazz” label, considering that his music covers a far greater range? “Well, I don’t want to say anything about other musicians,” Paquito says with a laugh, “but I want to tell you want the great Mario Bauza, who is considered the father of Latin jazz, told me. He said, ‘Paquito D’Rivera is the only musician I know on the scene playing *real* Latin jazz. All the others are playing Afro-Cuban jazz.’ I appreciated that, not because of my deep respect for him, but because he understood what I was trying to do in my music. I want to use *all* elements of Latin music in my work, not just focus on the rhythmic elements. I focus a lot on melody and also use a lot of classical elements.”

On the subject of classical music, D’Rivera explains that his current opera project is “a contemporary version of *Romeo and Juliet*, set in Cuba.” Although he is still working on it, there are plans to stage this Spanish-

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language work in both Spain and the U.S. (Miami, to be exact). He cites Puccini as a major influence, but also notes that being married to an opera singer has undoubtedly had an influence. As for his composing process, D’Rivera notes that it varies very little when he moves between his jazz and classical ventures. “I have my coffee and get to work,” he says. He adds that most of his classical pieces have jazz elements, and that classical ensembles have trouble with that. “It seems that classical groups are not used to syncopation, and a lot of my pieces use it. I’m trying to change this with some recent pieces, but I grew up with a father who was a classical musician, and he happened to love Benny Goodman and Stan Getz. He’d play a Mozart concerto for clarinet, and the next record he’d put on was Goodman’s 1938 Carnegie Hall concert. It was no big deal to go between the two – and it’s still no big deal for me to blend these sounds together.”

On Saturday, October 27 at 7:30pm, Paquito D’Rivera and his ensemble bring a program titled *Funk Tango* to NJPAC’s Victoria Theater. This performance is presented as part of *Alternate Routes*, sponsored in part by American Express. Choose your own seats when you order online.

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