

Batacumbele at The 22nd. Annual Chicago Jazz Festival

By Luis Moreno
and Gregory F. Pappas

BATACUMBELE - Yoruba language meaning "to kneel before the drum". Founded in 1980 in San Juan, Puerto Rico by Master percussionist Angel "Cachete" Maldonado, Batacumbele is one of the leading Afro Caribbean ensembles in the world. It is to contemporary Puerto Rican music what Irakere is to Cuba. Known as a progressively innovative ensemble that respects tradition, Batacumbele excites audiences by fusing genres such as Afro Cuban salsa & jazz with African and Caribbean (Puerto Rican) folkloric polyrhythms. The combination of world-class virtuoso musicians and superb vocalists along with great compositions and arrangements result in a unique package that has garnered a cult following in Japan, Europe, South America, the greater Antilles & Caribbean and the United States. (Alumni of Batacumbele include: David Sanchez, Papo Vazquez, Charlie Sepulveda, William Cepeda, Nestor Torres, Cuban drummer Ignacio Berroa, John Benitez, Richie Flores, Eric Figueroa, et. al).



The ensemble released two landmark albums in 1981 and 1983 entitled "Con Un Poco de Songo" and "En Aquellos Tiempos" (Tierrazo Records) that catapulted many of individual members into solo careers and bandleaders in their own right. The ensemble reunited for an exclusive appearance in the Midwest as a 12 piece All-Star unit with original members -now superstars- Giovanni Hidalgo as special guests.



RMM Records recording artist, vocalist & trumpeter Jerry Medina joins the group leading the dance oriented songs with his exciting vocals. On September 3, 2000 Batacumbele's performance was to be heard live throughout North America (U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico) via National Public Radio's FM broadcast of the 22nd. Annual Chicago Jazz Festival on a network of over 300

Yan Carlos Artime, piano

Cuban emigre, trained in Havana's top conservatory. Former Member of Cuban ensemble led by flutist Maraca Valle & Otra Vision. Recorded "Havana Calling" on Qbadisc and "Rumba Jazz: Tribute to Chombo Silva" on Sunnyside Records. Now one of San Juan, Puerto Rico's first call pianists. Youngest member of Batacumbele.



Goyo: You are the new member of Batacumbele and the second cuban in the band's history (first one was Ignacio Berroa). How are they treating you in

Puerto Rico? Are you playing with other bands there?

Yan: Very well! I am having the opportunity to play all kinds of music, from musica jibara to traditional jazz.

Goyo: With what bands did you played in Cuba?

Yan: I was part of the founding members of the group "Otra Vision" with Orlando Valle (Maraca). I also worked with Joaquin Betancourt, arranger and director of "Opus 13", one of the best bands of Cuba at the time. We used to play Latin jazz and salsa cubana.



Goyo: How does it feel to be part of Batacumbele?

Yan: It is an honor. They are excellent musicians and people. I get along with all of them, both personally and musically. I am happy to be here. It is a group were you have the opportunity to learn from each other and to express your individuality.



Giovanni Hidalgo "Mañenguito"

congas & percussion, Latin Percussion Inc., Endorser. Considered the greatest conga player in the world -the Michael Jordan of his instrument.

Goyo: Many people think that the Giovanni-El Negro combination is one of the most explosive and exciting one in Latin jazz. What kind of relationship do you have with him? Do you have any future projects with him?



Giovanni: I have known El Negro for many years now. We have developed a special chemistry together, especially because we both have a strong willingness to learn. We read each other by just looking at each other. We have a future project together scheduled for November.

Goyo: You sometimes play the drum set. We have seen in Latin jazz an effort to incorporate the more traditional latin percussion instruments into the playing of the drum kit, for example, with "El Negro" and Ignacio Berroa. I get the impression that you have done the reverse, i.e., incorporate your knowledge of the drum kit to your conga playing. Is that right?

Giovanni: Absolutely! The first and most important person on this is Ignacio Berroa.

He is mi "tio" and I have a deep respect for him as a musician. I started to experiment with a different approach to the conga in 1977. I remember that I would get a lot of questions about how I did make the conga sounds so strong without raising my arms.

Goyo: There are many great congueros but only a few that can fully master (to the point of even composing) jazz and the afro-caribbean musical traditions. What do you think is needed to develop such bilingualism?

Giovanni: It is important to keep educating yourself from different styles of music so that you can bring versatility into whatever context. Since I was a kid I listened to all kinds of music.

Luis: A different type of versatility was obvious in the Conga Kings CD. Candido belongs to that tradition of conga players with an emphasis on strenght in an era when they did not connect microphones to the congas. Then Patato is famous for his melodic approach. You, on the other hand, seem to incorporate all of the above...

Giovanni: In one conga you can hit from 10 to 13 different sounds. So imagine with five timbas and the way you have them tune up for the ocaasion. From all those possibilities available you guide yourself by whatever else is happening musically at the moment. They are abstract graphs. It is also important in playing never to forget the pioneers (like Patato and Candido). I try in my Conga playing to incorporate the past but also move forward. I have always tried not to get a big head about all the praise regarding my playing. It seems to me that the moment you start doing that you have closed yourself to learning. There are many incredible congueros out there, there is no reason to start putting me labels as "king", "the greatest", or the "best in the world".

Luis: In your duet cd with Michel Camilo you showed that you can put aside velocity when needed . That relationship got you to participate in the upcoming film about Latin jazz by Fernando Trueba...

Giovanni: Yes, there is more to life than speed. In fact, the slower stuff can be the most difficult. It was truly an honor to play next to Puente for that film. Tito open the doors to all percussionists in the world. One of the greatest experiences in my life has been to play with Puente. Even in his old age you could hear and feel with every stroke of his stick something that is very hard to describe. In someone like that, physical capabilities may somewhat fade, but there is always something there that does not go away with time. Puente is Puente.

Goyo: In what direction do you think it would be good for Latin jazz to go?

Giovanni: Latin jazz Musicians should try to develop their own style while also open to new styles of jazz. I hope there will be more well thought out harmony between jazz and the latin elements. Jazz is very neutral in the sense that it allows itself to almost any rhythm. Working with Dizzy was working with the precursor of what is even yet to come. God gave me the opportunity to share and learn with musicians that even though they are not with us they are still with me. But one must not take things for granted, one must keep growing and learning. Patience, dedication, and



discipline are key to growth.

Luis: Don't you think that the Bolero is a good example of a promising contribution to Latin jazz?

Giovanni: Of course, and from bolero you can easily move into the Guaracha and the Son. If you notice you are doing "cum bim Bum Pa" , and then " Bim Pa", Bim Pa" is a very slow guaracha. Even though the Bolero is slow in some of then the Metric is complex.

Goyo: Do you have any specific plans regarding future recordings or education?

Giovanni: I have many things going, but I intend to do them one at a time. I need to finish my instructional material and then I am interested on starting a new quartet with a piano, drums, conga, and a guitar. Once in a while I do get the urge to sit down in the piano and compose whatever comes to mind. I store them and have faith someday I will use them. Once a year I do give clinics at the Berklee School. I just did that with my friend John Santos, whom I have known for a long time and respect as a percussionist.

Goyo: Can you imagine what would happen if the doors to Cuba were open in terms of the interaction between musicians from Puerto Rico and Cuba?

Giovanni: I am still very hopeful that soon there will be a direct flight from San Juan to La Havana. I would like to return this year to the jazz fest in Cuba. Chucho has already contacted me about this. Next time I do not want to rush and have the time to listen to some of the local music.

Luis: What do you think about this Batacumbele reunion in Chicago? I imagine it is hard to meet when many of you have your own bands and projects. There seems to be also developing a San Juan school of Latin jazz with, for example, Humberto Ramirez, Charlie Sepulveda, and so many others...

Giovanni: I am living now in Florida but I love all those guys you mentioned. I am proud of being part of that first Batacumbele generation (with Cachete, Papo Vazquez, Eric Figueroa, Gua-Gua, Jerry Medina, Ignacio Berroa). The idea to form this group actually started in NY but it was actualized in PR. They had one of their first gigs in PR and I went to see them. Afterwards they invited me to join them in a rehearsal at the hotel where they were staying. They wanted to check me out to see if I had what it takes. I ended up staying 3 days with them in the hotel. My Mom thought she had lost me! Needless to say, when I returned home she was waiting for me. That was the rehearsal that really initiated Batacumbele.

Luis: are you familiar with the record Time Machine of Cortijo?

Giovanni: Indeed, that was the most amazing "ahead of its time" LP in Latin jazz. I cannot believe that when it came out, it was totally ignored. The guy who wrote the arrangement was Carlos Miranda, a Puerto Rican cuatrista.

Goyo: Any opinions on what is now known as Timba? Are not there some similarities with the Songo played by Batacumbele in the 80's?

Giovanni: You can see in both influences from guaguancó, abacua, bomba, charanga, as well as North American influences. My compadre Changuito developed this style in Cuba and me in Puerto Rico when we did not know each other. I got to know about Changuito through Cachete and I remember asking Cachete, "why does he play like I do?" Timba keeps growing and Songo is Son and "Go Go". We also need to see their historical connection with what people like Joe Bataan and Pete Rodriguez did.

Goyo: Who are some of the jazz musicians you like to listen to?

Giovanni: Lee Morgan, Clifford Brown, Art Blakey, Lester Young, Dizzie, Charles Mingus, Horace Silver, Cecil Taylor, Oscar Peterson, Elvin Jones, Roy Haynes, Billy Cobham, Airtto Moreira.

Goyo: Do you think it is important for there to be more interaction between the Afro-Caribbean world and Brazil?

Giovanni: I know personally many remarkable Brazilian musicians. To connect with Brazil is also to connect with Jazz. From Jobim to Hermeto they have made their contribution to Jazz. It is all connected. As far as I am concerned, Jazz is Caribbean music born in New Orleans. In developing my own style I have started from where I am: Puerto Rico, but one need to open oneself to the rest of the world.



John Santos, percussion

Goyo: In the integration of Afro-Caribbean rhythms to jazz is there a difference between them in terms of how easy or difficult is such integration? For example, my impression is that Bomba is better and easier to integrate to jazz than Plena...

John: There are two ways to answer that question. If you just generalize and think about jazz as the general swing feeling and you look at the general way that Afro-Caribbean music has been played in 4-4 time, then depending on the tempo they can come together very comfortably or sometimes it can be more difficult. For example, up tempo bebop is not so conducive to Afro-Caribbean rhythms. But one must also recognize that both worlds are so wide and diverse that the answer to your question would depend on what particular combinations. In the end one has to rely on trial and error (i.e., experimentation) to determine what fits or what doesn't. For example, the Plena and the Calipso has a strong pulse accent so depending on what style of jazz and what instrumentation it can work very well in certain situations. The Bomba does seem to me a bit more conducive to Latin jazz. This has been shown by Papo Vazquez, William Cepeda, and David Sanchez.



Goyo: You strike me as a musician that have always been open to interaction with other musicians from all places and styles. I read recently that you have

even played with the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble. How was that experience?

John: That was a beautiful experience! The group came to do a residency in the San Francisco- Bay area. My playing with them was sort of by accident. I was supposed to be a guest in a festival with the Cuban band "Columna B" but there was some mis-communication and I ended up playing with the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble. I was blown away by what they do as a jazz trio.

Goyo: Do you think it is important for there to be more interaction between the Afro-Caribbean music world and Brazil? Why is there so much mutual ignorance? Is not there a great deal in common?

John: That is an interesting but complex issue. There are many different reasons why there is a division today between these two musical worlds. There is the factor of the distance of Brazil from "El Caribe" as well as the fact of a different language. There is, of course, a great deal in common but nothing like there is between those centered on the Caribbean basin. Also, keep in mind that there is plenty of new things to learn and explore from the richness and diversity of both Jazz and Afro-Caribbean worlds. To dwell deeply (and really learn) from these two worlds and then extend oneself to Brazil is really hard. It would take a lot of lifetimes. I am in fact dealing with a related issue lately since I am part of the Latin Jazz committee for the Smithsonian. We are currently choosing music for a 6 cd box set that is going to represent Latin jazz, and one of the big issues is what to do about Brazilian type of Latin jazz. There is a lot of disagreement about it. Our consensus so far is that the Brazilian music needs to be represented separately. We could not, because of the limitations of this compilation (only 6 cd's), really give it the space that it rightly deserves. There will be some Brazilian representation in the compilation, we cannot just ignore it but we are going to have to do some explaining. My pick would be Hermeto Pascoal but there are so many other incredible jazz musicians.



Goyo: Perhaps with time there will be more musicians like Edsel Gomez who have had his own personal reasons to visit Brazil every year, so that those barriers you mentioned will slowly come down. In any case, is there any strong argument in favor of trying to include and learn from the Brazilians?

John: Of course!, their music is sophisticated in different but complementary ways to ours. When you talk about harmony, which is so important in jazz, what they have been doing is amazing. They are the most advanced in Latin America on this. Our Afro-Caribbean type of Latin jazz is more centered on rhythm. Hence, there is the possibility of complementing our strengths.

Goyo: But what about experimenting with rhythms or styles that are much closer to us, like what about opening ourselves to the music of Veracruz (Mexico)?

Luis: Yes, you played once with Mono Blanco, a band from Veracruz. Did you feel that the Son Jarocho shows promise for incorporating more percussive elements of Latin jazz?

John: No doubt about it! There is evidence that it would be a very natural marriage.

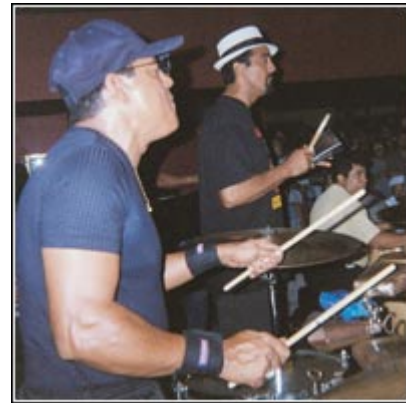
That music is part of the "Caribe experience." A lot of the rhythms and instruments they use in Veracruz are similar to the once we are so familiar with. Take, for example, the rhythms that they use with "decimas." A lot of the meters are 6/8 type of rhythms which then have the possibility of bringing the African element with "tambores." In Cuba they have been experimenting with this for a while now. The music has the same feel throughout the Caribbean basin.

Luis: One of your collaborator is Wayne Wallace. I love the stuff you guys write together. How do you collaborate?

John: Wayne is an original member of Machete, almost 15 years, before that we both played with Pete Escovedo. He is a treasure of the Bay area and little by little the world is getting to know him. He just came out with his first solo record. He wrote all of the music. He is an incredible composer and arranger. He comes versed in jazz from an Afro-American context but during the 80's he opened* his heart and mind to the Afro-Caribbean world. There were four of us that wrote for Machete: Wallace, John Calloway, Rebeca Mauleon and me. Rebeca left the group about 6 years ago when her son was born and later she pursued a solo career. She and Calloway are also great composers. They both help me when I compose. I usually start with the rhythm and melody parts and then they take care of the harmonies and final arranging decisions.

Goyo: Any present or future projects?

John: We have a lot of things going on. We are always recording even though it has been difficult to release records. We have been together for 15 years with only four cd's out. This is not because we are not writing. We write every year, so we have a stockpile of recordings. If we had to depend on the recording companies we would be nowhere. Even when we do not have record contract we record. I just pay that out of my own pocket . Each of our cds's have been with different companies. It is just difficult to establish a good relationship with a record company. The next record is going to be interesting because we have a lot of guests, for example, Dafnis Prieto, Yosvanny Terry, Fajardo, Carlos del Puerto, and Roberto Carcasses. It will not come out until next year. We also did a project last week in L.A. with the Bobby Matos band, a spontaneous Descarga that was a lot of fun. It will be out on the Ubiquity label soon.



Luis: We believe that among Latin jazz musicians today there are two (one in each coast of the US) that stand out in that they are not only great musicians but are also historians, educators, preservers of the musical tradition, and are remarkably fluent. You are one of them, the other one is in the East Coast: Bobby Sanabria. Have you ever hooked up with him?

John: Thanks! Yes, but not enough as we would like. He invited me once to give a presentation at the Manhattan School were he teaches. Our path has crossed but we have not had the opportunity to do something together. Perhaps, we may be able in the jazz education convention in January (in NY).We have a lot o respect for each other.

Goyo: Is this a good time for Latin jazz?

John: It is nice to see the whole Latin jazz thing expanding but there is a lot of work to be done. We cannot assume that just because Latin Music is so popular that now everything is cool. Actually, in some ways it is a more difficult period because the most creative musicians are having a more difficult time getting work. The ones getting the opportunities are the ones doing the more popular stuff. They are the ones that get the press coverage. Financially it is tough. They can pay you the same amount they used to give you 15 years ago because they can now pay so much less to get groups from Cuba that are "de moda."

Luis: One direction Latin jazz seem to be taking is towards smaller groups. One would think that makes them more affordable.

John: True, I just hope it does not mean that we have to make trios in order to make a living. And there are not that many Danilo Perez out there. What about bands like Batacumbele, Irakere, Machete? I hope there are more opportunities to hear groups like that on tour. The problem is that the company sell images. It is not about the music. They do not take any chances. We need to deal with these issues.

Goyo: We have learned from the LatinJazz eGroup (on the Internet) that there are plenty of Latin jazz musicians that struggle with the problem of invisibility even within the small context of the mainstream Jazz world.



John: We cannot force people to listen to Latin jazz but what we deserve is equal recognition in the local press and in education. It is not about competition but about some equal footing so that more people can hear the music. If you look at a recent Jazz Times magazine you will find it full of advertisement of many Jazz educative programs in universities and conservatories but there is hardly any Latin presence. "Gracias a Dios" that there are people like you that take a genuine interest in the music and that are trying to help educate the people!

Edward "Guagua" Rivera, bass

Legendary studio bassist responsible for recording on thousands of Fania Label sessions throughout the late 60's, 70's & 80's. Original member of Batacumbele. Currently based in Miami Florida leading his ensemble The Latin Jazz Crew. "Guagua" still performs world-wide with Larry Harlow's Salsa Legends as well as special concerts with Batacumbele. He helped to popularize the sound of the Ampeg Electric Upright Baby Bass during salsa music's heyday in the 1970's.



Goyo: After being a sideman in so many classic recordings in Salsa and Latin jazz you now have your own group...

Guagua: Yes, in fact we just released our second one titled "Bridges Cross." We are a

quintet based on Miami. Our first CD was well received. It was nominated for a grammy. For the second we just went together to the studio and did it live, in the sense that we were all there at the same time. This is important, you need that interchange.

Goyo: How is the Latin jazz scene in Miami?

Guagua: In general the Latin jazz scene all over the world sucks! It is terrible. Jazz has 2% of the American music industry and Latin jazz probably less than 1%. Needless to say, we are not in this to make money. There is a lot of great Latin jazz that gets done that gets lost because few are listening. Take for example, Giovanni Hidalgo's great CD's (I participated in both) "Worldwide" and "Time Shifter," Where are they? Can you find them in record stores today? It is a shame that this is the state of the business.

Goyo: But you should have seen the reaction of the audience here today when you guys came on stage. At the end of your set everyone was standing up. When you see that it is hard to believe that Latin jazz is not doing well.

Guagua: Right! When we play it live people freak out. I bet you anything that most bands in this festival will not get the reaction Batacumbele got today. In 1971 when I was playing in a live concert with the Mongo Santamaria band in front of a Swedish audience we had the same sort of wonderful reaction from people . I knew then that this is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Experiences like today's are what keep me going.



Goyo: You are in so many important albums of that classic Salsa period of the 70's. One distinctive feature of that era was the use of the baby bass and you were one of the pioneers in that context.

Guagua: To this day I still use it. I still use the same one that my father bought me in 1966. The story of the baby bass is that even though it was manufactured for the American big band scene it was use mostly by Latin orchestras especially when Rock came along.

Luis. Do you see Latin jazz going in a more smaller ensemble direction? Is that a good thing?

Guagua: It may be more economical, but more importantly, it allows you a freer context for individual expression. I started my group with an entire horn ensemble but when you do that sometimes you lose certain flexibility.

Luis: In what directions should Latin jazz go? What is the Latin jazz that you are digging now? Is Miami a good place for music?

Guagua: It has to have its own signature like the stuff we are trying to do in the "Latin Jazz Crew." In the West Coast you have more than 20 bands playing what Mongo played 20 years ago and some of that has also happened in the East Coast. There are too many Jazz musicians today following the same old formats. If Charlie Parker was alive today he would not be playing the same way he was playing back in the 30's! But today you have alto sax players spending 8 hours a day in their house learning Donna

Lee. Please, find your own Donna Lee!, your own voice. Miami is a very promising "virgin Latin jazz country" because of the presence of a huge diversity of cultures not only from the Caribbean but from Central and South America.

Goyo: Do you admire any particular "straight ahead" Jazz bass player?

Guagua: Of course, and even some that play in symphonies. I love Ron Carter. I remember when I met him back in 1971 he said: "Hey kid! That Tumbao thing you do? What is that? Don't you get bored playing it over and over again?" I replied, "it may be the same thing written but every time you play it you are supposed to play it different, and sometimes by just a hair." When you laid down that "Tumbao" you have to be also thinking about everything else that is going on rhythmically. Latin Bass playing may look simple but it is not. God made me a Puerto Rican and that means that as a bass player I must begin with certain feelings to learn certain things.

Luis: Tonight we were impressed by your interaction with the new Batacumbele pianist...

Guagua: O yes, you mean Yan. Can you believe this is only the third time we play together? We had not played together until two days ago! We are sure communicating.

Luis: What do you think of the classical conservatory training that many Latin jazz musicians are getting? Is that a good thing? Is it pushing the music on a chamber direction?

Guagua: It is not bad as long as the musicians that you are thinking about do not have a conductor, i.e., as long as the musician is conducting himself. The only one swinging in an orchestra is the conductor.

Benjamin Vega "El Pollo", flute, soprano and tenor sax

Goyo: Are you a new member of Batacumbele?

Pollo: Not really. I have been playing with them since the 1980's but only when they needed a substitute.

Luis: We were impressed with your performance tonight. You played flute, soprano and tenor sax, and you even sang "coros." Furthermore, your improvisations had some of that free jazz edge that you can hear in other bands in this festival. What is your musical background?

Pollo: Thanks. I studied Jazz in the Escuela Libre de Caguas, one of the most important music schools in the island. Since I was a kid I have been listening to all the Jazz greats. I have played with Charlie Palmieri, Tito Puente, Roberto Roena's Apollo Sound, Bobby Valentin, Willie Rosario, Charanga 76. I currently teach lessons at home on sax improvisation. I am proud to say that I have students that are now in the Berklee School of Music.



Goyo: You sure have played with solid bands that are schools!

Pollo: Oh yes, especially Batacumbele. When you play with this band you have to give your best, you cannot fake it.

Hector M. "Endel" Dueño, timbales & percussion

Veteran studio and concert musician equally skilled in trap drums as well as timbales. He participated in the landmark Grammy winning recordings "The Sun of Latin Music" and "Unfinished Masterpiece" by Eddie Palmieri. His professional career spans over 30 years.



Goyo: People that know about timbaleros know who you are. In fact, I read somewhere that they invite you every year to some major competition between the best timbaleros. Can you tell us about that?

Endel: I do not like the word "competition", though that is the term sometimes used to sell these events. What you are talking about is called "La Batalla De Los Palos". There will be one next week in Puerto Rico. I think this year it is between Nicky Marrero, Orestes Vilato, Edgardo Morales, and myself.

Goyo: In what new projects are you participating in Puerto Rico?

Endel: We just recorded a new Descarga Boricua. But I do not know if I am supposed to say more about that...

Jerry Medina, lead vocals, trumpet, vocal chorus

RMM Records/Tropijazz Records recording artist, original member of Batacumbele, now enjoys prestige as star vocalist and bandleader on the leading salsa label RMM. His performance and recording credits include: vocalist on Palmieri's Grammy winning "The Truth-La Verdad" -hundreds of recording credits- Solo albums include: "Feeling Alright", "De Parranda Con JM."



Goyo: I remember seeing you as part of the band that appears in the video of **Cheo en la Habana**. Was that your first time in Cuba? How was that experience?

Jerry: Terrific experience. It was my third time in Cuba. The first two times with Batacumbele in 1981 and in 1984 in the Festival de Varadero. Cheo picked many that are now in "Descarga Boricua" including musical director Luis Garcia.

Goyo: Do you realize that there are many that think you and Bobby Carcasses

are "two wings of the same bird"? You both are leaders, trumpet players, and use jazz vocalization in a Latin jazz context.

Jerry: This is the second time someone says that to me. I have not met him but I know about his music and I think he is very talented. I hope we can meet someday.

Luis: Any recording plans?

Jerry: I was invited to record for the CD Masterpiece of Palmieri/Puente and that has kept things that I had been working on hold. In fact, Palmieri now wants to tour with the band. Next weekend we have a concert at Madison Square Gardens, there are some others in Los Angeles and Puerto Rico. However, I sure hope to be able to continue to work on my new CD.

Goyo: Lets talk about your singing. You are obviously a sonero influenced by the tradition of Maelo, Beny, etc., but what about the jazz, non-Latin, aspect of your style?

Jerry: That comes from my upbringing. My parents moved to the USA when I was a child. We used to go to a church where my mom played the trumpet, my dad trombone. It was there that I first was exposed to Gospel, Jazz, and Blues. In the university, I also got interested in Rock groups like Crosby, Stills, and Nash; Grand Funk; Beatles... Later I had the opportunity to meet Sarah Vaughan in the North Sea Jazz Festival. I was with the Eddie Palmieri's band that recorded the Grammy winning LP "The Truth". She had a huge impact on me. That experience made me inquire into Billie Holiday and the rest of the vocal jazz tradition.

Goyo: How does it feel to be reunited once again with Batacumbele?

Jerry: This is a very special group. We all have our own group projects but when we get together it is such an energy and chemistry! We only have to see each other to communicate musically. It is even more special when you get the sort of reaction we got from the audience today. It has been a great experience.

Goyo: I just think it is a shame that so much of the world does not know about Batacumbele. I wish you guys would have the opportunity to record in the sort of high quality studio that you rightly deserve...



Jerry: People that know about music know about Batacumbele, but unfortunately, we have not had the exposure. The radio, for example, is a big challenge. It is not commercial music. I am sure that right now, if we had the right offer everyone in the band would put their own plans on hold to record a CD. We are on fire as you have seen here today in the Chicago Jazz Festival. The reaction of the audience was great.

Luis: Do you think there is a distinctive Latin jazz approach coming from Puerto Rico, so that there can be a "San Juan school" (e.g. Charlie Sepulveda,

Humberto Ramirez...)? Perhaps it is more experimental, generally, than the West Coast, but less free and aggressive than the East Coast? I love that middle!

Jerry: What unites us all is Rhythm. Perhaps that sabroso middle point has to do with the fact that we in Puerto Rico care about the dancer. We want to make music that moves both the serious listener and dancer. For example, that is what I had in mind when I composed "Catilangua".

Goyo: Is there a movement starting in P.R. in terms of an actual consciousness to Afro-Puertorican culture-music?

Jerry: Absolutely, we now have bomba and plena festivals. We need to be grateful that there are such courageous groups as Plena Libre, Truko y Zaperoko, and Viento de Agua.

Luis: Are you incorporating some of those rhythms to jazz?

Jerry: Yes, I have already experimented with the decima en blues and there is some more Bomba and Plena in my new material. I like to disguise it though, a little bit, so that I can educate the public. La Bomba is such a rich rhythm with all sorts of variations. I believe that life is all about rhythm and without rhythm, we are nothing. Can we walk without rhythm? If the heart is out of rhythm, we are in trouble. There is even a method of birth control based on rhythm. Whatever you do you cannot do it well without rhythm.

Angel Ruben Maldonado Cruz, aka "Cachete"

Founder and Director, conga player. World-class percussionist, recording artist, bandleader and teacher. Based in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Recently featured in upcoming cable movie "Flight to Freedom" featuring Andy Garcia, about the life of Cuban trumpeter Arturo Sandoval. Nearly one-thousand recording credits. Students come from as far as Japan for instruction. Leads group called "Los Majaderos." One of Puerto Rico's greatest unsung heroes and percussion masters. Quietly amassing an incredible resume. Recently appeared on soundtrack to Mission Impossible II with Los Jaguares (w/ Anthony Carrillo). Gives clinics with Giovanni Hidalgo.



Luis: You obviously have plenty of people in Chicago that know about Batacumbele. The reaction of the public in the Chicago Jazz Fest was great...

Cachete: You should have seen the reception we got in Madison and Milwaukee.

Luis: You have created a music school with Batacumbele. This reunion must be very special for you...

Cachete: We try to reunite the group 3 or 4 times a year, mostly for festivals. I am delighted and proud that so much talent has grown out of Batacumbele. I have also

created another school after Batacumbele, the Taller Cultural Afro-Antillano in Puerto Rico. For the last 15 years, we have been teaching all dimensions of Afro-Caribbean culture.

Luis: I know Puerto Rican and Cuban musicians respect and appreciate each other, but I think that Batacumbele is an obvious counterexample to the prejudice that only Cubans can make great Afro-Caribbean music.

Cachete: Since the very beginnings of Afro-Caribbean music there has been a mutually beneficial relationship between PR and Cuba. Cubans are very proud people about their music. And they should be. I think it is futile to get into the game of who is better. The best is only God.



Luis: The best groups have always had both Puerto Ricans and Cubans and in this one, your new Cuban pianist is fabulous. And I should also mention that your new sax player "El Pollo" is also remarkable.

Cachete: Yes! Tito Puente, Machito, Tito Rodriguez also had gringos. Yes, Yan is very talented and keep in mind that the piano is not his instrument, he is a violinist. His Mom, who lives in Madrid, is a concert pianist. "El Pollo" is not really a new member. He plays with us when he can or someone is missing. He is a musician with incredible talent. He may be thin and small like a "pollo" but he has craftsman lungs. He can blow.

Goyo: Is there a movement starting in P.R. in terms of an actual consciousness to Afro-Puerto Rican culture-music?

Cachete: There is now a strong movement. Puerto Rico right now has close to 100 Plena groups. The truth is that our music has never really died. I have tried to make that possible by educating our children. The problem is always trying to counteract those commercial forces, like payola.

Goyo: Are you familiar with the Latin jazz group that is very heavy on Afro-Rican rhythms, CLAVE TRES? Don't you have also other groups in PR?

Cachete: Of course I know Clave Tres. That is Raul Berrios group. He is related to me. I really have three groups: Batacumbele, Los Majaderos, and Caribe Negro. This last one is all about everything Black: drums, dance, poetry, and chants. We cover the entire Caribe. Then there is Batacumbele where we cover Afro-Caribbean jazz, and other folkloric and popular styles. Los Majaderos is an extension of Batacumbele but a smaller ensemble of five or six in order to be able to be more experimental.

Luis: Any plans to record?

Cachete: Our last one is Los Hijos del Tambor. It was nominated for "Premios Tu Musica" in the Latin jazz category. I hope to record with Los Majaderos. Our problem is really economic. The groups from Cuba can travel the world because Fidel sends them and they are inexpensive. If I were president of Puerto Rico, I would send all of my groups on tour. I would pay them very little but I would take care of their families. Our situation is different. For people to listen to us is a different struggle. I have knocked

on so many doors to find a producer and high quality studio in the USA without success. I also worry about the economic interest of producers. I want to be able to record what I want. They are scared of us because they are afraid that we would not do something commercial enough. I have so much material right now waiting to be recorded but I am not willing to compromise my principles. That's why I remain a free agent. We may not be rich and famous but our small contributions to the music will endure.

Luis: Don't you think that San Juan has a lot of talent and a distinctive Latin jazz school?

Cachete: The world knows that. In Europe, they know that in PR, there is a lot of talent but as I explained before, we cannot really compete economically with the Cuban wave. We are expensive in comparison with Cuban groups that would sleep anywhere. However, international producers in Italy, Spain, and Holland know that our music has its own distinctive sound.