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Rejecting the Shadow: Steve Berrios, An Apache of the Skins, Discusses his Musical Influences, Latin Jazz Music, and the Significance of the Fort Apache Band

WILSON A. VALENTÍN -ESCOBAR

Steve Ramon Berrios, characterized by many as the leading inventor of Latin jazz drumming, is one of the unspoken heroes of Latin jazz music. He was born on February 24, 1945, in New York City to Puerto Rican parents, Steve Berrios, Sr. and Mérida Pizarro Berrios. They raised the talented musician on the Upper Westside of Manhattan, where his neighbors included some of Latin music’s most prominent performers, such as Israel “Cachao” López, Federico Pagani, Mario Bauzá, and Lino Sierra. Born and raised into a musical family, the elder Berrios was a professional drummer who performed and recorded with Macelino Guerra, Noro Morales, and Pupi Campos. Exposed to Puerto Rican bomba, plena, jíbaro music, African-American jazz, as well as Cuban music, Steve Berrios recalls listening to an array of musical genres at home, from European classical music to Trio Los Panchos to Charlie Parker. This organic musical environment proved invaluable for his musical formation and imagination.

After picking up the bugle and the trumpet, he became a proficient drummer as a teenager. Through his father’s recommendation, he performed with a local house band at the Alameda hotel in Manhattan. He was then invited into Mongo Santamaria’s band, playing traps and timbales for over a decade with the late Cuban bandleader. In 1981 he joined the legendary Jerry Gonzalez and the Fort Apache Band, contributing his knowledge and experience to the ensemble. The leader of his own band, Son Bachéche, Berrios has performed and/or recorded with the late Tito Puente, Larry Willis, Paquito D’Rivera, Eddie Palmieri, Art Blakey, and many others. In this interview, an excerpt of a larger oral history conducted on October 25, 2001 at Columbia University’s Center for Jazz Studies, Steve Berrios reflects upon his family, musical influences, teaching strategies and performance techniques, performances at the Soundscape music club, and the significance of the Fort Apache Band. Mr. Berrios continues to reside in New York City.
Wilson Valentín: Before we talk about your musical influences and experiences, can you discuss some of your educational experiences?

Steve Berrios: I barely got out of high school. Matter of fact, I got left back a year. Not because I was dumb or anything, but I never went to school. I used to cut school like crazy, and I’ll tell you why I cut school and my mom used to allow me to do that. As opposed to going to school, I used to keep my lunch money and then hop the train to go to the Apollo. If you arrived before twelve o’clock, it was a dollar admission and you could see four or five shows a day, and in between the shows there was a cartoon, a newsreel, then the same show goes on again. And I used to see people like Tito Puente’s band, when he had Willie Bobo and Mongo Santamaría and Bobby Rodriguez on bass. I saw Machito’s band too. I used to cut every time there was a good show, and there was basically a good show every week. The show used to last like a week and then another show would turn over. So I saw from like Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers to Machito and his Afro-Cubans to Duke Ellington and his orchestra. So that was my schooling.

WV: How do you identify racially/ethnically?

SB: I’m an African in the Diaspora. That’s how I’ve seen myself. Not by choice, because that’s a fact. That’s what it is. It’s not because, “Oh, I just want to be called a Puerto Rican,” or I want to be called Latino, I want to be called Hispanic. To me, all that’s hogwash because it’s not getting to the root of what you really are. I’m an African in the Diaspora, and I’m proud of that. And I speak Spanish muy bien. Y a veces puedo hablar como un puertorriqueño o un cubano. And that’s a feather in my cap. Some people think that I am Puerto Rican who has a desire to be a Cuban. That’s basically because I was raised among more Cubans than Puerto Ricans.

WV: Did the Civil Rights Movement assert a more positive notion of being a black man in the Diaspora?

SB: I was in the Nation of Islam. I joined the Nation of Islam, which I was one of a handful of Puerto Ricans, black Puerto Ricans at that time. And I was in the Nation for a while.

WV: Who invited you? How did that happen?

SB: Through mutual friends in high school. I was very attracted to Malcolm X. I used to go see him at temple number 7. He used to make speeches at 116th Street and Lennox Avenue, which is now Malcolm X Boulevard, or on 125th Street. There were a lot of speakers there. So I was always attracted to nationalism, pan-Africanism, I would say. And so much so that when they assassinated Martin Luther King I was having lunch with Mongo and a few other musicians in the band, and we were working in San Francisco that week, a place called The Matador. And I read in the paper, or it came on the news or something that Martin Luther King was assassinated. My reaction was, “Oh wow, now they’re assassinating Uncle Toms.”
parties, and they used to bring their guitars, and I used to sit around playing the bongo or the conga, you know. But my first professional job, one of my first professional jobs on playing percussion, on drums, was when my dad was working at a hotel on 57th Street called the Alameda Room. And the drummer—there were two bands, like a show band and a dance band—and for some reason the drummer left so my dad said, “Would you be interested in doing this job?” And I was around seventeen, eighteen years old. It was a steady, six- night-a-week gig and making good money for those days, so at seventeen I was already making good money. And I stayed on that job for about four or five years, every night. I never missed a night, six nights a week. During this time, I learned a lot about different types of music. Playing paso dobles, tangos, all that kind of stuff. Because then after that my dad left the show band, and I took over playing the shows, and I did that for four years. So I played with Ruth Fernández, Miguelito Valdez, Bobby Capó, Johnny Rodríguez, Tito Rodríguez’s brother, Los Tres Aces, and Myrta Silva. I accompanied all those shows. That was really a great learning experience for me.

This was on 57th Street, so we used to do a show and then we had an hour and a half break. I used to run to the Palladium on my break to go see where my heart really was. There was Palladium or Birdland, which was the next block. So I used to do that faithfully. On my breaks I would run back and forth. Sometimes I used to take a cab or just run down there and catch maybe a half hour of the music. So I saw Machito’s band, Puente’s band, you name it, I saw them there. And then right down the block I used to go to Birdland and see Miles Davis, Horace Silver, Art Blakey, Thelonious Monk, all at that same age. I was like seventeen or eighteen years old. I was being bombarded with different styles of music all at once, it was all coming into my head. And at that age you can process so much stuff subconsciously.

WV: How did you meet Mongo Santamaría?
SB: I met him through my dad. On Sunday afternoons they used to have matinees, and they used to have a pretty hip band, they used to have La Playa Sextet or Mongo Santamaría’s band used to come by. And he heard me playing and because his drummer was leaving at the time he asked if I’d be interested in joining his band. And you know what my reaction was. That was like my freedom after four years of doing something I didn’t appreciate at the time. I did, in a way. But I wanted to play hipper kind of music. So I jumped at the opportunity. I just left it all there and joined Mongo’s band. First time I got on an airplane. I was really green at the other side of life, you know. And from then I stayed with Mongo’s band from like ’67, ’68, on and off through 1980, ’81. So I did a lot of traveling; I grew up on that band. That was like my real college.

WV: Why did you leave Mongo’s band?
SB: Trying to be a good father and husband. Finally raise some of my children. And I was tired of playing that music. After fifteen years of playing with one band...
Art Blakey was another mentor. I played with him and I was his road manager for about a year in 1985 and 1986 and hung out with him. He taught me a lot about life, about being a band leader, about how to get the best out of your musicians without making it obvious so they can feel comfortable, so they can feel wanted or that they're contributing something to the group. As a road manager, I used to check the musicians in at the airports and at the hotels. I used to get paid from the promoters, I used to pay the band, I used to pay Art Blakey, I used to pay myself. I learned a lot from that. And before I got that job, before he offered me the job, he asked: “Well what are you doing?” And I wasn't working at the time. He said, “Why don't you come to Paris with me, just as a vacation.” I said, “Oh sure, why not.” And from that, one thing led to another. Then I was with him as a road manager for about a year.

WV: Did your mentors provide a foundation for your teaching/mentoring philosophy? What do you talk about when leading a music workshop?

SB: I've worked with a lot of great percussionists, and they never spoke to me about music. Everything else: baseball, politics, movies, but never about music per se. You know, and I find that consistent with all my mentors. Which I think is very interesting and that's the way I apply teaching students that I have, and I don't have that many. You know, because all music is cultural. But some people, for whatever reason, separate certain musics from their culture. And certain other music genres you must know the culture and their language. Like for example, not putting down European classical music, but if you go to a college to learn music, if you want to or not, you have to take a European classical music course. Because they say those are the masters and that's the legitimate music. You have to know where Beethoven was born, what language he spoke, what he ate. When it comes to our music, that's passé. You don't need to know that. Which I think is very derogatory to our culture because we have the same kind of heroes who are just as valid as a Beethoven or a Mozart. It's just as valid. I mean what Ramito ate, what Chano Pozo ate, what Dizzy Gillespie ate, and what town he was born in.

WV: Is that something that you talk about with your students or mentees?

SB: Yes, but not that direct. Because it's more subliminal. If a student wants to learn how to play Afro-Cuban guaguancó, you have to speak in that language.

WV: What is that language?

SB: You have to learn just a little Spanish, just to know the names of the instruments, for one. So right there you're speaking another language, you know. And it'd even be better to, “Alright, you want to know how to play Afro-Cuban guaguancó. Why don't we go have some rice and beans at a Cuban Chinese restaurant?” To understand all of that, how all these things came about. If you want to learn how to play jazz, you can't dismiss Afro-American people. You cannot dismiss that, because then it's not jazz. If you want to play bomba y plena, you can't
... clave involved in it, I'm not saying, "Well I'm speaking Spanish now." Or when I'm playing jazz I don't say, "Well I'm speaking English now." It's all one thing. And I'm glad you mentioned that I have bells on my drums, but that's not my invention. Because back in the early days Chick Webb had cow bells and temple blocks on his drum set, so did Papa Joe Jones, and so did Sonny Greer. But I just took it somewhere else, from listening to records, from watching rumba, people dance rumba and playing rumba. So I take a a little bit from here, little bit from there, and then when you put it all together, then it sounds like Steve Berrios.

WV: When did you decide to expand or change the way you perform the drums?

SB: After being exposed to the Cubans who arrived after the Mariel. What they brought to the table was quite unique to me. I saw Ignacio Berroa at Soundscape play with one bell or something, and I got some from his style of playing, and then I added more bells, and then I added my knowledge of the Afro-Cuban experience and it turns to be Steve Berrios.

WV: What's your technique?

SB: I have none. First of all, I'm self-taught. Even if my father was a great drummer, he never gave me a lesson. Just by osmosis, watching him and watching all the drummers that I like and—not just drummers, musicians in general. Watching them live, I think that's very important to do. You know, and you can hear a record but if you don't see the body language and the way musicians move and the way they set up, it's not as valid to me. So my technique: the closest way I can answer that is when I'm playing something with a clave involved, I'm thinking of rumba and congas and clave and cascara de baile on the side of the drum. That's basically my approach.

WV: Over the years, there's been a growing tendency to perceive U.S.-born Latin jazz musicians as imitators; as invalid artists imitating musical forms that derive from Cuba and elsewhere. What are your thoughts of this perception?

SB: I'm glad you brought that up. I'll answer that very simple. All those "jazz" musicians that are big stars from Cuba, that are big stars today, can't play in the Fort Apache Band. That should tell you something. Not one of them can sit and play with us. And I've played with all of them. You know what I mean? And believe me, I'm pro Cuba. But that's not what we're talking—we're talking about reality and what's true or not. Not one of those musicians can play in the Fort Apache Band. You know, again because they don't understand the vernacular. They don't know the vernacular.

WV: In addition to speaking both musical languages efficiently, what is it that makes musicians want to emulate Fort Apache? Is it how the harmonic structures are synthetically combined with rhythm?

SB: I think it's all of the above. But all of that is more, I think if a person is aware of it or not, it's raw. It's really unadulterated music. It's raw and it's very unique to New York City. I think the only place that this can be done is in New York City.