

## Features

NOVEMBER 2011 ISSUE

### The Heritage Ensemble: A Judeo-Latin Jazz Journey

By Eugene Marlow, Ph.D.

with Multi-Grammy Nominated Drummer Bobby Sanabria



Eugene Marlow's Heritage Ensemble

What happens when one culture mixes with another? You usually get something new. This is certainly the case with my group *The Heritage Ensemble*—a quintet that records and performs my original compositions and arrangements of familiar Judaic melodies in various jazz, Afro-Cuban, Brazilian, even neo-classical styles. The formation of the ensemble and the creation of almost two dozen charts in its current repertoire was perhaps inevitable. I was born in London, England to a family with deep European/Russian Jewish roots. And from a very young age I have been listening to and influenced by a variety of jazz and, particularly, Latin-jazz sounds.

#### The Afro-Cuban/Brazilian Thread

My first exposure to Latin music was in London, England in the late 1940s when I heard the Edmundo Ros sextet perform on early British television. At the same time I listened constantly to my father's 78 rpm recording of The Louis Jordan Band performing "Caldonia." I was about nine years old when my father—himself a classically trained violinist, orchestra leader, and composer—took me to an all-day jazz jamboree where I heard one of the big bands of the era, the Ted Heath Orchestra. All told, my early music "listening" was a combination of classical (through my father), big band jazz, and Latin style music.

Jumping forward to the mid-1960s, I was now in an U.S. Air Force uniform serving in California as an historian during the Vietnam War. In my off hours I had the good fortune to form a

trio in Central California with local Chicano drummer Rudy Merino, whose bossa nova brush playing was the best in the San Joaquin Valley, and bassist Sonny Jay, who, it was said, played with the Louis Jordan Band. This was also the era of the Brazilian bossa nova craze. Everywhere you went you heard either Tony Bennett's "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" or anything and everything by Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim.

Jumping forward again to the early 1990s, I was now a member of the *Milt Hinton Jazz Perspectives Series* committee at Baruch College (The City University of New York) where I have been teaching media and culture courses for the last 24 years. We invited Tito Puente to perform. Over the years we also invited The Bronx Horns, The Latin-Jazz All Stars (with Mike Mossman as leader, Arturo O'Farrill, Phoenix Rivera, Steve Turre, and David Sanchez), SYOTOS with trombonist Chris Washburne, the Chico O'Farrill Afro-Cuban Jazz Orchestra, Bobby Sanabria's Quarteto Aché, and the Manhattan School of Music Afro-Cuban Jazz Orchestra (under Sanabria's direction).



Eugene Marlow, Leader/Piano

While a member of the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop (1998-2006) I wrote several big band charts with a Latin feel, including "El Aché de Sanabria," eventually arranged and recorded by good friend and colleague Sanabria on his Grammy-nominated album "Big Band Urban Folktales" (Jazzheads 2007).

Clearly, my musical journey has been infused

with numerous Latin-jazz influences over a long period of time. For me, Latin-jazz style music has the kind of rhythmic drive and pulse that speaks to people. It makes them want to move, especially to dance.

#### Latin-Jazz Maestro Sanabria Joins The Heritage Ensemble

I first became aware of Bobby Sanabria when I serendipitously saw him narrate the history of clavé while playing the clavé (and never missing a 2/3 beat) at an International Association for Jazz Education conference in New York. A few years later we met at a Jazz Journalists Association Awards event. In my role (since 2000) as senior curator of the *Milt Hinton Jazz Perspectives Series* at Baruch College, I invited Bobby to perform. One thing has led to another, and now he's a member of *The Heritage Ensemble*.



Bobby Sanabria, Drums

Without a doubt, the formation a few years ago of the current iteration of *The Heritage Ensemble*—with NEA Performance grantee saxophonist Michael Hashim, Phi Beta Kappa/educator bassist Frank Wagner, Nuyorican virtuoso percussionist Cristian Rivera, and multi-Grammy and Latin-Grammy nominee Bobby Sanabria—has had a major influence on the group's adoption of Afro-Cuban and Brazilian rhythms in my arrangements and original compositions.

#### The Judeo-Latin-Jazz Arrangements

Take, for example, "Hatikva," the Israeli National Anthem. The music for Hatikva is based on a folk song of unknown origin. The earliest known appearance in print was early 17th century Italy as "The Dance of Mantua." The modern adaptation of the music for Hatikva was probably composed by Samuel Cohen in 1888. It's possible he took the melody from composer Bedrich Smetana's work, or that he got the melody from a Romanian version of the folk song, "Carul cu boi" ("Carriage and Oxen").

Hatikva is written in a minor key, one that may seem depressing or mournful to some people. However, as the title ("The Hope" in English) indicates, the mood of the song is uplifting. While usually played in a 4/4 rhythm, *The Heritage Ensemble* plays it in a 6/8 bembé rhythm. The combination of the original melody morphed into a bembé rhythm gives the outcome a deeper cultural and musical meaning beyond the melody.



Cristian Rivera, Percussion

According to Maestro Sanabria,

The bembé is probably the most often imitated, yet incorrectly played rhythm of West African descent in the United States. Although associated with Cuba, it is of Nigerian origin with the people known as the Yoruba who were brought to Cuba as slaves in the 19th century. Their religious belief system known as Ifá and its New World manifestation known as Santería—with its complex mythology, rituals, and music—has influenced much of Cuban popular music. The word bembé literally means ceremony, feast, gathering, and/or party. It is used to praise deities known as Orishas that explain all of the mysteries of life, both physical and meta-physical and the universe. The rhythm with its cadence in 6/8 meter is defined by an iconic bell pattern that is at the root of the "feel" of the swing ride pattern that every jazz drummer plays today. In our arrangement of Hatikva the bell pattern is reversed following the rhythmic cadence of the intro and melody and it is fused with elements of a jazz waltz feel with a backbeat from rock music on the snare drum. That means there are three rhythmic traditions being fused all at once in what I'm playing on the drumset. In the bridge of the song I switch to the Joropo, a style in three counts from Venezuela that is very syncopated and driving.

Another example: Ata Hu Hashem

"Ata Hu Hashem" is from the liturgy. The text is: "You are the Lord our God. Grant peace, welfare, blessing, grace, loving kindness and mercy unto us and unto all Israel, your people."

The melody by Shimi Tavori indicates a tempo of allegro moderato (moderately fast). We play it with a samba cansao feel.

According to Sanabria,

What the romantic slow tempo of a bolero is to Cuba, so is the samba cansao to Brazil. Tempo is a defining element in most forms of music, particularly those from Latin America, and this piece's interpretation is no exception. With its haunting melody and static harmony, I interpret the rhythmic feel of the piece on the drumset with syncopations that have their roots in the samba traditions of Brazil while occasionally I interject maraca like patterns from Cuban bolero on the hi-hat. The bass lines and extremely slow cadence of the piece define it as samba cansao, the slow romantic tempo of Brazil



Michael Hashim, Saxophones

A Third Example: Bilbililos (a.k.a. Zur Mishello)

"Zur Mishello" is an anonymous hymn that is generally chanted at the conclusion of the Sabbath meal. This poem functions as an introduction to the Grace after the Meal, and its four stanzas summarize the content of that prayer. The refrain of this hymn reads: "Rock from whose store we have eaten—Bless him, my faithful companions. Eaten have we and left over—This was the word of the Lord." Usually sung in a lyrical, 4/4 meter, we have adapted it to give it a "world music, middle-Eastern" flavor, especially with Michael Hashim on soprano saxophone. His Lebanese family background comes into play here. Rhythmically, though, the underlying drum/percussion patterns are straight out of the Afro-Cuban tradition. Sanabria comments:

The funky cadence of Puerto Rico's bomba xicá style is featured on this piece. Played in its folkloric context on rum barrels covered with goat skin, a

large maraca, and a small whiskey barrel struck with two sticks, that is called cuá. Percussionist Cristian Rivera and I simulate between congas and drum set what is normally played by five percussionists. The xicá is but one of the many styles in the Afro-Puerto Rican complex known as bomba. The tune's bass line and deeply rooted harmony in middle-eastern tradition outline beautifully the ancestral DNA that many melodies in the Caribbean have with Judaic, Arabic, East Indian and Flamenco traditions.

## The Multicultural Affect

*The Heritage Ensemble's* musical and performance approach is to take Judaic melodies (and a growing number of original compositions) and morph them into various jazz, Latin American, and, on occasion, neo-classical styles. It is not about novelty or slickness. The underlying purpose is to show audiences the commonalities among the various cultures from which all these musical styles are inherited. This is part of the reason the word "heritage" is in the ensemble's name. The current iteration of the ensemble reflects this. As mentioned earlier, saxophonist Hashim is of Lebanese descent. Bassist Wagner has an Eastern European background. Drummer Sanabria and percussionist Rivera are Nuyoricans, New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent. My own family background is Russian, German, Polish, and British. Taken together, our collective cultural and musical backgrounds add immeasurably to not only our performances, but also to our approach of melding traditional Judaic melodies with rhythms and musical styles from other cultures. The result, we feel, is a fresh sound and experience that jazz audiences and beyond can access, be inspired by, and appreciate.



Frank Wagner, Bass

Learn more about  
**The Heritage Ensemble**  
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