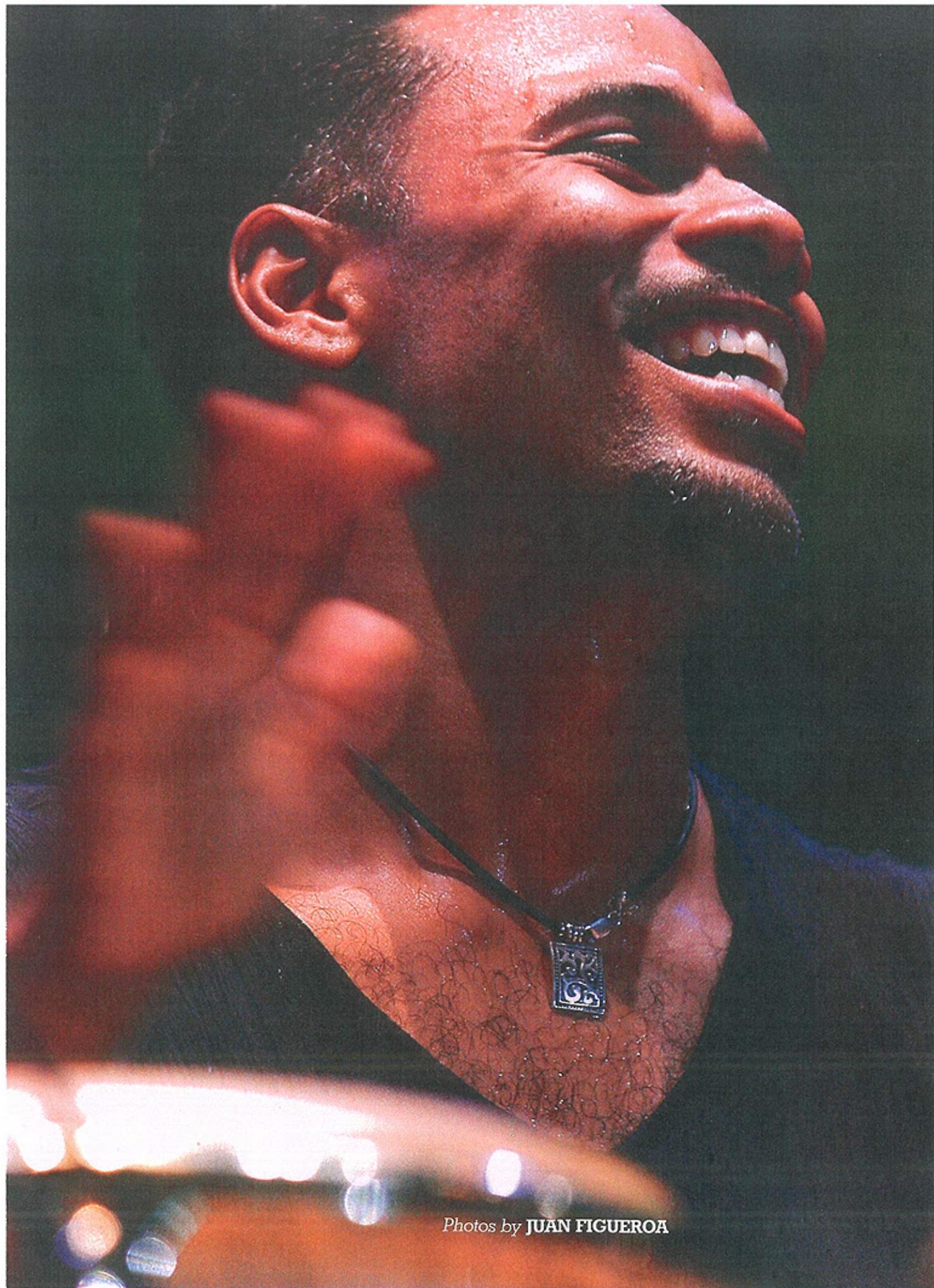


PAOLI MEJÍAS

**UN
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AL
CONGUERO**

By **ROBERT L. DOERSCHUK**



Photos by **JUAN FIGUEROA**

When Paoli Mejías talks about how Latin music is at a crossroads, with one way leading to a kind of roundabout where traffic circles tunefully but endlessly in the same pattern, while the other points toward unlimited potential through its intersection with jazz, there are two ways to respond.

One would be to nod and look interested while thinking, “This is news? Haven’t we been talking about this for a few decades already?”

The other would be to spin his latest CD, *Transcend*, and realize that there’s plenty to talk about here after all.

Both responses, incidentally, are correct. Yes, Afro-Caribbean music and jazz have a long acquaintance, going back not just to Dizzy Gillespie but further, all the way to the beginning, nearly a century ago, when Jelly Roll Morton started talking about “the Spanish tinge” whose infusion with blues and European traditions provided the formula for the birth of America’s music in New Orleans.

Over the past couple of decades, that tinge has opened into a rainbow of variations, illuminated by historic and ever-changing influences from Cuba, Brazil, New York, and elsewhere. For myriad reasons, though, Puerto Rico has provided an especially steady stimulus. Some of it has to do with the easy access that exists between the island, due to its commonwealth status, and the U.S. Much more is owed to its folk traditions, primarily its connections between religion and music.

All of this can be heard in the music of Mejías. In fact, he insists that no matter where his explorations lead, he could never lose touch with his roots, even if he should want to. But that doesn’t mean that these ties are tethers to that tradition; think of them, instead, as lifelines that sustain the 36-year-old conguero as he pushes forward.

Already he’s gone a long way since he started playing local gigs in his hometown at age 14. His first high-profile affiliation was with salsa keyboardist Eddie Palmieri; his eight-year run with that band took him throughout the world and set him for work with many of the top players in Latin music. The list, still growing, now includes

Marc Anthony, Paquito D’Rivera, Chick Corea, and dozens more, with the Grammy-winning *Masterpiece*, featuring Palmieri and Tito Puente, and Alex Acuña’s Grammy-nominated *Acuarela de Tambores* among the highlights in his catalog.

It’s his work as a leader, though, that best reflects the importance of Mejías as a force within and beyond Latin music. He fronts his own band, based in Puerto Rico, and has recorded two CDs under his own name. These two releases — *Mi Tambor*, which received a Grammy nomination in 2005, and ’06’s *Transcend* — map out the direction he’s chosen to follow, which in basic terms involves drawing from as many styles as possible, including even Indian tabla, and channeling a sound that’s personal and universal at the same time.

“I believe I have a concept and a vision that’s different,” he insists. “And a lot of that has to do with being a bandleader. We’ve lost Ray Barretto, Tito Puente, and other percussionists who have led their own groups. A changing of the guard is happening, and I’d like to take my place with them as a member of the younger generation.”

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INFOGRAPHIC BY RICK EBERLY



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- 2 11.75" x 30" Galaxy Giovanni Series Wood (Quinto)
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- 7 14" Tito Puente Commemorative Bronze Timbale

PERCUSSION

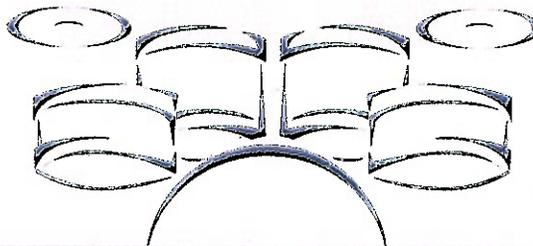
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MUSIC IN THE STREETS. Mejías is as good a candidate as anyone for taking the reins in this revolution – not only because of his exceptional chops, whether measured by velocity, control of dynamics, and command of tone, but also by virtue of having been born in Puerto Rico. That alone, he would insist, gave him a head start.

“Here in Puerto Rico,” he explains, “music is very important. It’s normal to love music. We have music for everything in our lives, and a lot of it centers on the drum.”

So it was in the Mejías household. Neither of his parents played an instrument, but from his early years, up to age seven, in Río Piedras and through the rest of his childhood in Carolina, near the Luis Muñoz Marín Airport, there was always something playing on the stereo. There was music, too, on the streets, and nearby at the Isla Verde

“Music was extremely important to my family because we all love to dance ... It was our way to relax”

beach. On a typical day after school, Mejías would join other kids on their bikes and ride out to the ocean, where drummers would play rumba, bomba, and plena patterns against the thunder and hiss of the waves. Now and then he would head further east along the coast to Lotza, a predominantly black town whose ancestry dates back to Yoruba settlers in the sixteenth century; here, the African strain in the Afro-Caribbean groove was especially strong and, to Mejías, intriguing.

“Music was extremely important to my family because we all love to dance,” he says. “They listened only to the music of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean: the old salsa players, like Eddie Palmieri and Ismael Rivera, the Fania All-Stars, Hector Lavoe, Tito Puente, meringue. That’s what I heard

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every day as I was growing up. It was our way to relax, celebrate, and hang out.”

Even as a kid, when it came to drumming, he was a take-charge guy, especially when Christmas season rolled around. “I always organized the parranda, with my friends,” he says, smiling. “A parranda is a serenade, where you go from house to house, unannounced, any time after midnight between the middle of December to the middle of January. I’d gather my friends, we’d take pots and pans and anything that could make noise, and we’d go and wake people up by singing traditional songs or even making up songs of our own. But it was all based on rhythm.”

When hammering on his mother’s pots and pans and disturbing the peace began to lose their appeal, Mejías went out at age 11 and got himself a job delivering newspapers. Some of the money he earned went toward starting and expanding his own record collection, in which Irakere, Carlos “Patato” Valdes, Batabumbele, and rumba bands were

“We lived in a lower-class neighborhood. I would play and play, which would connect me to my instrument and disconnect me from the outside world.”



well represented. But he set the rest aside until he was able to buy himself his first instrument – a single conga drum.

DO IT YOURSELF. With that, Mejías began his serious self-education, by listening to records and playing along with them. Right from the start he felt a contradictory pull toward digging deeper into the history behind the music and going past that into uncharted territory. The main reason for this pull, he now understands, was that he was an improviser at heart, as much then as he is today.

“That’s why I started listening to music where there was more of a jazz element,” he explains. “Traditional music is much stricter because you can only play in set patterns. I learned those patterns, all the Puerto Rican and Cuban music, but I wanted to do more and I was attracted to musicians who did. For instance, I liked Irakere, the Cuban group, a lot. I liked Batacumbele because they played in a very progressive style. I started to pay special attention to them and to play a lot to their records. Then I started listening to Eddie Palmieri and, especially, Ray Barretto, who was very important to Latin music. I wanted to learn the language of the music that they were playing.”

No formal instruction was involved; Mejías learned as he always had, by playing on his own, often for hours at a time as an escape from what he describes as “issues going at home – economic problems; we lived in a lower-class neighborhood. I would play and play, which would connect me to my instrument and disconnect me from the outside world.”

While still playing along to records, Mejías also began buying and watching performance videos or going out to catch percussionists like Giovanni Hidalgo doing live gigs. “I was too shy to ask these great musicians for their advice, so I just tried to copy what they did when I got back home. It was actually the hardest route I could have chosen. I had no strict method, no exercises to start with each day, and so on. I could only go on instinct, and so I suffered a lot: My hands, my forearms, and my shoulders seemed to hurt all the time.”

Eventually Mejías found a way past his early problems with tension. These days, he imparts what he’s learned to up-and-coming percussionists through workshops. The answer is twofold: strength and focus. “I’ve always been active,” he explains. “I like to exercise and do weights and run, so in my clinics I emphasize the importance of working the individual muscle groups to make the wrists, forearms, and shoulders stronger while also isolating your movement so that you don’t tire out the whole arm. But it’s not only physical energy; you also want a very strong connection between your body and

PRACTICE TIPS

BY PAOLI MEJÍAS

The following exercises should be practiced slowly focusing on precision of the hits and quality of sound. Then gradually increase speed and the length of time spent practicing each exercise. I would practice any one of these exercises for intervals of ten to fifteen minutes.

Warm-Ups. I use the exercise in Ex. 1 to warm up the forearms and wrists before a performance or clinic. Keep your shoulders relaxed, start slow and controlled, and keep the rhythm steady and even. It’s best if you practice this exercise with a metronome. Concentrate on keeping the sound even while gradually increasing the speed.

Strength Builders. Ex. 2 helps to build strength in both hands. Be sure to focus on the sound of the slap and flam. We turn to building arm strength in Ex. 3, where you should concentrate on the volume of the bass by using the strength of your whole arm, while keeping the slap clean.

H = Heel, T = Tips, B = Bass, M = Muff, S = Slap

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

Ex. 3

mind. I'm not trying to hit the drum hard. When I see someone trying to do that, to physically *force* the rhythm, I know he's not connected to his drum. He's trying too hard to impress his friends or his audience when the real goal should be to connect with your instrument within the music."

Along with these early physical issues, another casualty of self-education was that Mejías never learned to read music fluently. The flip side, though, is that he became expert at listening, a skill that serves him well today: On a recent session with trombonist Conrad Herwig, for instance, he learned each piece by listening to the demo before showing up at the studio. And because of his reputation for playing freely, sticking to the letter of each part isn't a crucial factor on live dates. "I do regret that I never focused on reading music," he admits, "but at the same time I know some musicians who cling to their reading without developing the kind of freedom I have."

There was another advantage to building his technique alone, with limited resources. For quite some time Mejías had only that one conga to work with. As a result, to approximate the subtleties in tone that he could hear players working with a full complement of drums, he had to concentrate

"I always practiced my exercises very slowly. If you want to play very fast, go ahead, but you're only fooling yourself."



more than most students on hand position in order to push toward the limit of his instrument's sonic potential. Even as a beginner, he knew that this meant working fundamentally with sound, rather than repeating perhaps the most common mistake that young musicians make.

"The number one problem is immaturity, in not taking time to develop the basics fully," he explains. "In the technical aspect, that usually means to not focus on the quality of the sound. Someone could take a basic exercise and say, 'Oh, I can do this really fast.' Sure, but if they're playing with some-

one like Eddie Palmieri and it's their turn to play a conga solo, they're already pooped and they've lost the quality of their sound. So I always practiced my exercises very slowly, even though it's really boring, until I could master volume and the quality of the sound, to where everything is done cleanly and precisely. If you want to play very fast, go ahead, but you're only fooling yourself."

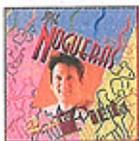
Looking back, Mejías realizes that learning on only one conga was helpful in more areas than tone. Without the distractions of having a bunch of drums within reach, he found it easier to apprehend the structure of the music. In fact, this drew him toward forms in which one drum was the norm, such as when playing a guiro for Santeria services. In that setting, 6/8 is the normal meter; the key is to know and bring to life every possible counter-rhythm within that framework. For that you don't need a big setup; listening, something Mejías already did well, was infinitely more important.

TURNING PRO. During these formative years, Mejías was motivated purely by the pleasure of playing. Working full-time in music was never a conscious plan; when thinking of the future at all, his thoughts turned more toward playing baseball or boxing for a living. It was never even a priority to play in public, at least not until drummers at nearby rumba circles began to notice him as a regular listener. Eventually they began inviting him to sit in. Almost immediately word spread about this kid's capabilities. So perhaps it was inevitable that the phone rang one day with an invitation to substitute for a conguero who couldn't make his gig with a steel drum band led by José Nogueras. Surprised, Mejías accepted the offer and shortly after that made his debut at a nearby hotel.

That turned quickly into a regular job, five times a week, paying \$30 per show. With that, Mejías, at age 14, became a professional musician.

Along with the hotel job, Nogueras and his band toured throughout Puerto Rico, playing at festivals and carnivals. With each show Mejías, whom his fellow musicians nicknamed "Bacho," attained a higher profile, not only among audiences and peers but also within the top echelon of players. One of these, José Ramírez, became a mentor to Mejías, to whom he was especially helpful in passing along knowledge of Afro-Cuban rhythm and batá drumming. It wasn't a matter of formal instruction; rather, they hung out together when they could, talking and playing, never with any payment involved. Eventually, their relationship reached the

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



1994
Para Tu Fiesta
JOSÉ NOGUERAS



1995
Alternate Roots
SÉS DEL SOLAR



1996
Vortex
EDDIE PALMIERI



1997
A Thousand Nights And A Night
ROP MANRÍQUEZ



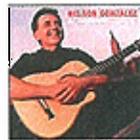
1998
El Rumbero Del Piano
EDDIE PALMIERI



1999
Juntos Y Libre
FLAMINIA CRUZ



2000
Masterpiece
TITO PUENTE AND EDDIE PALMIERI



2001
Pa' Los Treseros
NELSON GONZÁLEZ



2002
Piñero
ROP MANRÍQUEZ



2003
Historia Live
HECTOR & TITO



2003
On The Move
RAMÓN VÁZQUEZ



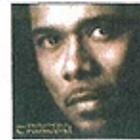
2004
Mi Tambor
PAOLI MEJÍAS



2004
Dirty Dancing Havana Nights
VERNON'S ARTÉYS



2005
Recuerdos
CARLOS CASCANTE Y SULTUMRAD



2006
Transcend
PAOLI MEJÍAS



as one of the top ten releases of the year by *Latin Beat* magazine, *Mi Tambor* left Mejías with a feeling that he could have done better. “I deliberately put a lot of variety on that album, but that was what drew the most criticism,” he says. “Even before it came out, people were saying, ‘Man, you’re all over the place!’ So for my second album, I went for a more uniform concept. I improved the quality of the sound. I kept my quintet at the core of the music. On the other hand, I tried harder to break from the idea that Latin music is in 4/4 and it’s directed toward dancers. I incorporated other rhythmic pat-

point that Ramírez invited his protégé to take over the batá slot in his group.

Over the next few years Mejías expanded his territory, traveling beyond Puerto Rico on gigs with Noguerras, Luis Enrique, and future superstar Marc Anthony. His next big step, though, came courtesy of Ramírez, who one day heard that his friend Eddie Palmieri was looking for a conguero with a flair for improvising. By now Mejías had been developing a style precisely along that line through listening to Latin jazz players, with Palmieri already among his favorites. It proved a perfect match, and in the early ’90s Mejías, barely 21, debuted with the band at the Blue Note in New York.

During this time, though he kept Puerto Rico as his base, New York became a major stimulus for Mejías. Often, while on the road with Palmieri, there might be a one- or two-week break between legs of their tour. Rather than fly back home, Mejías might pass that time staying with his sister or brother, who had relocated to the city. It wasn’t just the music that drew him; the cosmopolitan vibe in general fit in with his broadening range, and not just as a player and composer.

“There’s a lot of talent in Puerto Rico,” he says, “but New York is really the best place because there are so many kinds of music available and the level of musicianship is much higher. Now, I’m not saying that musicians are better there than in Puerto Rico, but they do have more opportunities to expand. I’ve met musicians all over the world who went through Berklee and then moved to New York. That’s one big reason why I’m making plans with my family now to move there as soon as we can.”

“I tried harder to break from the idea that Latin music is in 4/4 ... I incorporated other rhythmic patterns, focused more on other instruments”



GOING SOLO. Riding the momentum of his gig with Palmieri, Mejías was able to record his first CD, *Mi Tambor*, in 2004. He performs exuberantly through this disc, but what’s more important is the discipline he exhibits as he stretches into jazz, Indian, and realms more ephemeral than geographical. Even when going back toward his Latin roots, Mejías makes sure to find a new approach, as in his treatment of “Oye Como Va,” where every time the saxophone begins to play the familiar theme the band brakes and idles on the word *va*, as if to make it clear there’s more to this music than rehashing the rhythms and riffs that everyone expects. There are impressive solo moments too, especially in “Evidence,” where Mejías sets up a soft, steady groove and heightens its impact through a carefully measured acceleration and a crisp articulation of melody on the pitched congas.

Though critically acclaimed, and picked

terms, focused more on other instruments, added more changes in dynamics, and improvised even more.”

This explains the 7/8 and 9/8 meters that crop up on *Transcend*. But the story behind the 6/8 on “Egbin’pa mi” is a little more involved, with a complex arrangement that actually draws directly from batá drumming. His idea was to transfer the roles of the itotele and oconcolo, two of the three batá drums used in Santería ceremonies, to the piano. In the folk-based form, each of these plays in a different time signature; pianist Luis Perdomo’s part reflects this throughout the track, with one hand playing in 6/8 and the other in 4/4. When Mejías and the composer, L. Paul Romero, took the chart to the band, they decided not to explain the theory behind the notes, leaving it up to the musicians to play without preconceptions.

It seems strange, at first, that Mejías brings his adventures to a close on *Transcend* with two very traditional cuts, “El León,” a plena, and the salsa-oriented “Oyo Como Suená.” But there’s no mistake to this sequencing. “The plena is a very big part of who I am,” he insists, “because it’s very important on the island as a way to tell stories, like the blues in America. Of course, traditional plena is just percussion, so I infused a modern spirit to ‘El León’ through the horn players. And I did the chorus and vocals on ‘Oyo Como Suená’ in ways that aren’t common to salsa.

“In other words,” he sums up, “I put my own mark on it. Even though I’m doing Latin jazz, I always want to honor my roots. These two songs identify me as Puerto Rican, and that’s as important to me now as it has always been.” ■