



# Features

FEBRUARY 2011 ISSUE

## FROM THE EDITOR

Over 20 years ago, Yvette, myself and our late friend Silvio Alava came together on a Sunday afternoon in Los Angeles, California, to discuss the possibility of publishing a magazine dedicated to documenting and promoting the evolution and history of Latin music, with a main focus on salsa, Latin jazz and Latin pop music. As of this writing, we enter our 21st year of living a dream that we now share monthly with multitudes of Latin music aficionados from around the world.

Volume 21, Number 1, February 2011 issue of Latin Beat Magazine Online features Cuban bass-master Carlos del Puerto (a founding member of the famed group Irakere) in an article by Latin Beat Magazine's senior editor Luis Tamargo.

Contributing writer/photographer Ricky Richardson takes us to New Orleans on a Latin jazz educational seminar, while yours truly fights the crowds of the annual winter NAMM Show in Anaheim, California (the world's biggest and longest running music trade show).

Latin Beat Magazine Online also brings you exciting monthly columns from New York, Los Angeles, and Puerto Rico, as well as the popular Latin Beat Music Update column by Nelson Rodriguez (covering the latest Latin music scene from all over the world) - Music news, national and international independent hit parades, concerts and CD reviews, calendar of events, streaming music tracks and music videos complete this unique experience. Musically yours, Rudy Mangual

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# There's Life After Irakere: The Nordic Adventures Of Carlos del Puerto Sr.

By Luis Tamargo

*I had lost contact with bassist Carlos del Puerto Sr. —one of the most influential Cuban jazz icons of our time— in the late 1990s, when our last conversation was documented in the article titled “Defining Music as the Most Easily Difficult Art Form” (Latin Beat, December/1997-January/1998). Fortunately, I was able to reestablish a direct line of communication with Carlos (now residing in Finland) in recent months, and the following interview serves as proper follow-up to the abovementioned Latin Beat item. It must be noted, of course, that in the case of Carlos del Puerto Sr., there's life after Irakere: He is currently teaching at two conservatories, while simultaneously leading a big band and touring as musical director of Finland's most famous singer...*

**Luis Tamargo:** It appears that you were first exposed to the electric bass during an audition with Armando Romeu's Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna (OCMM) in Havana, circa 1967.

**Carlos del Puerto:** When I arrived for the audition, I was looking for a contrabass (which was the instrument that I played) all over the theatre, but I didn't see any. So I went and told Armando Romeu, “Maestro, they didn't bring a contrabass today,” and he pointed to a box that looked like a coffin. I approached that box with a terrified look on my face, and the guitarist Carlos Emilio (Morales) commented, “Hey, kid, you don't know how to hook this up, do you?” “No, maestro”, I replied, and he said: “this cable goes in here, and the other one goes on the other side.” In other words, he told me how to connect the electric bass to the equipment. That's how the whole thing started. I'm still asking myself how it all happened, but at the end of the rehearsal, Armando Romeu said, “come back tomorrow to sign the contract.”



**LT:** It appears that the foundation of Irakere, back in 1973, led to a new era in Cuban jazz (and Cuban music, in general).

**CP:** Fundamentally, there was a significant division between the musicians or groups that played popular dance music and those who were more jazz-inclined. In the beginning, Irakere was, most of all, a group that played dance music with jazz influences. As we began to elaborate a musical mixture that kept getting increasingly intricate, we managed to attract two different types of followers: the jazz or classical music aficionados and the mostly black dancers that frequented such venues as Tropicana's Salón Mambí. In the following years, many attempts have been made to attain another musical communion between such absolutely different segments, but no other band has been able to accomplish this, not even el Tosco's NG La Banda or other Irakere byproducts that appealed mostly to the dancing public.

**LT:** How were you affected by Chucho Valdés' decision to dissolve Irakere in 1996?

**CP:** It is unquestionable that Irakere's dissolution represented a formidable blow for those of us who were involved with the band for 30 years. When Chucho decided to dissolve Irakere and form a new group, I received an offer in which I would be in charge of the former Irakere roster to be called something else thereafter, as it was clear that the name “Irakere” belonged to Chucho. After thinking about this offer for a little while, I came to the conclusion that I was more interested in independently developing my own career as an educator. Right around that time I had received a few offers to conduct some workshops at various U.S. music schools located in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles.

**LT:** Not to mention your tours with Jesús Alemany's Cubanismo!

**CP:** I must regard myself as a lucky guy. My son, Carlos del Puerto Jr., was featured in the first two recordings of Cubanismo! Right around the time that Irakere was dissolved, he obtained a scholarship to study at Calarts and he told me that he wouldn't be able to participate in the next international tour of Cubanismo!, so I was given the opportunity to replace him.

**LT: You recently conducted an amazing project with a Norwegian symphonic orchestra, resulting in a marvelous fusion of Cuban genres and classical music.**

**CP:** This is an excellent way of perpetuating our music. You listen to that orchestra comprised of more than 40 Norwegians (plus a mostly Cuban rhythm section) and it sounds truly wonderful!

**LT: Your adopted homeland, Finland, has been quite receptive for many decades to Cuban jazz. I recall that Dizzy Gillespie and Arturo Sandoval recorded an album in Helsinki called *To a Finland Station*. Not to mention Paquito D’Rivera’s first bandleading effort (*Paquito in Finland*).**

**CP:** There is another interesting fact: The first recording made by Irakere for a Capitalist label (Love Records) was conducted in Finland. It included almost the same tunes that were later nominated (as reissued in the U.S.) for a Grammy award...But nowadays Finland’s musical contact with Cuba is not as warm as it was before....

**LT: This is obviously related to the musical changes that have occurred on the island.**

**CP:** To a certain degree, my generation (the same generation that included Paquito D’Rivera, among others) was fortunately forced to create our own thing because we didn’t have so many external influences, because we weren’t musically updated and exposed to so many different sounds. If you analyze, for instance, what happened with Cuban music, from the 1960s to the 1990s, you’ll find a bunch of creative groups that were characterized by their own distinctive projects, modifying and further developing, in some cases, the roots of our music, or even creating their own thing... What happened later? This is my very personal opinion: As more information entered the island and as additional opportunities to travel abroad were available, we become increasingly immersed into the musical currents from other locations, not with the intention of adapting such currents to our own thing, but the other way around. This has resulted in the emergence of some terrible hybrids that are quite removed from the Cuban musical spirit. Keep in mind that reggaetón has nothing to do with us, it is devoid of any creativity and has nothing to do with an island that has created the most important rhythms of Latin music. I must add that Spanish-language rap sounds terrible because our idiom is not suitable for such endeavors, although it is conducive to certain delightful things... Something has happened to the new generations: Looking for a successful exit or for an easy way to make a few bucks or whatever, they do not take any risks in order to explore a more interesting option or preserve what they think is better... What we get at the end is a bunch of people doing the same thing, playing the same music. Their sound is very aggressive and repetitive, and cannot be assimilated by the European public.



**LT: I recently became aware that you married a bassist and had two daughters with her (9 year-old Brenda and 5 year-old Susan), both of whom were born in Finland**

**CP:** My Finish offspring have given me the strength to remain involved in these creative musical struggles, as if I was only 20 years old. I don't have time to get old or to give much thought to what happened earlier.

**LT: If I remember correctly, your prodigal son —Carlos del Puerto Jr.— also married a Scandinavian female.**

**CP:** Yes, Carlitos married a Swedish girl and I married a Danish one. But there is another coincidence: They're about the same age! (LAUGHTER).