Latin Jazz Conversations: Paul Austerlitz (Part 2)

The Latin Jazz Corner

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Academic thought provides a different perspective upon the musical experience that results in a consistent stream of new ideas. Regardless of the academic's experience in the musical genre, their main goal is the pursuit of new knowledge, inevitably leading them towards uncharted territory. As the researcher bravely investigates unfamiliar musical areas, they step into the position of the outsider, an unfamiliar face in a musical community. This places a bit of uncomfortable tension onto the research process, as they try to gain the trust of a new community. It also adds an invaluable perspective; looking into a musical process from the outside brings fine details into light. It allows the researcher enough separation from the cultural elements to appreciate the music on an aesthetic level but analyze it from a detached stance. Without an emotional attachment to the music's context, the research can examine it from multiple perspectives and reconsider it on a variety of levels. If the community confirms the researcher with insider status, they gain yet another viewpoint that leads them towards a more complete understanding of the culture. With repeated exposure and an eventual acceptance by the musical community, the researcher can develop new

conclusions and educate the greater public about musical truths. Once they reach the public through books or other educational materials, they help spread a knowledge of tradition and original streams of thought into the world. Inevitably, their work leads to the survival of the musical culture and the creative manipulation of its elements in the modern musical world.

When bass clarinetist Paul Austerlitz leaped into the world of academics and ethnomusicology, he carried practical performance experience and a working knowledge of jazz and Dominican merengue. Encouraged by his parents in the arts at a young age, Austerlitz found a musical voice on both the clarinet and the saxophone Pursuing his passion, he attended Bennington College, where he gained valuable insight into music from trumpet player Bill Dixon and drummer Milford Graves. Working as a professional musician after graduation, Austerlitz found ample work opportunities in the world of Dominican merengue. The style fascinated him, presenting technically challenging saxophone parts and an addictively danceable groove. As Austerlitz moved deeper into the style, he saw academics as a way to further his interests in the music. He enrolled at Wesleyan University, producing a thesis upon the role of the saxophone in merengue. He produced books on both of his primary interests, giving the world *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity* and *Jazz Consciousness: Music, Race, and Humanity*. Both books delved into major issues of race and identity in African American and Dominican culture, placing the emphasis upon the history and development of music. Austerlitz continued performing throughout his academic life, most recently culminating in the production of an astounding demonstration of Dominican Vodu Jazz on the album *Journey*. This recording brought all the pieces of Austerlitz's academic life into an artistic presentation, allowing him to creatively interpret his many lessons. With each piece of writing and musical expression, Austerlitz built upon his research and helped push Dominican music and jazz into the world.

Years of study and research have provided Austerlitz with an invaluable perspective upon the music, while equal amounts of time working in the trenches of the musical scene gave him an authentic artistic understanding. In part one of Tomas Peña's discussion with Austerlitz, the bass clarinetist talked about his early musical experience, the influence of Milford Graves, and his initial involvement in Dominican merengue. In the second piece of the interview, Austerlitz goes over the main ideas of his two major academic books, looks at the development of *Journey*, and talks about his current musical direction.

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TOMAS PEÑA: The book, *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity* was published by Temple University Press in 1997. A lot has been written about the history of salsa; however, I have not seen that many books on the history of Dominican music. At least not in the states.

PAUL AUSTERLITZ: At the time, there was wave of ethnomusicologists who wrote books on Latin American, or non-Western music. I was part of that wave. The nice thing that I found most rewarding about the book is the reception in

the Dominican Republic. People really started digging it and I was inducted into the Dominican Academy of Sciences, which is a very prestigious institution . . . and not being Dominican, do you know what I mean? I taught at the National University (University of Santo Domingo) and the National Conservatory Of Music. They had been so accepting of me. Then the Academy of Sciences in conjunction with the National Ministry of Culture asked me if they could translate the book into Spanish, which they did. The experience was very gratifying.

TP: And well deserved I might add.

PA: I also have a band in the Dominican Republic.

TP: What kind of music does the band perform?

PA: Pretty much what you heard at El Taller Latin Americano.

TP: At what point did you decide to come full circle and explore your Finnish roots?

PA: Many Dominicans would say, "You are so into our music, what's your traditional music like?" The truth is I did not know so I decided to look into it.

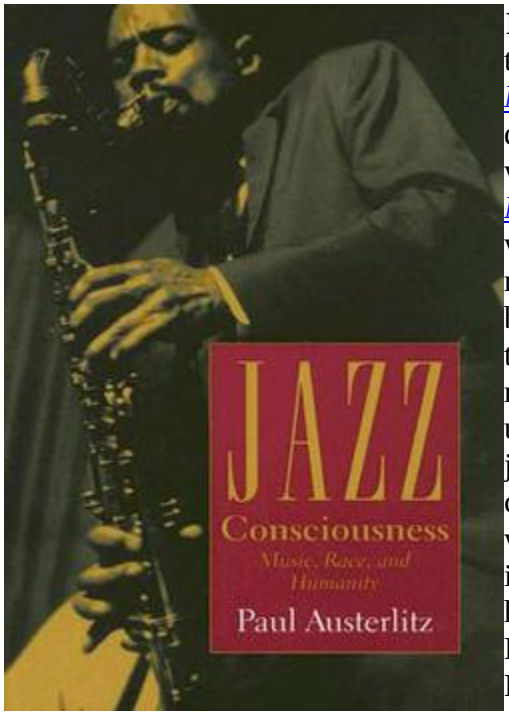
TP: As I understand it, Finnish music owes a lot to African American music. How so?

PA: Going back to the 1930s, jazz was a big influence. During the '60s there was Rock n' Roll and later there was Hip Hop and stuff like that. The Finnish musicians who were interested in traditional folk music started creating fusions with Finnish music and jazz.

TP: I would like to hear that. I am sorry to say that my knowledge of Finnish music, in all its forms is ZIP!

PA: I was surprised because I was looking for the traditional stuff, but a lot of them were playing new folk music that had jazz, rock and classical influences. I found it somewhat ironic that the Finnish musicians had taken a similar path as me.

TP: When did you write *Jazz Consciousness: Music, Race, and Humanity* - and what inspired you to take that particular approach?



PA: I started teaching at Brown University in 1998. At the same time, I started writing *Jazz Consciousness: Music, Race, and Humanity*. Going back to some of the questions you asked me in the beginning, I basically wanted to understand myself. Put another way, *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity* was about Dominican music. I am proud of the end result and the fact that it was accepted by Dominicans, but there was something missing because I was always talking about other people. The people that influenced me - especially Milford Graves - said that you have to understand yourself. I wanted to write a book about jazz that looked at African American music in a global context and from my perspective as a white musician. I wanted to say that the music was made by black people in a racist country and look at that racist context in history. Then I wanted to explain how a white European immigrant in New York experiences that. Many black musicians have written very eloquently about race and racism. Some white scholars have done it too but they are in the minority.

TP: When I think of white scholars who have written eloquently about African music, Afro-Caribbean music and African art the first name that comes to mind is Professor Robert Farris Thompson.

(Interviewer's Notes: Dr. Robert Farris Thompson has devoted his life to studying the art history of the Afro-Atlantic world. He received his BA, MA, and PhD degrees from Yale and has served on their faculty since 1965. Thompson has published numerous books and articles on topics as diverse as African dance, art history of the Black Americas, bark cloth art by the pygmies of the Ituri Forest, and altars of the Black Atlantic world. In 2003, the College Art Association, in its inaugural award of Distinguished Lifetime Achievement for Art Writing, honored this "towering figure in the history of art, whose voice for diversity and cultural openness has made him a public intellectual of resounding importance." Thompson is the author of *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* and *Tango: The Art History of Love*).

PA: I should have mentioned him earlier. As I said before, I had no desire to become an academic like my dad, however I did want to be an academic like Robert Farris Thompson.

TP: You and me both. Thompson is one of the hippest and most forward thinking academics I have ever encountered. Imagine a white guy teaching a course on the mambo at Yale University before it was fashionable! And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

PA: Getting back to the book there are chapters on jazz, race and music. There is also a

chapter on Machito and Mario Bauza, which is very "New York."

TP: How was the book received?

PA: It has kind of an activist aspect to it and some of the people at Brown University did not like it. In fact, I was denied tenure specifically because of the book. It was very disruptive because I had a great job at there and I was training a number of graduate students who were completing there PhD's in ethnomusicology. Ironically, after I was denied tenure the book received two international awards and an honorable mention in the Woody Guthrie Prize (International Association for the Study of Popular Music).

TP: How did Brown state their case?

PA: The University stated that the book was not up to their standards. Afterwards I left Brown and got a job at Gettysburg College (Sunderman Conservatory) and I am happy to say that they have been very welcoming of my research and my creative work.

TP: Bring me up to speed on what you are doing now.

PA: After I finished the second book, I was granted a Fellowship from the Rhode Island Foundation for music composition. It was the largest grant that a composer had ever received in Long Island ($25,000.00). I used that money to create the CD, *Journey*. Admittedly, I don't like all of my recordings, but that one I like! I was meticulous with it. If there was something I didn't like I changed it. And I have different bands, I recorded part of it in the Dominican Republic and in New York. So I did that and since about 2005 I've been focusing primarily on composing, playing and developing new music.

TP: How has *Journey* been received? Does the listening public get it?

PA: It's hard to tell. I had a nice review in Jazz Times and a couple of reviews in All About Jazz and some European magazines. People seem to like it. I am getting some airplay . . . it's hard to tell. The album contains so many different styles of music.

TP: I think that people who love and understand African based music will appreciate it. Also, if they see your band live they will "get it." Your music is very deep, spiritual and communal. There is nothing quite like it.

PA: For the record I had a band in the Dominican Republic before I had a band in the states. Which is to say I have been working on the concept for a long time. Also, I was attending a lot of religious ceremonies in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Brazil. I gradually became involved in the Yoruba religion in New York. More recently I got

involved in Dominican and Haitian Vodu. I was initiated in Haiti last year. In fact, I left Haiti 6 days before the earthquake.

When I starting to putting the tour together I knew what I wanted to do but I wasn't sure if I was going to call it the "Vodu Jazz Project." Then I thought to myself, "It is Vodu Jazz. Why do I have to be ashamed of it?." At the performance I wore a ritual scarf on my head and danced. I decided to be "out there" with it and doing the spiritual thing helped me to open up.

TP: More power to you and why not?

PA: A lot of people that were there were not jazz fans, however they accepted it as part of the whole.

TP: I think that at the end of the day the overarching theme of our conversation has to do with the transformative power of music. Meaning, how it has transformed your life and brought you to where you are today.

PA: I agree with that.

TP: Music has certainly transformed my life.

PA: Music is an expression of cosmic harmony. You find it in Sufism, Indian music and European music. One of the best ways to connect with music is through spirit. Especially the music we are talking about . . . I have always felt that so strong, even though I am not from the Caribbean. When I perform I just try go give into. The thesis of *Jazz Consciousness: Music, Race, and Humanity* is that jazz comes from African American culture but it is also this human thing that touches everyone.

TP: Is there anything else on your agenda?

PA: I want to write a book on the transformative power of music and the link between spiritual music, spiritual traditions and jazz. I also want to talk about Vodu in the Dominican Republic and my experience as a member of the religion. I am not ready to write about that yet but I hope to write about in the future.

TP: I look forward to seeing the book materialize and catching your band the next time you perform in New York. Thank you for speaking with me. It has been interesting, enlightening and above all, a pleasure.

PA: Thank you, Tomas.

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Make sure that you check out Part One of Tomas Peña's conversation with Latin Jazz bass clarinetist and saxophonist Paul Austerlitz. Peña and Austerlitz discuss his musical beginnings, his introduction to Dominican merengue, and his move toward ethnomusicology. You can read it HERE.