



1-24-2006

Mantilla, Ray

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_oralhist



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ray Mantilla, January 24 2006, Interview with the Bronx African American History Project, BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham University.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham Research Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Fordham Research Commons. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu, bkilee@fordham.edu.

Transcriber: Connor Murphy

Maxine Gordon (MG): Ok, this is Tuesday, January 24th, 2006. The one hundred and - -

Mark Naison (MN): - - thirty-ninth.

MG: - - thirty-ninth interview for the Bronx African-American History Project, which is a joint community project with Fordham University. This is Ray Mantilla, world renowned Latin percussionist and jazz and Latin percussionist. And, as an introduction - - world famous, and we'll get to why he's world famous. But as an introduction I wanted to say that - - do you want me to look at - - [Crosstalk]

Dawn Russell (DR): - - I was just trying to get the camera so that - - so that we're seeing more of Ray - -[Inaudible].

MG: Do you want me to look at you or look at Ray?

DR: When you're talking to - - do what you usually do. Sometimes talk to the camera, and if you could, push your bracelets - - either push them up or take them off.

MG: Nobody ever noticed that before, the bracelets in the sound. Yes. [Crosstalk] Ok, the first disclaimer is I didn't know I was going to be on camera for those of my friends and family watching. I don't usually dress like this, and I wear makeup. Other than that, one of the reasons that I'm so pleased that Ray Mantilla has agreed after much arm-pulling to come back to the Bronx and to be interviewed for this project is that actually, we live in the same building in Manhattan, and in the elevator of that building, I was talking to somebody about oh I'm working in the Bronx. And he said, you're working in the Bronx? I'm from the Bronx. I said yes, but I'm working on the jazz research of Bronx African American History Project. He was like I played in the Bronx, I played jazz. I

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

2

said, but you're not black. He said well what am I? I'm a Puerto Rican. I was like, wait a minute, I have to rethink these things.

Ray Mantilla (RM): Peruverican.

MG: Paruverican. He's Peruvian and Boricua. But he was the one who started me thinking about when we talk to people about music in the Bronx and talk about jazz they always talk - - from people from a certain period, about Tito Rodriguez, Tito Puente, Machito played in the same places that jazz groups were playing, and so I realized that if we're going to look at jazz isolated from Latin music, we miss the point about the Bronx. And if we look at African-Americans isolated from Puerto Ricans, when they're living in the same community, we're also missing the point. And also when we black, and we say African-American, and we don't include Caribbean and African, which we do in our project, and Puerto Ricans and Cubans, then we're limiting the definition of what we're trying to do. So anyway, you were the one who got me thinking about that.

RM: Oh thank you. What took you so long to get me here? 139, you had 139, you waited for me at the bottom of the barrel. [Crosstalk]

MG: - - [Inaudible] all these black people - - [Crosstalk - Inaudible] we're working through the Patterson Houses, Morissania [Laugh] So I want to do this interview in two parts. I'd like to try to stay in the Bronx for the beginning because I know that in all the interviews that I've read about you, you go - - I grew up - - I was on Prospect Avenue and then I went to work with Herbie Mann. You, know there's a leap there.

RM: A big leap.

MG: So I want to stay in the Bronx. Would you state your full name and when and where you were born?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

3

RM: Raymond Mantilla is my real name. They call me Ray for short because it's better for the music. I was born in 920 Prospect Avenue, 1934. I tried to get back that - - try to remember the archives of my brain. I'm going to try to tell people that particular area was one of the most richest time when there was music all over. The people that I was brought up around, most of the time - - see I grew up - - I wanted to be a baseball player. I had nothing to do with drums. And I was just saying before, everybody either they like stickball or they played baseball where I was born, right. And getting back to that era, I was just into baseball, so after fifteen, sixteen, I was playing semi-professional ball on Randall's Island. That was what I wanted to do. Everybody wanted to play first base for the Yankees, ok, everybody. I don't know anybody that don't. Or pitch, you know. So, big Yankee fan that I've been all my life. Story was, we got to the period where I heard the music. When I started to - - I was in high school there, at School of Industrial Arts downtown. But just try to get back from when the time when I was born there I just jumped to the high school.

MG: See this is what keeps happening.

RM: But still in all, I didn't know. At eight years old, my father - - I couldn't even get into the kindergarten. I didn't speak no English. You couldn't get into - - unless you spoke English in that time. So, my father said well alright go out there and hang out with the people in the street, you know. So in sixth months I was speaking fluent English. I was only eight years old, just to get into kindergarten. Finally they let me in the school. We didn't have bilingual classes in those days.

MN: What school, elementary school - -

RM: - - I don't remember. I got to tell you, sorry I can't remember.

MG: Did you walk from where you were living on Prospect?

RM: I don't remember nothing like that.

MG: Going to elementary school.

RM: When I was going to elementary school I don't even know how I got there.

[Laughs]. At that time my father was an electrical engineer. He was work for the Northern Bomb Site Company, and he was always working, and we had our own little thing in the house. My father used to play the guitar. On Sundays, we would sit, my mother and me and some friends, and he would play the guitar for us.

MG: Your father is from Peru?

RM: Yes.

MG: Do you know how your parents met? Your mother is from Puerto Rico.

RM: Yes. My mother and my father met at a school learning English. Bernard's School of English downtown somewhere. And they met there. He was - - she was twenty-one, twenty-two, something like that. I think my father was twenty-eight, she was twenty-seven. I'm remembering my birth certificate. That thing was pretty interesting because none of them could speak English, so they all went to the school to learn, and that's how they met. And then after that, what happened. This was already a bad situation. It was 1934, so it was what, the Depression and stuff like that. But since my dad was an electrical engineer with a company here we had no problems.

MG: Were you the only child?

RM: Yes. I was the only one. That's just as far as I can remember about growing up. The part about the music part came in afterwards. I started - -

MG: - - we'll stay - -

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

5

RM: - - I'm trying to stay in the Bronx ok - - [MG Laughs] I'm eight years old now, and

I went to the Bronx. Alright, then - -

MG: Did you have grandparents?

RM: My grandparents, I never met them. They were in Puerto Rico.

MG: Did your mother have other relatives?

RM: Yes. Oh my mother had five sisters and two brothers.

MG: In the Bronx?

RM: In the Bronx, yes. So we used to go to the houses there. When you have all these aunts, I had nothing but aunts, so they took care of me. Even till before they passed, every time I - - they all moved to Puerto Rico. And I used to go there, they all cooked - - everybody had something for me to eat. I was a wonder feeling, the family feeling. When you had your aunts, you know. And my uncles, hey, and then everything starts going. But everybody moved to Puerto Rico. I stayed in the Bronx. I got married. My musical career really started kind of late actually. Well, not late. You can call twenty-one, twenty-two late my first professional job. So, besides going to play baseball since fifteen, fourteen till about sixteen, eighteen when I heard the Machito Band, which is the first time I ever heard the Machito Band, and the Tito Rodriguez band at that time, when Machito came out with Tanga. Tanga, and that was one of the greatest tunes I ever heard at that time.

MG: Where did you hear about Tito?

RM: We heard him on the radio. I mean, I was playing baseball, I wasn't going out dancing. Then, I met some people and they took me to this Bronx Y on Freedom Street.

MG: Freeman Street?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

6

MR: Freeman Street, yes. Right off of Boston Road up on the hill, was the Boston Road. And besides there was a Royal Mansion on Boston Road also. In other words, in the first couple of years till I was almost twenty, it was just going to the dancehalls. Playing at the Freeman Y, when I heard these conga drums, I bought a new conga drum. Actually I started with a little can. A little can from coffee, and I used to go like that and play my little can. I started to save my money, and I ended up buying me a little conga drum. I was fascinated with that thing. And I gave up the baseball, it just happened. And that Machito Band, this was when they were in their prime. They were talking about great music, great music.

MG: In - - you don't have a microphone.

AT: That's true.

MG: I'm just moving back just a little bit. Ok, you can't remember what elementary school you went to, but I know you remember what junior high.

RM: Yes, it was Clarke Junior High. Clarke Junior High School is the one I know Bobby Darren came from that school, Bobby Darren. In fact, that particular time, we had to take a test, because I used to draw. I like to draw. I had a portfolio of drawing also. So that I was one of the few people from that school, Clarke Junior High, to go to the School of Industrial Arts, at that time which was a pretty good school. But you had to be an - - you had to take art, and you had to take something else. I took photography, and filming. I went pretty good till about the last part of the year before graduation, and this is when I started to mess up. We were right next to the - - we were very close to the Paramount Theatre. I don't know if you guys remember the Paramount Theatre over here it was on the - - Broadway. So you had to go by there to go to the school. It was hard because you

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

7

had all this great music was there. So I used to pop in there a lot of times to see all these bands. I mean it was really something. So I also had a - - I quit school before I graduated, which is one of the things I can't help. My mom and my dad, my step-father - - she had remarried at this time. He - - she - - we had a store, a little store on Beck Street, 582 Beck Street, a little clothing store. And then we lived in the back. I lived in the back of this clothing store. I was embarrassed to live in the back, but what are you going to do in those days.

MG: This was when you were in high school?

RM: Yes.

MG: So that would be '49.

RM: I used to have to go downtown everyday, everyday to go to school. But we used to live in the back of this store. That was embarrassing. My friends used to come around, where are you. I never told them I was living in the back of the store. Because that store was in the front. So they - - I used to say meet me in front of this place. So I used to go and get - -

MG: Your step-father was Puerto Rican?

RM: Yes, he was Puerto Rican too. My dad left, he went back to Peru about when I was nine or something like that.

MG: Have you been to Peru?

RM: No I've never been there. My thing is that he had already had some children from a previous marriage, and after he left, he went to Peru and he remarried. My mother divorced him. I hadn't seen him - - we hadn't seen him for ten years. What are you kidding, she divorced him then. And the story was, he got married and had five brothers

and a couple of sisters. And it's a funny thing. After that, I finally met my family, Peruvians. I never met them, but they used to write to me, oh we love you, we miss - - so he used to talk about me. So, anyway, getting back to that era where I was living in the back of that store. My dad, my step-father passed away and my mother was alone. This is the story. And there was nobody to take care of the store, so I just, I figured man I'm - - what am I doing here, I'm just playing hooky at times, and going and learning - - in just one more year I would have been a graduate already, but I said no. So I quit and I went and I took care of the store. And I went and I took care and I was there. I was the only guy. I was the only man, she was all alone. So I thought that was a big reason for me to help support my family.

MG: And where was the store?

RM: The store was at 582 Beck Street.

MG: And what were the other stores on Beck Street?

RM: Well there were very few stores there. Well, there was - - we were in the middle of the block, because it was like a residential. It was a little store there on the corner; that was Prospect Avenue. So you had Beck Street into Prospect. And on the other block was Avenue Saint John. So you got Avenue Saint John on one side, down the hill you had Prospect Avenue, if you know the Bronx. So we stayed there, and then when I started to play the baseball, I figured that's the best way to get out of town - - you know, get out of there. To make a long story short, everything passed by. I stayed there and helped her with the store, blah blah blah, we ended up moving out and going into an apartment up the block.

MG: On where, on Prospect?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

9

RM: On Beck Street, yes. The store was down the block. The house I lived was 582. So the store might have been a couple of - - five something. Now I went by there, there's nothing but nice houses there. These beautiful little houses with their car ports. That's a dream. Nobody would ever think about having a little car port. Oh boy, up in the Bronx in those days, it was like Fort Apache, that era. It was a lot of drugs around there at that time.

MG: When did the drugs come in, do you remember?

RM: No, I don't remember that far back.

MN: Was it when you were in high school?

RM: No, no. I got involved with some of this stuff here at an older age. I was almost thirty years old. Everything started late. When you wanted to go do something in baseball specially - - it's all about training. It's all about taking care of - - so I didn't drink, I didn't smoke. I smoked late in life. And I dabbled in a little bit of everything. There was that particular point there. That was a pretty rough period there. So we all dabbled in it, some of them in the music business. But what really saved me, I got to tell you, I don't want to be jumping the [Inaudible], but the conga drums saved me. The music saved my life. You have to have - - what do you want to do? Oh I don't know. But when I heard the drum, I already knew that's what I wanted to be. I wanted to play the drum, you know. And getting back, when I heard those drums, that's when I first started realize I had something. A vocation they call it. What do you want to do? I don't know what I want to do. You ask people now, they say they don't know what I want to do. So I knew I wanted to play the drums. The problem is that I had to bypass the baseball career.

MG: What - - in junior high school did they have music?

RM: They had music, but I wasn't into it. I was like I said, in junior high school I was more interested drawing and acting. I used to like to act. I was in a lot of school plays. I liked to act. So I did all the school - - in fact, that part, and then before that, the elementary, when I was growing up, I did a lot of shows where I would be the lead person. I used to be able to remember everybody's lines for some reason. So I did all the shows.

MG: Well that applies later to the music, where you remember all the [Crosstalk-Inaudible]

RM: Probably, yes.

MG: I find that musicians have extraordinary memories. Have you noticed that?

RM: Yes. Now I just remember - - I remember dates. I just remember that this period came. This period, that period. It was a wonderful feeling.

MG: Do you still have any friends from the period when you grew up in the Bronx?

RM: Yes, there are a few. There are a few that still - - musicians. Recently, a couple of my friends passed away, and that's when you see these guys from the Bronx. You know Benny Bonilla?

MG: Yes.

RM: The Bonilla brothers, and Orlando Marin is an old friend.

MG: You grew up with Benny Bonilla?

RM: Yes. Sure, in fact I gave Benny - - well, Benny taught me how to do the first hand motions on the congas the right way. I was playing wrong. But Benny and I became - - then I started to send him to my gigs. In fact I just saw Benny. But anyhow, he could tell you a whole story about us and his brother, Richie. Richie Bonilla, he's a big guy agent

now. Orlando Marin, he calls himself one of the last mambo kings [Laughs]. But at that time, all they would - - that's a bunch of stories, because he was already playing before I started to play. And his problem - - I don't know if you know who that guy is.

DR: [Inaudible] There was like a loud beeping outside, one of those trucks backing up.

MG: Oh I didn't hear it.

DR: Yes, but the microphone did.

MG: Ok.

DR: So I don't know if you - - [Crosstalk]

MG: - - go back to Benny?

DR: - - because we're probably not going to be able to use it because it's real loud.

MG: Ok, we'll go back.

RM: Start from where?

MG: So when I said, oh so you grew up with Benny Bonilla?

DR: Yes

MG: From there?

DR: Yes.

MG: Ok, so we repeat ourselves so I have no more questions.

DR: - - you're so professional. Now that I know you're an actor.

MG: But it's a problem, the professionalism is a problem because this is oral history, and I read all his interviews; people ask him the same questions.

RM: Yes, right.

MG: And I want to stay on some of these questions. So my question is, so you grew up with Benny Bonilla?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

12

RM: I tell you, I met Benny Bonilla when I started to play the drum, and he was more of a professional than I was. He had already been playing with Jose Budet, which is one of the old bands in the Bronx.

MG: How do you spell that?

RM: Budet was B-U-D-E-T, Budet

MG: Budet.

RM: Yes, Jose, Jose. Benny can tell you about that band, because that's how I started. He put me in the band and I started to play with him and Benny kept on moving. It's like moving - - then I moved ahead of that. It's just that I got lucky I guess. I started when the work - - when I started to play music, my first gig was with Ertha Kitt.

MN: Really?

RM: Yes, Ertha Kitt, my first professional job.

MG: Don't - - no - - we're not moving there yet. I want to go back to the store. When you had the store did you dress from the clothes in the store?

RM: No, it was a women's store.

MG: Oh, women's clothes.

RM: Yes, it was a woman's store. I used to get beat because these girls would come in and I couldn't go in the back while they tried the dresses on. Let's say three girls came in, what am I going to do? So they had to go in the back - - we had the back there, and they would take the dresses and put them on and walk out with them [MG Laughs]. I didn't know. And I said damn, we're missing a dress here. Well, they would go - - you can't go back while they're - - I didn't have a dressing room, we had to go back to where we were sleeping. That was a funny situation there. I remember that was the first time I ever got

beat. The girls came in, they kept me busy and all that, and they went in and they took a couple of dresses and put them on. Story is I learned. That was the first time, first and last. And I watched that from after that. Well, that was the whole thing why, getting back to - -

MG: Did any singers or performers come in?

RM: At that particular time, no. See, I was like - - we were not into the music yet. It was after that that I met these fellows after I started to play the drum - - moved - - I went over to Freeman Street, the Freeman Street Y. I got to tell you, that Y there - -

MG: - - Ok, talk about the Y.

RM: - - was a wonderful time because that Y had a piano and that's where we used to rehearse. So we got to - - a bunch of kids getting together and playing. One guy maracas, that guy was a maraca player, he loved the maracas, and everybody had their timbales. We had a black piano player, he was blind. I can't remember what his name was, a long time ago. And I played the congas, and that was the band. Our first tune was C Jam Blues. Played in Latin jazz. We used to play that all the time. And we started rehearsing. That was it, every week we used to meet for that. It kept us out of trouble. It really kept us out - - the music kept us out of trouble. That's why a lot of people now a days, we need this music program so these kids - - it's very important. Because a lot of kids don't know what they want to be, what to do. So the music, meanwhile - - when you grow up in a part where I was in the Bronx, everybody wanted to get to do better. We all want to get out and do better. Being around all the Latin areas, it's all tribal. You stay in that little circle of friends and you don't move out. I was living up there for so long I said I would never come downtown for nothing, unless to go to school. And everything was in that

area. It's like a tribe, everybody knew everybody, and most of the stuff was all the guys from the block.

MG: The block was it?

RM: The block, yes.

MG: That was the tribe right?

RM: Well that was the tribe. And the block was - - slowly I started to be - - after I started to learn how to play the drum that's where I met Benny. Benny taught me how to do the hands. Because a lot of these kids, if you don't have the - - put you on the right track, you could be playing wrong. You could play an instrument and it sounds good but you'd be playing wrong, unless you get a professional teach you how to do it. So you do - - everybody needs to start right, you got to start right. That's why we need teachers, so the kids get on the right road. Without teachers - - because I'm mostly self taught also. I just took very few lessons from solfegio, and I took piano. I had to get on the piano, and I said when am I going to touch the keys? Because you first had to know the notes. And they wouldn't let you touch the piano until you know the reading. And I said well I want to get on the piano. Story was that turned me off completely. That turned me off. So the conga drum was more hands on, more hands on, you're playing. And it took a long time, it took awhile. I remember living in the back of the store. I remember with my little can, and my stepfather said why don't you get a job? Go get yourself something that means something. My mother used to say leave him alone, you never know what might happen. My mother was always saying to me, leave him alone. Usually if you leave kids to follow their dreams, they do. If they really believe in it - - I always used to say, even when I was nineteen, you got to follow what you feel your dreams going to be, and you never know if

you don't try. You know what I remember also? I used sort of beat myself. In other words, I would say, I can't do it. Or, no man, not enough time, and I never pushed it. And I'm telling you, every time I pushed myself to make something, it happens. Just a little effort. Little kids nowadays, they don't have the effort, and they don't know how to get straight. That's why we have this football, baseball, it's all competition. It's all about competing. And no matter if you lose, at least you're competing, you're there. We all have to have this thing to survive, and you got to keep pushing. A lot of people just give up, so I learned a lot like that, by pushing myself just a little bit. I can do this. I tell all the young people the same thing. You got it in you, just don't get so, be so lazy [MG Laughs]. How many young people are lazy? They just end up saying alright we can't do this, so everybody gives them everything. I say there's nothing - - you got to push. One thing, for instance, when I learned this, how many times you say you have to catch a truck, and plane, or you have to catch a subway or something on time, and you got a couple of minutes, and you say you aren't going to make it, you already beat yourself. You already beat yourself inside you. How many times you said oh we ain't got no time. Guess what, you go and you try, and guess what, you make it. Because that's when - - I'll always say that. And a lot of times I will catch a train, and oh man I can't going to do it, we ain't going to make it. But I got to tell you, you go and you do it and you make it.

MG: Did you know that before you met Art Blakey or did you learn that from him?

RM: No, I learned that - - I think I learned that a little bit before that.

MG: Because you know that was his way of life.

RM: Yes, really?

MG: You never say you can't do something.

RM: That's right.

MG: Ray Mantilla played with the great Art Blakey, and they were very close. And Art Blakey had a philosophy of life besides being one of the greatest musicians ever, and I'm going to tell you - - this is not my interview but I'll tell you my Art Blakey story. I went with him when he had big band up at University of Massachusetts at Amherst. And he was like we got to get there early because we got to cash the check. They gave him the check for the whole big band, and these guys were not playing if I didn't have the money, because they would not come - - they were like, no check, no. We'll play, but we want the cash. He had the check. So of course we were late, and the bank is closed. And he was like we'll go to the bank anyway. And I was like, Boo, because his name was Boo Hangun, the bank - - it's 3:30. And he was like, go to the bank. And I was like, what are we going to do. And he was like, go to the bank. And we get to the bank, of course it's closed. And he said, go to the door, knock on the door, and tell them Art Blakey is here. This is in Amherst, Massachusetts, and I was like Boo, they don't care if Art Blakey is here, and he was like go to the door, everybody stay on the bus, the white girl's going to the bank [Laughter]. So I knocked on the - - a bus full of black musicians. So I go, I knock, and they're like closed, and I was like please, so the guy came and he opens the door a little bit, and I said Art Blakey is here. And he was like Art Blakey, I love Art Blakey, is he really here? And so then Art got off and it was like we all go in. And the guy said oh can I have your autograph, he said yes, on the check [Laughter]. The guy cashed the check. So and he said, never say you can't do something. You always find a way to do something. If one thing doesn't work, we'll think of something else. I never forgot that because he was - - he found a way, right?

RM: Yes he sure did. That gives me a story. But getting back to - - I got a billion stories with Art.

MG: I know you do.

RM: Where were I? Where was I?

MG: You were in the Bronx, we're going back to the Bronx. I want - - you said something when we had the earlier conversation about doo-wop and the Latin jazz group.

RM: Ok, about that particular time. Well, after I got to play the conga drums, after I learned a little bit, we had a bunch of friends that were all interested in playing the congas, the Puerto Rican kids in my area I met. We started to jam in the roof. It was like every Saturday and every Sunday. Everybody would go to the roof with their conga drums, and we would be playing all kinds of rhythms and everything, it was like a big party with the drums. But meanwhile, down in the bottom, down in the street, we had these black people or whites, they were into the doo-wop. At that time the period of the doo-wop was very big, and I'm saying, I was wondering because you know in the Caribbean they never took our drum away. You know, the black folk they took their drums away, you know that. So they had to invent something, and they invented that doo-wop stuff. And it got - - then the white cats got that, and they became - - they made it popular. But the real deep thing where it all started was from the black people, from the blues. But we were too busy with our percussion, our Caribbean stuff. We had nothing to do with them. They were doo-woping and we were rhythm. African rhythms, we were still playing because thank God they never took our drum away. So we played that. And I guess that's what happened, that's why you had a lot of the groups that came out at that period. You saw them they were all doo-wop groups.

MN: So this was on Beck Street?

RM: Beck Street, yes.

MN: You had the congas on the roof and the doo-wopers on the corner.

RM: Yes, yes, yes. But around there there was Beck Street, there was Avenue Saint John. So in that whole - - it could be either Beck, Avenue Saint Johns, but it was around there in that area- - I can't remember exactly the street where maybe everybody used to get together, but I remember that, it was really something. And that's how it was, it was like the drums and the doo-wopers, you dig? And then the jazz situation, I was into the salsa. Excuse the language, salsa, I hate that word. But I was into the Afro-Cuban music.

MG: Why do you hate that word?

RM: Because that word just says to you salsa, and Tito used to say that's sauce, that's just a sauce. We have sixty eight rhythms. I mean, Machito, Mario Bauzá told me we have sixty eight rhythms, and that - - I said sixty eight, maybe even more now. And that comes from the African stuff. And well, I got to tell you, we might know maybe forty of them, thirty, but we don't know them all. There's plenty of rhythms that I don't know. I'm always learning. You never say never because you're always learning, right till you die. I learn something new everyday. But I mean really. So I was interested in the Latin music, ok. The jazz was going on at the same time. In order for us to get the right foundation of any music, you have to research it all the way down to where it started. So most of the kids, most of the Benny Bonillas and the Orlando Marins, and all of the Latin - - the Eddy Palmieri, Charlie Palmieris and all that, we all had the Cuban music that came out of Cuba in those days. The Charanga bands, the Latin Charanga bands which was my favorite kind of music, the Charanga bands. Over here Charanga wasn't that big

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

19

yet, but I came from that, these violin and flute bands. So I had them all. I had all these Cuban - - because they used to let records in. In those days Cuba was open and they let us bring these records in. And I had all the old records. And that's when Machito started to play. But when I heard that band that started me off, that started me off. Ever since then I've just been playing the congas and the drums, the bongos. You had to go through every category, ok. There were times I played the bongos in the band, times when I played the congas, times when I played the timbales, played the drums, but it was all in Latin music. It was always - - eighteen, nineteen years of playing Latin music ok. When you tell me about the jazz, I think the jazz came in when I started to hear - - when Herbie Mann, thanks to Ray Barretto - - Ray is a dear friend of mine. We opened up - - started his orchestra. His first bands, I was the drummer there. I got to tell you, for eighteen, nineteen years I played this Latin music and I played with the greatest Latin bands at that time, and I played with the Miguelito Valdez, with that Xavier Cugat, played Jose Curbelo, we played La Playa Sextet, La Plata, René Touzet, Pete Terry's band, Afrodito band, I mean there was bands, Mongito bands, I played with all these bands.

MG: Where did you play?

RM: Hey, we played the dance halls. Thank god, I was introduced to a guy named Johnny Rodriguez, Johny La Vaca, and he was - - at that time he was playing with the Tito Rodriguez Orchestra, he was the bongo player. Dandy's - - you know Dandy, Tito Puente's bongo player?

MG: Yes.

RM: That's his father. He passed. He brought me around, he was - - his code name La Vaca, Johnny Rodriguez. That's Johnny Rodriguez Junior. And then I used to hang out

with the Mangual family, the Mangual. And they were with the Machito band, and Mangual played the bongos. And then there was another guy - - these were my peers. Chino Pozo. Not Chano Pozo, don't get me wrong, Chino. Chino was the bongo player on that Machito band first. He made this Bongo Fiesta. He was playing bongos on that. And I used to - - like I say, he brought me around and I was just listening at that time. We were listening and dancing. Stuff about this music, about Latin music is, you got to dance it. I dance. I dance at the Palladium, I dance at the Royal Mansion, I dance at the Hunts Point Palace. I mean dancing, like I said, not a professional, but dance, learning how to dance. And that all went together with the drums for some reason. And then after I dance - - I learned how to dance at the Palladium, at the old days at the Palladium. I hope I'm not getting away - -

MG: No, no.

MN: No, no, no.

RM: But getting back to the whole complete - - I'm a drum, I'm a drum, you know what I mean. Max showed me how to be - - we are drums.

MG: Max Roach.

RM: Yes, Max. So what I can say, brining that era back, that Tito Puente era, the Tito Rodriguez band, which is my favorite band, next to Machito. And you used to hear this every four days a week up at the Palladium. It was Machito, Chino Rodriguez, and Tito Puente. It was Tito Puente and Machito, it was a constant. And you had to dance. But I stayed - - after learning, after dancing for about a year, I just stood by the conga drums and didn't dance no more, and I just watched, and watched and went home and played, practiced, came back and watched. Nothing like watching the professionals do it, you

know? So those - - they were, like I said, Tito was - - Tito was at least twelve years or thirteen years older than I. He was older, so they were out. They were already out professional. I started late compared to - - they were there. This guy Orlando Marin, you should call him, he could probably tell you a lot about it. He could tell you more about it. I can give you his number, he gave me his card. And that's Benny friend too. He's not playing - - you know, we're old timers but I'm still playing, thanks to the jazz music, not because of the Latin.

MG: Now when you played in Hunts Point Palace, or when you would go there, were there jazz groups and Latin?

RM: Yes, there were jazz groups too, Latin - -

MG: Like what? What do you remember?

RM: I got to tell you, I was so interested in my Latin music that I didn't even know who these guys were. I remember it was Monk there too, and I remember there was all these bands - - you know, when you're a young guy, you're into your music, you know what I mean? I wasn't into the jazz thing. So I got to tell you, I don't really remember who they were.

MG: But there must have been an audience for both, because if the promoter would have the jazz groups and the Latin, obviously you had the audience - -

RM: But the audience danced, they knew how to dance. I don't know, but they used to be able to dance to the jazz. The Latin was just second. And a lot of the Latino people wanted to learn how to dance the jazz. They wanted to learn how to dance the boogie-woogie and stuff like that. So it was great because everybody had their own thing. There were the greatest dances I ever saw. When I played the Savoy Ballroom, it was really

incredible those dances - - it's just like when you go to play, and you see these Latin Palladium dances. When you went to the Savoy, you saw these great jazz, these black folk dancing this boogie-woogie. You couldn't compare it man, it was two different things. But we lived together and we got along.

MG: In the Y over there. Black kids and Puerto Rican kids - -

RM: Yes, oh sure.

MG: - - what kind of baseball was - -

RM: In baseball, yes.

MG: - - black and Latino - -

RM: Yes, we all wanted to get out of whatever, we wanted to get better, we wanted to make a better life for ourselves. This is a - - every kid grow up with this ambition. I don't know, if you got no ambition, no motivation, you got to learn it. I have a son. My son is old now, but he got to have motivation. What do you want to do when you grow up, a guy's fifty years old, he still don't know what he wants to do [Laughter]. Give me a break. I mean, what do you want to do, I don't know. Hey, but I picked up the music. After that - - before that I was going to be a cartoonist. I used to draw.

MG: You still draw?

RM: I do. I do faces and all that. I gave that up already. But every time I sign my name I put a little face there, a little smile. I don't know what that means. So I was very - - so that's what I do when I sign my name, I always put a little caricature.

MN: Now - -

MG: I want to - - and then I - - I'm going to let you speak Mark. We have up in our interview room; this poster has been up here for a long time. Baile, Baile, Hunt's Point

Palace with the address on the Boulevard, 163rd Street, Saturday, March 21st, three famous orchestras. So I want you to talk about these people, because I've been dying to know. Machito - -

RM: Everybody knows that Machito was the first one to bring in that Latin, that Afro-Cuban Jazz here. I mean, Mario Bauzá said that many times, alright. People not know who Mario Bauzá is, story is he was like Machito's right hand man, he ran the band. And he was the only guy who played in all these jazz groups.

MG: Mario Bauzá played in Cab Calloway's band and Dizzy Gillespie.

RM: Thanks to Mario, he brought Dizzy in and that's why I'm working now because he got the conga in there. Otherwise, they wouldn't be there. If Dizzy hadn't done that - - suppose he would have been a dumbeki guy with a little - - this other kind of music - - then that would have been the hot stuff, but he was into that Cuban stuff. And when Chano Pozo came in, thanks to Bauzá, they brought him in.

MG: Miguelito Valdez brought him, right?

RM: Yes, well I played with Miguelito. In other words, I was lucky to even be involved with Miguelito and all those people. But, that part I didn't know because I was still learning. I was still learning how to play. This Machito orchestra is what started me to play the music. Ok, when I heard that Tanga, and I heard some of their stuff - - their early recordings are the best recordings. Forget about the stuff that's coming out now. Go way back, no wonder everybody's going back to the original stuff because it's true. There ain't nothing out here that touches that. From the original stuff. You should have people get the old records. Alright, that was Machito. Vitin Avilez was one of the first singers that sounded like Tito Rodriguez, and if you don't know who Tito Rodriguez was - - this

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

24

was one of my heroes too. He was a Puerto Rican. He has a brother, it was a guy that had a trio, his name Johnny Rodriguez. He played guitar. So, but he was a singer, Tito. I met him at the Pupi Campo Orchestra. I don't know if you remember that era when they opened up Long Beach, and they had all those beautiful things in Long Beach, the dances, and one of the main bands there was Pupi Campo, I don't know if you remember that name.

MG: It's come up, yes.

RM: Pupi Campo was there and Vitin Avilez was the singer, plus Johnny Rodriguez, the father of Dandy, was the bongo, conga, bongo player. Vitin Avilez was that - -the modern ballad singer, it was like the Frank Sinatra of this Latin music. You know that?

MG: No.

RM: His records you got to get.

MG: Ok.

RM: I had the privilege to play with him at the beginning of my career and then at the end of his career I had a band, and he was working with me. I have tapes with him in my band. Vitin Avilez, he spent the last couple of years with me. At that time he was already an older man, he was really old already and he was getting hard - - it was hard - - but he still never lost the voice. This guy never lost the voice. It was a wonderful - - Mr. Avilez was one of the top singers in our music, may he rest in peace. Now Elmo Garcia was one of the first bands that were in the Bronx playing all these - - they played all these dances, they played the Hunts Point Palace, they played the Savoy, they played all these places where they had dance music. Elmo Garcia, you got to remember him. That's what I was talking to you about. And I played with him just before the band broke up.

MN: Did you ever play the Tropicana Club?

RM: That's right, we played the Tropicana. That was another club - - we were talking about that the other - - the Tropicana club I remember that, yes. I used to consider it - - they used to bring a lot of Charanga bands in there, and I met a lot of Cuban groups in there. I'm trying to remember all that era. The Tropicana, they had the Hunts Point Palace at that time, still going. They had the one up in the Bronx, they had the Savoy. No, the Savoy was somewhere else. That was the Royal Mansion.

MG: Yes.

MN: Right, on Boston Road.

RM: Yes, I met my wife on Boston Road. She lived up from - - yes, Freeman Street and Boston Road and then you go up - - yes. You know I haven't been in the Bronx in a long time.

MG: [Laughs] Well maybe you'll go with us when we [Crosstalk] - - we're planning, by car, to go around with Don and photograph the sights, even if they're not there and then maybe you could remind us.

RM: Yes. 582 Beck Street, my house, is not there no more. There are little houses. I went there to see that; it was ridiculous beautiful. I couldn't believe it. They just used to beat it - - you know those old apartment buildings with the court yards.

MN: Now did you ever play at the Stardust Ballroom?

RM: Yes, that's another ballroom. We'd play the Stardust and - -

MN: - - and West Farms in Tremont?

RM: Right, yes. Keep going because I can't remember everything. The Stardust, that was another place that we always had a Latin band. Most of these places had a Latin band and

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

26

a society orchestra like the Stardust. It was later on when I met Ray Barretto - - Ray was another dear friend that I worked - - we met - - he lived at 920 Prospect Avenue and I had moved to Beck Street.

MG: - - about Ray Barretto, 920?

RM: Yes. Because I met him there and then I found out on my birth certificate, I had told Ray recently, I didn't know I was born in that building. I didn't know because at that time I didn't know. In fact - - so when I started hanging out with Ray, when I met Ray at a session once, we became great friends. Ray just played the congas, bebop. He knew all the jazz guys.

MN: So 920 would be right across from club 845?

RM: Well 845 was over here. We were a little bit further up.

MN: Did you ever go into 845?

RM: Yes, we played on top of that bar man. Me, Ray Barretto, an organ player, and Stanley Turrentine. I remember him up there and we played up on top of that bar. And Ray and I, he brought me around to all the jazz guys. In fact, my first record was - - because Ray was already into the jazz.

MG: Did Ray play Latin before?

RM: No.

MG: He never played Latin?

RM: No.

MG: How did that happen?

RM: Listen, because he was coming out of the - -

MG: - - bebop.

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

27

RM: - - bebop stuff, that's what he liked. He could tell you that. And he didn't play no Latin. And then when he - -

MG: He always says that, Ray Barretto. I don't play jazz.

RM: Yes, because I said to him - - he was playing his bebop kind of conga drum, which wasn't happening for the salsa, for the Latin music, you know that, it didn't go inside. So he started to jam, and we started - - I started giving him how I played. I used to do certain things. He even told me years ago, when you started to play the bass on the drum with the two hands, he said I ain't never saw that before. Yes, well he was on his own, playing his own thing. He was - - he learned how to - - that's a street drummer. I'm a street drummer. Congas are street drumming things, man. You can't write music for that. I mean, you could write it, but it's mostly, most of these record dates they just make up your part. Make your own part up, which is great. So Barretto brought me into the jazz thing so the first thing we did I brought him into the Latin thing and he brought me into the jazz. Isn't that funny? And I was playing the Latin all the time. And then he got all the Latin kudos with his band and then I just said - - I had a ten year period where I was sick, so you know I didn't know where I was going, I was just floating around. But then when I came back, I said I'm not going to go back into the Latin scene because it's thousands of those bands out there. So I said Latin jazz is where - - thanks to Herbie Mann, getting back to that era with Ray. I realized that was the music of the future. Because I look at it now, the Latin scene is dead and the jazz scene is thriving in a way, but the Latin jazz is big.

MN: You said Stanley Turrentine played 845?

RM: Yes, I think that was him, most likely.

MN: Because he also played with Lou Donaldson on Funky Mama.

RM: Right.

MN: Did you ever play with Lou Donaldson?

RM: Yes, we made a record. But this is all afterwards. Don't you see, like I said, if you want to know about all the jazz cats, that's Barretto.

MG: Yes. We're going to start now to talk about jazz [Inaudible] albums.

RM: Because Ray was really into it and I was into the Latin scene. So I can tell you all about the Latin thing you want.

MG: Ok, well I'll leave up to age fifteen in the Bronx now, unless you have some questions about the Bronx. Ok, now we can move into - - ok. So now we're going to start talking about your career and there are - - I want to talk - - there's a few things I want to talk about. First of all, Ray Mantilla is on over two hundred recordings.

RM: Well more than that.

MG: More than that, three hundred by now.

RM: I haven't updated my resume in a long time.

MG: Your resume says over two hundred, so three hundred, four hundred, lots of records, jazz records. And also a few key things in his career, one is that after the Cuban revolution in '59 the first jazz group to enter, '77, he's the first musician, Latino, [Crosstalk] to enter, reenter with Dizzy Gillespie and David Amram. I want to talk about that, and also he's a member of one of the most important percussion groups in the world, M'Boom, which is Max Roach's group, of all percussionists. And they recorded and traveled all over the world and also he played with Art Blakey in Japan and South America, everywhere.

RM: Charles Mingus too, don't forget Charles.

MG: Ok, but we'll talk about that, but I have a present for you.

RM: Oh you got that book, where did you get that?

MG: Yes. I got it for you.

RM: Oh my god, but did you have it or you got it- -

MG: I had two copies, so you can have that one.

RM: Did you read this yet? Did anybody see this book?

MN: [Crosstalk] Hold it up.

MG: Ok, this is a book called Jazz Lives, and this is a series of - -

RM: 1980, is that 1980?

MG: - - series of interviews with jazz musicians, one eighty-nine - -

RM: Oh my god, this here - - I loaned it to somebody and never returned it.

MG: Yes, he mentioned this to me and then I looked and - -

RM: Where did you - -

MG: - - well I buy, you know being a graduate student, I buy double books, because one you mark up and one you keep.

RM: Yes, no kidding.

MG: And so I bought this online - -

RM: Oh my god.

MG: - - Ray Mantilla, but it's a great picture.

MN: Hold it up. Wow!

MG: Remember him?

RM: Yes.

MG: And the - - oh, you got to show her?

RM: Yes.

MG: Or you can get it later right?

DR: I got it, but I'll get it later.

MG: But what I like is the first line where it says Latin percussionist Ray Mantilla is a good - -

[END OF SIDE A, BEGINNING OF SIDE B]

MG: - - former me, my former - - when I was named Maxine Grey, in a former life. And here's a picture of me in my office.

RM: Yes, incredible.

MG: There's Woody, look there's my - - see the baby?

RM: Yes, yes, yes.

MG: My baby's twenty-seven, he's on the wall. [Laughs]

RM: Look at that, incredible.

MG: But we're in the same book, which I had forgotten.

RM: You know something, I didn't even know about that. I didn't know about that, really. This is for me?

MG: Yes.

RM: Oh god, do you know what this is to me? This is something because - - this is the first cover, this is the hard cover, so the rest are just soft right?

MG: Yes.

RM: My god Maxine. I was trying to find this. They have all the great players - - look at whose in here, Anthony Braxton, Betty Carter, Doc Cheatham, Maxwell Cohen, Tommy Flanagan, Dizzy Gillespie, Dexter Gordon, Maxine Gregg, Neil Hefti, Earl Hines,

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

31

Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Charles Mingus, Ken McIntyre, Marian McPartland, Sam Rivers, Sonny Rollins, Horace Silver, John Snyder, and Joe Venuti. Now you tell me something, it's nice to be in that company, huh?

MG: Yes.

RM: 1980.

MG: And the reason I'm in the book is because they - - they - - [Inaudible] is interesting, he wrote for the Saturday Review - - New Republic.

RM: The New Republic books.

MG: And he was - - because I was one of the early women in the so-called jazz business.

RM: You know, I want to tell you, the reason why I came out of this is because I made the record with Inner City, it was called Mantilla, my first record, with Inner City. And the record label was small, Music Minus One, and he had a little department where they get you publicity, alright, they got you publicity. If everybody did that with a label, go out there and try to get you publicity - - these guys - - so this guy, Suston, Susman, was his name. He has a brother that plays piano. But he got me this, and I went in there and I gave him the story just like now, just talking, blah blah blah.

MN: I saw on Channel Thirteen a film about Dizzy Gillespie in Cuba. Are you playing in that?

RM: I don't know, because the first trip that we took, it was sort of like, they didn't bring all the cameras out because you only - - it was the first trip. It's the second - -

MG: They were on the cruise ship.

RM: Yes, we were on the cruise ship. That first concert is a live performance that you can get now, but I don't know if it was ever videotaped.

MN: You had also mentioned Earth Kitt.

RM: Yes.

MN: When did you meet - - when did - -

MG: Oh ok, now we start with his first professional gig.

RM: My first gig. I was - -

MG: You want to start there?

RM: Eartha Kitt I think I was twenty one, twenty one, twenty two. Yes, because I had just gotten married. So I had to leave my - - on the honeymoon I had to leave my wife home. I was in Philadelphia - - we had to go to Philadelphia for that. There was a place there, used to be called, I don't know, Philadelphia Casino or something - - a big - - and that's the time I joined the group. It was my first gig, I was nervous as anything. And she got a bad throat infection at that time. That's when she had to stop engagements and go in the hospital for her throat. That's the only thing I remember about that scene there. And then I never was able to play with her again. I was not experienced enough. But when she got into the operation room, she didn't work for months and months, and she came back, she hired her some other people that she was working with before. Like I said, my first gig with a big star like that, man, you know. I did ok, but I could've done better. But anyway, that was the first time that ever happened to me.

MG: So Ray Barretto. Let's talk about Barretto, how he brought you around.

RM: Yes, he brought me around. The first gig that I got with Ray was playing with Arnette Cobb. We did the Flying Home Mambo. We were in the studio, Ray played congas, I played the bongos. I had a little cowbell and that, and that was the first date we

did. Then Ray and I used to play a lot of dates together. And, till the end - - I remember Ray coming and talking to me out of quitting Herbie Mann's band.

MG: And how did you go with Herbie Mann?

RM: Well, thanks to Ray. Ray was playing with Tito Puente. That's the funny thing, I brought Ray around to the Latin scene. My dream was always to play with Tito, and guess what, he got it. [Laughter] Because I got involved with him, he was getting into the Latin so heavy he was the new guy on the scene. And I was just playing the old Latin way of just hopefully by word of mouth, get to that spot where they recommend you. He came on the scene, and once he learned how to do that Latin thing and the clave man, he just kept going man. I spent ten years of my - - it was ten years of my life that I didn't do nothing but destroy my life, you know. I went to Puerto Rico, a whole bunch of stuff happened. I had to take my family there because my wife was Hispanic. So I moved to Puerto Rico. But there was ten years there where I didn't do nothing but play with other people. You have to start being a leader after you get to a certain plateau, otherwise you're going to be waiting for the phone to ring, and you're never going to - - that's why I became a band leader. But I'm ten years behind Ray. So look at where Ray is. If I would have stuck around, who knows. But we were called the dynamic duo. Ray and I had all the gigs. I was one of the - - but now things have changed. Everything is - - he's older than me now, and he's just a little under the weather right now. But we're still very good friends, very good friends. I started the band - - the first thing - - he got me with Herbie Mann, ok. He says stay in the band until I get - - I'm leaving - - I'm going to leave Tito, and then I'll take the gig, and then I said alright, I'll hold on to the gig for you. When it came that time, they wouldn't give him back the chair. I got the chair. It's too

late Ray. Hey baby, it's my chair. [MG Laughs] So we put him on the bongos. [Laughter]

I said alright, so that's where we had the Herbie Mann group, and it was Ray Barretto, myself, and Ola Tungee.

MN: Ola Tungee was in the band?

MG: Yes, the Herbie Mann - -

RM: - - Herbie Mann, yes. Ola Tungee.

MG: - - was serious about who he had. He had - -

RM: - - We had Rudy Collins on drums man. And we had Johnny Ray play the vibes.

Well we had a lot of vibes players come through. We had Ahmed Abdul-Malik on the bass. Abdul-Malik was a great bass player. And so it was that - - we had Nabil Totah on there too. But I mean that was the first time I really played and toured a Latin jazz group. It was for me - - but I still played - - like I played the salsa stuff, the Latin stuff. We went and played with Herbie and he got me out there. I got better pay. I started to see the other end of the jazz.

MG: So did jazz, even at that time, pay better than the Latin stuff?

RM: Oh yes. Always, always.

MG: That's still true.

RM: It's still true. I don't know for some reason jazz always gets X amount of dollars.

They would take - - if you get X amount of dollars, you aren't going to take fifteen guys with you, you just take what the budget is. The Latin thing, we're thinking about the rhythm section, we're thinking about we have to have over what, eight people, nine people because that's the kind of music. Because it's true. To be the traditional band, the traditional salsa band, quote unquote, it's a lousy name, salsa, we have to understand, you

have to have vocals, you have to have the rhythm section. A Latin band without a conga drum is weird.

MN: Did you ever play with La Lupe?

RM: I never got a chance to play with La Lupe. I knew of her and she was with Tito, and I never did get to play with La Lupe. No, no. But most of the other people I did get to play with. So getting back to - -

MG: - - Herbie - -

RM: - - the Herbie Mann thing. He was one of the first guys to go up there and play the Latin jazz music. It was good for me, because I was just into the Afro-Cuban music, which is the salsa, whatever they call it. Tito used to hate that word, but that's the truth. And thanks to Ray, I got to thank Ray too. He's got to thank me too, because I pushed him into the Latin thing also. So story is he went with Tito, I went with Herbie Mann, blah blah blah, and then after I was working with him and he left Tito for some reason, he came with us for about five, six months. We made the records, Herbie Mann Nonet. I don't know, on Verve, we made the Nonet record. We made the Common Ground. It was Ola Tungee, Ray Barretto, myself, and we made a lot of records together, then Ray said says I want to play, I want to make my own band. So he used to come to the gig - - after he tried all the timbale players, he used to come to the gig, and just say there man you got to get out of this man, this is a huge - - you got to go back to the Spanish music man. What are you talking about, I said Ray. And every day, he kept on ne ne, you know he could talk, ne ne ne ne. So I said ok, alright. I told Herbie. That night I quit. I quit, stupid me. Not really, because from there we started a Charanga Moderna. That's when we

came out with the Watusi album. And then we came out with a Latino album, and we did a few things with Ray. After that - -

MN: Watusi was the big hit, right?

RM: For him. The funny thing about that is that I had done the dates right up to that last date, which was the last session. We did - - and I did eight songs. And then that day - - there was another friend of ours, Lou Perez. I don't know if you know who Lou Perez is, he had a Charanga orchestra, and I played with him. And I was like his ace guy. So was Ray Barreto was working with him too. You know we used to work with different bands. This was before he went with Tito. And Lou, at that time, was coming after me, hey Ray, he ain't got no work, I got four weeks in the mountains. He only got a record session, I'm going to be there all summer long. I said but yes, but I've been doing the dates with - - yes but I got four weeks, you only got one day. So guess what, stupid me, I said, I got to go up to the mountains. After awhile, the guys, you know - - they're friends of yours, I didn't know, I was pulled in between. I had to pick - - they were pulling at me, Ray on one side, Lou on the other side. The story was, I went to the mountains, we lasted four weeks and Ray had to get another drummer for that particular Watusi date [MG Laughs]. I sent him - - I sent him a guy called Joe Rodriguez. Joe Rodriguez was a timbale player with the Charlie Palmieri Orchestra. And to this day - - I just spoke to him the other day. So he went in and he made that session. One session, that's when they made up Watusi there. So the eight songs I did, is the only thing people remember is the Watusi, so I have to say I was on the Watusi album even though I - - [Laughter] but I did eight songs on there, and we did some of the heavy tunes. That's when there was that tune called Ritmo

Sabroso on that album, which is on the other side when they used to make the forty-fives.

Remember?

MG: Yes.

RM: Watusi was on one side and on the other side was Ritmo Sabroso. And that was the first timbale solo, Cuban style - - not first, but I took a solo on there. To this day everyone thought it was Mario Pendo.

MG: Oh yes?

RM: No, it was me. [Laughter] At that time, I was listening to the Charanga, so you had to get a guy who knew this music. To play the Charanga orchestra - - you know we have Cahunto orchestras, we have Charanga orchestras, we have all kind of different orchestras, different instrumentations. The Cahunto is with the trumpets, trumpets only. Orchestras with the saxophones and the - - the Charanga with the violin and the flute, right. So we - - you had to know how to play that. A guy that played in a Cahunto band, plays different than the guy that plays in the Charanga band. It's the touch, it's a light touch. You hear the Orquesta Aragón, you hear - - I used to listen to all those - - [melodia de quarenta aragon ascension, there was Orique Horin], there was a bunch of these Charanga bands which was - - this is what I wanted to do. And guess what, the violin and the flute, that was the main - - and the rhythm, that they were so tight, there was that heavy groove. It was that heavy groove, the Charanga - - and that's where Pacheco got all his stuff from. This was stuff that already was already conceived in Cuba. We're just playing Afro-Cuban music, but when we took it, the Bronx kids took it, that's where we took it and we put in our own little two cents worth. That's that - - that music, we're just playing the Bronx style. [MG Laughs]

MN: So Afro-Cuban music, Bronx style.

RM: Yes, that's right. That's like Eddie Palmieri, and the Charlie Palmieri, and even Barretto when he started his thing. We were all trying to follow the Cuban stuff. You can't simulate that. You can play at it, you can do it. So that's what it was. We had our own voice because in the time when I was coming up - - when I was playing on my little - -

MG: - - coffee can.

RM: - - coffee can, there was the Bomba and the Plena out. And the people - - that's corny. That was Puerto Rican music, you know that. We had Corti, who was playing that - - and oh we would listen to that, and that's corny man, where's the - - he would play that Bomba, this Puerto Rican music, and Plena, and guys didn't want to play that. You wanted to play - - that was corny. We wanted to play Afro-Cuban music, Bronx style. And now, you hear the Bomba and the Plena pretty big.

MG: Yes.

RM: They finally caught up.

MG: Cut?

DR: We have to - - oh, you have a cast, oh I - - [Crosstalk]

RM: Alright - -

MG: Oh, did you want to ask a question?

RM: Sorry my mouth is running again.

MG: That's great, oh he's like oh I'm going to meet - - I don't know if we have anything left to say. [Crosstalk - Inaudible]

[Break in Tape]

MG: Mark wants to know - - oh you're learning?

DR: Are you ready?

Other Videographer: Yes. Alright action.

MG: Do you have some questions? Did you have a question? Ok. Mark asked the question, did you ever play the Blue Morocco?

RM: Blue Morocco, I think I played there once. Like I said, that was more like a jazz place. But like I said before, I spent all these years playing my Latin, my Afro-Cuban, Latin music, and it was Barretto that brought me around to the jazz clubs. He brought me to Mittens, he brought me to all the jazz - - I got to know them through that. And when I got in with Herbie Mann, that's when I started to really get into it. But I got to say, my head was into our music. My head was into my music. And the jazz thing was beautiful, but I was into the rhythms. All this Afro-Cuban rhythms that was coming out of - - then there was a lull there that didn't let no more records out. They didn't let no more nothing. You couldn't get - - you would have to go to Europe to pick up a Cuban record. Eighteen years passed, eighteen years, I didn't know what Cuba was doing. We just took what we knew, and the bands were doing it here. And then when I went on the Cuban trip - -

MG: - - Yes, so talk about when you went to Cuba and what you heard and - -

RM: Getting back, getting back - - thanks to a few people, I got on that boat. Excuse me. David Amram called me. I had been working with David Amram and he called me and would I like to go to Cuba. I says are you kidding, sure. I mean here I was, all of a sudden, picked out of all these beautiful - - these percussion players. They were all dying to go. When I got the gig, he had to go through all kinds of paperwork for me. I guess they checked me out. Because on that ship there was nothing but FBI, CIA, producers,

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

40

Colombia Records executives, all these magazine people. It was the first trip. And to make a long story short, we had a great time onboard the ship, Dizzy especially. Stan Getz, Earl Father Hines. This was on that trip, 1977. I remember that. And we got there, went to New Orleans, stayed overnight at New Orleans and we picked the boat up there. You had to go from New Orleans to Cuba. I remember that because we got into the boat, there was a big picket. It was Castro's sister. I don't know that story. There's a whole bunch of stuff, archives on that. That's where I met Arnold J. Smith from the Downbeat people. And that's when I met Ira Savin. Yes. I think Ira Ginter was on that trip. I'm not sure, I don't think so. Ira Savin - - but I got all of the publicity through Arnold J. Smith. He could tell you the whole story on that trip. Make a long story short, we got to Cuba, and it was something, thirty-six hours in Havana. They've wrote many stories about that. First thing they did, they put us in the bus, and that's when Dizzy got into the - - he got off the bus man, and he's talking to this guy over there, and he's mentioning to me. So he sent one guy to get me off the bus. Now here I was, what does he want me for. We're not supposed to get off this bus. But Dizzy could do what he want [Laughter]. Yes. Story was, it was Arturo Sandoval trying to talk to Dizzy, and Dizzy didn't understand what he was saying because he talked very - - he couldn't speak the English language. So I was the translator on that whole trip. I was always with Dizzy translating. Arturo, blah blah blah blah, and I say, Dizzy, this is a trumpet player, his name is Arturo Sandoval, and he wants to meet you, he has your records. Oh yes, hey man blah blah. And then he says, where are the drummers. So I want - - where are the bata drummers. That's the first thing Dizzy said. I want to hear the African drummers. So that's when Arturo says, oh we go to Bogolote. This a true story, they made a whole movie out of this. And we went to this

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

41

little barrio where all the people there - - they were all like folk people, and the drummers were there playing their little - - so they made a big party for us inside, and the story was we were there for about two hours. And the guys were playing and Dizzy was listening. I said I couldn't believe he was there. Oh man this is great. And we get a call, a phone call, Arturo gets a phone call from the ministry, what are you doing there with Dizzy Gillespie man, hey come on. So they reprimanded him. We wasn't supposed to be there. Because you realize, just to get a bottle of beer, you had to be on line, get on line. Because everything was so short and everybody lived in these little houses. It was not poor, it wasn't bad, but it was rural. That's the way it is in Puerto Rico too. I remember that, the houses look like Puerto Rican houses anyway. But Arturo Sandoval brought us to Paquito D'Riviera's house. We knock on the door [RM knocks something three times], nobody's home. And then Dizzy's knocking on the - - hey man what's happening, he's not there, alright. So Dizzy writes, we came to visit you, Dizzy Gillespie. He left a note there and we left. Paquito has the story, he opened it, when he came home he saw it he couldn't believe it. Aw somebody's playing a joke on me man. So yes, the ministry that particular day told him we're not supposed to be going to those places. So they made a concert for us, especially because of that, at the Hotel Havana Libre in the afternoon. It was an afternoon. So we - - they played, and Irakere showed up there. Irakere, first time I ever heard of that band. And they went there and they killed. I mean you're talking about Arturo is playing the highest notes he could do [RM imitates music] everybody [RM imitates music] I was saying oh my God, this is ridiculous after eighteen years. Arturo Sandoval and Paquito D'Riviera, when he was a skinny little guy like that. You know Paquito was always skinny. I don't know if you've seen those old - -

MG: Right.

RM: - - I said man this guy needs to eat. Now you see him he got - - he got like this [Laughter]. I said alright Paquito. And story was they played so great and that's when they got the - - Dizzy took out the handkerchief and says I give up, I give up. Arturo was smoking. So then they invited us to play some minor blues. And we all came up, and we played. Mickey Roker was the drummer. He took the drums over. I took the congas over. And Dizzy and Stan Getz played with David Amram. I'm trying to remember the - - oh, Joe Afrikin [SP] was the piano player. And we played, and that night, it was great, the camaraderie. Oh we love each other, blah blah blah. You know something, that was one of the first trips that music took over. It was a big trip where - - and that's when the doors really opened up, when they saw how we got along perfect. And we went on the stage that night, the Hotel Milla in Havana, Cuba. And that night I walk in and I see these red and white drums man. And I says oh no, that's Los Papines. They were number one for me. The Munequito group too, which is from Matanza. That's a Guaguancó group. That's with drums. These guys here were considered tops. Los Papines. And here I am, oh my God I'm nervous again. I'm shaking. It was a real something. But that's when I had to step up and say, hey wait a minute it's ok. I went up there and did very good. But David Amram and me, we were supposed to go to Cuba to play duo. I said you got to be kidding. So David was smart - - excuse me - - so he got the ministry to ok Irakere and Papines to play with us. And then he got the ok - - John Ore was playing bass with somebody - - I think he - - I don't know if he brought - - he might have brought him with us.

MG: [Inaudible]

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

43

RM: I don't know. Dizzy had a fender player. So we brought John Ore too. Story is he made a band there, we made a band. A big orchestra, it became - - we gave two people to play - - oh no, and Billy Hart. He brought Billy Hart on drums, yes. [Tubale]. Was it [tobale]

MG: [To bale].

RM: So, to make a long story short, it was some experience. And if you want to hear that record, it's called Havana New York, ok, David Amram. And that was - - he was smart because I didn't know we were getting - - we weren't getting recorded, but they were recording it anyway. They were videotaping it, I bet you Castro was watching it somewhere. And this thing here was only for special people to go in there.

MG: That's when Dizzy met with Castro, isn't it?

RM: No, I don't know.

MG: Or that's the next trip?

RM: Maybe the next trip. [Crosstalk] Because he kept coming back. Ry Cooder, Ry Cooder was on that first trip. Nobody mentions that first trip, but that was the trip that opened everything. What I don't understand is why. Then they start - - and that's when Columbia Records decided they going to give these people - -

MG: - - Irakere - -

RM: - - they going to give Irakere a whole new studio in Cuba, man, to sign up. That's when they signed him up, right there. [Crosstalk - - Inaudible]

MG: Before we finish I want to Andrew to - -

RM: But anyway, this continues, I can continue this - -

MG: - - maybe we could do - -

RM: - - You should do this: give me a class and pay me, [MG Laughs] and I will give you the rest.

MG: This is why Ray Mantilla has had a successful career [RM Laughs]. Andrew is a percussionist.

RM: Ok Andrew.

MG: You have some - - go ahead - -

Andrew Tiedt [AT]: I had some basic questions because you've been talking a lot about the different styles. Some of these styles I don't know about.

RM: That's in my class. I do classes.

AT: Alright, well the Charanga?

RM: Yes, yes.

AT: So this is violin, flute, and percussion?

RM: The violins.

AT: Violins.

RM: Yes.

MG: You've never heard Charanga orchestra?

AT: No.

MG: Oh [Crosstalk – Inaudible]

RM: Well see, that whole thing in my class, what I do is I bring the different music. Here, this is a Charanga band, this is a drum band, Guaguancó. Then we go to Cahunto bands, with two trumpets. Then you go to orchestras, and there's different - - then even go to the trios with the guitars. That's called - - a trio - - cueldas, in Spanish it's guitars. They have names. Rhythms have names, too, you know that. You don't know what

you're playing; you have to know the names. So we have sixty-eight rhythms. That's being cheap.

AT: Can you demonstrate, maybe two of the sixty-eight rhythms for us, to show us the difference?

RM: No. Well, is it necessary?

AT: I'm just curious.

RM: [Taps on desk] Well, the main beat is this one. This is the basic beat that everybody plays, one two three four, one two three four. That's one, then you got the six eight, another rhythm. That's the six eight, Naningo. Then you got the danza, the Danzón, then you got the - - the danza, the Danzón, you got the Compalsa, you got the Guaguancó. So it could continue. You got the Guajira.

MG: The Naningo, you know - -

RM: The Naningo is the six eight.

MG: - - it's an African word, a Yoruba word.

RM: All of these things here, they have a whole history about that. It's the researching of that thing. You have to know, because nowadays with they're bringing out these new rhythms, if you listen to this new music that's coming out, - - the Cuban bands that are coming over, they're coming out with the Songo. The Songo rhythm was a thing that you don't play time, you just play around the time, you know what I mean. But over here, it's ok for certain songs, but not for dancing. A lot of people for dancing, you got to have the beat. That's the problem over there with the Cuban - - they're so good, they're so virtuostic, let's say, that it just fills up every beat. There's no breathing. It's constant playing something. I come up with the old days of the Machito, the Rodriguezes, and all

that. The time was like that and everybody else could do. We were just slaves. The rhythm section is a slave. Like all the drummers, how many times the drummers would have to play through all the solos. With Art, first solo, second solo - - he would - - everybody soloed in the band, till at the end he gave me my solo. I said I don't want to do it. He said oh man I'm tired, go. So he used to kick my [MG Laughs] - -he use to knock me out. I have pictures where I'm just so bathed in water. Woody was on those things. I got pictures of Woody.

MG: Really? Oh good, we have to look.

RM: You can see me all soaked and drenched in water because that was Art. He made me work so hard, but I loved it. That's the only way I got to the plateau to know what real time is. Thing about young drummers is that knowing the time. There's certain - - there's major league time and then there's minor league time, you dig. Major league time is something else. And a lot of kids, they stay and they - - you only going to learn the real way by playing with the real guys that have been up there for awhile. You're not going to learn by being with everybody that's a novice. You eventually got to get out of that and go with some professionals. And you learn a lot just by listening. I could tell you, when I was hanging with - - when I was doing the Latin scene, I used to stay and keep my mouth shut and there was these conferences also with Tito Puente. It was Machito, Mario Bauzá, Miguelito Valdez, and I remember the few - - Socarrás. And I was there with Chino Pozo and I just stayed and listened, and don't open my mouth. And you learn just by listening. Something wrong with kids nowadays, they don't listen. I don't know what's wrong with these babies, these people. You got to listen first, and then when you listen then maybe you might say a word. But you got nothing to say. I used to stay, there was nothing for

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

47

me to say. What am I going to do, ask a question, that look like a fool sometime. So I learned a lot just by listening. That's what I got to tell you, the history of this whole thing. I think kids these days do need to have some kind of professional help. Bring in a professional - - and the kids should learn how to play next to a giant because it's a whole nother level. I didn't really know what time was till it was with Art Blakey, when I really find out what's happening with Art. And then with Max, those the time - - and then with Tito, you play with Tito it's a different time. With Machito band also. You had to keep going, you had to go straight. There's a time that goes back and a time that goes forward. You say if you go back or you go forward. They say batra o palante. On top of the beat it's forward, behind the beat it's laying back, you know what I mean. The Tito Rodriguez band was a laid back band. And Machito band was a laid back band but also on top. Tito Puente was really on top. Tito was more like ballante, forward. So when we used to get in the rhythm section, what are you playing, forward. batrao o ballante. And we say, well, vamos bavante, ok. It's the beat moves. See the beat doesn't stay like that, it moves, man. There's a little flexibility. Try to keep the tempo the best way you can but it has to move forward, it can't go back. You know it's like a tempo starts like that and starts going back, you can't do that. I'd rather go forward than go back. And that's the thing about it, when I say, we going to kick a tempo, I said oh my god, if it's not the right tempo, you can tell. The best thing is to just stop and start again. You know what I mean? If you kick the tempo wrong, it's going to end up dragging. Tito Rodriguez was one guy before he kicked off, he would listen, and he would go like that, and everybody would wait, and then when he got it, you heard the foot [Taps Foot]. This is what you heard, that foot [MG Laughs] at the Palladium. And he would - - very heavy foot [Taps Foot], and then

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Maxine Gordon

Interviewed: Ray Mantilla

January 24, 2006

48

he would kick the right tempo. But he had to have it first. So tempo is very important. I don't know how I got to that, but I'm just telling you about time. It's not just time, you got the major league time, you got the minor league time, you got the kiddy time, you got -- you got the wavering time. Being a percussion player, myself, in particular, I'm so -- I love playing time. Good time. I have a thing that we got to get to the first plateau. What's that? Let's get the groove going first. We start making all kinds of stuff then. Kids nowadays, they got to learn how to play the time first. Anything else?

MG: Mark, you got anything?

RM: I have to save some for the class.

MN: Right. [Laughter] Just, thank you so -- wow. [Clapping]

RM: Yes, alright.

[END]