



ROBERTO MIRANDA

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Bassist Roberto Miranda has been on many musical adventures, performing and recording with his mentors—Horace Tapscott, John Carter and Bobby Bradford and later, Kenny Burrell—as well as artists like Charles Lloyd, Tim Berne, Vinny Golia, Michele Rosewoman and James Newton, among many others. This year Dark Tree Records released *Live at Bing Theatre* by Roberto Miranda's Home Music Ensemble, an apt name for that group, which had immediate family and his greater musical family performing with him. It was Miranda's Master's recital at U.S.C., recorded live on May 25th, 1985. His mentors Tapscott, Carter and Bradford are part of the band, but his father and brother are both in the fold as well. That was the only time anything like that happened. He also appears on one track from this year's celebrated box set of Julius Hemphill's archival recordings, *The Boyé Multi-National Crusade For Harmony* (New World Records). Over the course of almost 60 years, Miranda has established an international reach while his work has focused locally, in Los Angeles, where he has made his home.

"In between the ages of birth and just before my 8th birthday, I spent approximately half my time in Puerto Rico and half my time in New York City. Since then, I've been in Los Angeles," he says. Miranda's parents were from Puerto Rico. Louis Raphael, Sr., was a vocalist and percussionist from Ponce, Puerto Rico. As a young man, his voice was the first to be broadcast on the radio in that city. As a musician, he worked with Perez Prado, Joe Loco and Ruth Natal and he appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Miranda's father was his first music teacher. "My Dad sang and played congas, bongos and the smaller instruments, clave, guiro. He

played all those instruments and he taught those instruments to me and my brother. One of the favorite memories I have of my life is watching my parents dance to Latin music. Man! That still is an incredible memory."

Years later in school, his brother played percussion in concert band and Miranda asked for a trumpet. All those chairs were taken, he was told, so he requested a guitar, but was told that was not a band instrument. They did need bass players, however, so that's when he first played bass but gave it up after the semester. The brothers had formed a band together in which Louis played drum set and Roberto played congas. As teenagers they started a social club and held dances. "Almost everybody in the club was a musician. We would actually throw dances. We did one dance at a lodge or something in Echo Park and hundreds of people came. I remember being on the bandstand and looking out and just seeing hundreds of teenagers doing a dance that was popular at that time called 'the stroll'. It was really cool." When their bass player was no longer permitted by his parents to play with the social club band, Miranda picked up the bass again. This time he never put it down again and it wasn't long before he met his musical mentors.

"The Underground Musicians Association and the Pan-African Peoples Arkestra were both underway by the time I got to them. Underground Musicians Association changed its name to The Union of God's Musicians' and Artists' Ascension, UGMAA. I met my three mentors—Horace Tapscott, Bobby Bradford and John Carter—I met all three of them when I was 19 years old. I played with Horace and John from the time I was 19 until they died. Every once in a while, I still play with Bobby. They just really accepted me and loved me and nurtured me. They weren't that much older than me. Maybe somewhere between 10 and 15 years older. I loved all three of them. Those were the guys who really taught me. Even though I ended up going to school and getting an undergraduate and graduate degree in music, at least with relationship to really playing the music professionally and, I want to say at the street level, or... I can't think of another word for it right now, but those were the guys that really

taught me."

Miranda recalls that he made his first recording at age 21 with pianist Larry Nash and drummer Woody "Sonship" Theus, who were both just 16 at the time. The name of the album was *The Beginning* and it also featured saxophonists Herman Riley and Pony Poindexter and trumpeter Luis Gasca (who, under contract elsewhere, used a pseudonym). The drummer became a dear friend and was instrumental in Miranda ending up on a record with Charles Lloyd (*Waves*, A&M, 1972), even though, as it was happening, Miranda didn't even know he was being recorded.

"Sonship Theus was a very close friend of mine. Both of us shared a love for the Lord. And we shared a love for this music. I would get together with Sonship, he was a wonderful practicer. He would practice a roll—just a roll—for a solid hour. And then I would walk. And we would do that for a solid hour, man, just walking bass, roll, bass foot and hi-hat. And then we would begin to stretch out. We did a lot of playing together. Another good, close friend of mine at the time was a guitar player by the name of Tommy Trujillo. [He] and Sonship were both playing with Charles Lloyd. The bass player in the band at that time was a wonderful bass player by the name of Wolfgang Melz. Tommy and Sonship just asked me to come by the recording, they were doing a record and I met Charles. I brought my bass, so he stuck me into a bass booth and just asked me to play along with them. So, I was listening to the music that they were playing with headphones on, playing bass in this isolated room. The next thing I know, I'm playing bass on the album and I was touring with the group."

Miranda's own education coincided with his career as an educator. Besides attending UCLA he went to California State University Dominguez Hills, where he earned his Bachelor's degree and simultaneously taught at Compton Community College. He was also gigging and teaching privately and then got an invitation from the Jazz Department head, Thomas David Mason. In exchange for being his teaching assistant and playing in his big band, he worked toward his Master's degree tuition-free. He also

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LEST WE FORGET



DEWEY JOHNSON

BY ERIC WENDELL

When trumpeter Dewey Johnson recorded with saxophonist John Coltrane on the free-jazz masterpiece *Ascension*, Johnson countered Coltrane's soul-searching barks with brisk billows beyond his 25 years. While not as experienced as many others on the sessions, his soul nonetheless spoke the truth on a career that was not well documented but left an indelible mark on those with whom he spoke the truth.

Unfortunately, the trappings of missed opportunities and difficulties of modern life deprived jazz history of his enormous talents. The little musical output that remains showcases a player who was both resourceful and unbridled, revered by his peers. Collaborator pianist Mary Anne Driscoll described him as "kind, generous, introspective."

Johnson was born on Nov. 6th, 1939 in Philadelphia. Coming from a musical family, he took up the trumpet and began to perform with his brothers. Johnson eventually dropped out of high school and began to

take lessons at the Granoff School of Music, whose alumni include Coltrane, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and saxophonist Sonny Fortune. In 1960, Johnson traveled out to Los Angeles where he joined his brother Fred and acted as a mentor and teacher to saxophonist Noah Howard. Not long after, Johnson moved to San Francisco where he lived in a musician's commune that acted as a meeting place for musicians coming through including Coltrane, bassist Jimmy Garrison and saxophonists Ornette Coleman and Sonny Simmons.

In 1963, Johnson moved to New York City where he started a band with saxophonist Giuseppi Logan, bassist Reggie Johnson and drummer Rashied Ali. Johnson was a workhorse willing to put the necessary time and effort to creating beautiful art with Driscoll extolling, "in work he was concentrated, attentive, willing to rehearse for unlimited time."

In 1964, Johnson appeared on pianist Paul Bley's ESP-Disk' album *Barrage*. Perhaps the best record of his talents, Johnson's interplay with alto saxophonist Marshall Allen is at times adversarial; a competition of immense force that brings listeners to their knees, as is evident on "Around Again" where the sonic assault of the main melody is brief yet effective. Johnson's solo from 1:37-2:22 is an unrestrained bundle of notes just waiting to pop.

Johnson received a big bump in his profile when Coltrane invited him to participate in the recording sessions that would result in *Ascension*. Still fresh off of

the success of *A Love Supreme*, *Ascension* serves as a transcendent moment in Coltrane's career and a beautiful example of Johnson's prowess, who had the prime aural real estate on both sides of the recording, taking the first solo after Coltrane. Johnson settles nicely into a cluster of informal notes that both mirror Coltrane's soul-embarking heights while traversing brilliantly through the ensemble.

Not long after Coltrane's death in 1967, Johnson suffered a nervous breakdown, his mental health keeping him away from the scene for periods of time. The same year, Johnson played the concert that would, in 2020, be released as *First Time Out: Live at Slugs 1967* with drummer Rashied Ali, tenor saxophonist Ramon Morris and pianist Stanley Cowell. The two-track album showcases a more tender side to Johnson's playing; "Ballade" showcases a beautiful and mellow tone, which, when paired against his work on *Ascension*, sounds like that of two different musicians.

After subsequent stretches of time where he was homeless or working a succession of day jobs, Johnson participated on the sessions for drummer Paul Murphy's recording *Cloudburst*, which also included Driscoll. Driscoll shared one of Johnson's philosophies on improvisation: "You can create an improvisation and form easily. Start on A, freely improvise and end on an A. That way you cannot be lost, you always know where you are going." Driscoll elaborates on this

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PH: I know! It's true. Another one is, be sensitive to the audience you are playing for and let them know you appreciate them. Again, all things they don't teach you in school.

TNYCJR: I'd like to hear about the different musical situations you are in. Some people call you the King of Harlem because you have done and continue to do every gig in Harlem! Been on every bandstand in Harlem. Talk to me about uptown.

PH: My association with the Harlem scene or uptown scene came through a tenure at St. Nick's Pub at 149th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue, which, way before I got there, had been a hangout of Billy Strayhorn and The Copasetics, the great ensemble of tap dance people, and not too far from Duke Ellington's residence when he lived in Harlem. The Copasetics would rehearse there but it was not called St. Nick's at that time. It was Luckey's Rendezvous. A piano player named Luckey Roberts owned it. Then later I had a residency at this club and from there just began to perform at just about every place in Harlem.

There was a tap dancing group that hung there too after I had come to New York. A few of them were in the show *Black and Blue*, which I was also in. Opened in 1989. That is where I met Savion Glover who I still work with a lot. I met that whole crew from that show. Buster Brown and Lon Chaney, Bunny Briggs, Jimmy Slyde... It was a social hang too. That became my hang. Savion was the young phenom in that show. We got to be friends. It was such a wonderful experience—the music and the dance. I became enamored with it.

TNYCJR: How did that happen that you got the steady Monday nights at St. Nick's? You were there a long time, right, I guess from the early '90s?

PH: That came about through a lady by the name of Roberta Alloway, who was looking to have music in her neighborhood because she was tired of going downtown and coming back uptown. So she knew this musician and asked them to put together a group. And she went to the owner of St. Nick's Pub and said she wanted to bring music there... And from there it blossomed. I was there a good dozen years. That was the genesis of the Sugar Hill Quartet. St. Nick's Pub.

TNYCJR: Who else was in the band?

PH: The original band was the late great Andy McCloud on bass and Eli Fontaine on drums and we had rotating piano players, but finally settled on Marcus Persiani. People sat in all the time. This was during the time, you know, when I was doing many many other things.

TNYCJR: Broadway was dark on Mondays.

PH: Exactly. I did a lot of Broadway shows, but I was also a member of the Ellington Orchestra [under Mercer Ellington] for a long period of time. That came about through my association with a member of the band, [trombonist] Raymond Harris. We had done a gig together with Archie Shepp's band, his big band.

TNYCJR: Although you spent a lot of time uptown, you didn't actually live there, right?

PH: I didn't live up there but I spent a lot of time uptown. Uptown, downtown, all around the town.

TNYCJR: You have done some teaching.

PH: I teach with the JazzMobile program—been associated with that program at least 10 years.

TNYCJR: You have just the one album as a leader, although you have been on many others.

PH: Yes, on the Mapleshade label. It was done live at St. Nick's Pub with my Sugar Hill Quartet—called *Live in Harlem*. The recording included some of the guests who sat in with us. It was kind of a document of the band's time there.

TNYCJR: What do you have coming up? Of course, with the pandemic, no one has much coming up but do you have some potential gigs?

PH: Specifically, I do have JazzMobile's Jazz Fest coming up this summer. They will be doing outdoor events—Grant's Tomb, Central Park. Everything will be outside, of course. Broadway will be opening again in September, I hear. The last Broadway show I was doing before the lockdown was *Avenue Q*, which was a three Tony-award winning show. It ran for six years!

TNYCJR: Your philosophy—you have played such a broad spectrum of music. Do you have a philosophy that you could put into words that would allow you to be the best you can be with both the Ellington Orchestra and Aretha and more out players like David Murray, Muhal Richard Abrams, Hamiet Bluiett.

PH: Basically, my outlook is to have respect for the music and respect for the people that think that I am capable and qualified to be part of their endeavors. As Duke Ellington said, "There are only two kinds of music, good and the other kind." And I just approach it as, first of all, I love music and the vast array of the musical spectrum. There is no best, there is only different. That is basically my approach. I try and approach the music on the highest level that I can do it. I have been fortunate to experience and be a part of all types of music. ❖

For more information, visit facebook.com/CountGigula. Higgins is at Riverside Park Jun. 13th and Grant's Tomb Jun. 23rd, both as part of JazzMobile, and Minton's Jun. 26th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Gary Saracho—*En Medio* (ABC Impulse!, 1973)
- Sam Rivers Winds of Manhattan—*Colours* (Black Saint, 1982)
- Muhal Richard Abrams Orchestra—*Blu Blu Blu* (Black Saint, 1990)
- Errol Parker Tentet—*A Night in Tunisia* (Sahara, 1991)
- Patience Higgins' Sugar Hill Quartet—*Live in Harlem* (Mapleshade, 1996)
- Bluiett Baritone Nation—*Blueblack* (Justin Time, 2001)

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received permission to start a class called AfroLatin-American-Jazz-Ensemble, which is still going today. After earning his Master's degree, he started teaching for Los Angeles Unified School District.

"I actually started teaching elementary school. I taught in Spanish to kids that didn't speak any English at all. After nine years of teaching elementary school, I decided to just stop doing that and just teach music as an independent contractor. I was teaching kids who had had some difficulties and were in detention centers. I would go to those places and teach music. I actually taught a form of composition that I devised to elementary school children. I taught in Inglewood School District for a while and then I decided to go back to L.A. Unified because I realized that, as an independent contractor, I was actually paying [more in taxes than I was] taking home. I got a

job as a middle school music teacher where I was teaching nothing but music at the middle school level close to my home. So, I ended up altogether teaching 24 years with L.A. Unified and all of that time I was also teaching at UCLA."

Teaching at UCLA, Miranda was deeply influenced and became very close to its Jazz Department head, Kenny Burrell. They both have very practical guidance for their students. "Kenny really loves this music. He is one of the true legends of the music and he's a very honest and forthright educator and passionate in a real quiet kind of way. I got a chance to really see Kenny teach really closely and I've been part of that jazz studies program, I think this is my 26th year. So, I was there when Kenny started the actual jazz studies program. So, I got a chance to really watch him and see how he went about sharing this music with the students who expressed interest. He made it clear that some of you may be performers, some of you are going to be composers, some be arrangers, some of you may do music copying, editing, some of you may do film music, some of you will be teachers, educators in different levels of education from primary school all the way up to the advanced college [and] university levels. There's also the thing about being an author and writing. I don't know that many people know that Stanley Crouch was a really good drummer. So, you need to really understand that there are many careers, or many different ways for you to share this music, be honest with yourself and figure out what it is you want to do."

Miranda continues to teach at UCLA, gigs when possible and is focused on composing. "I'm working on a project now where I'm trying to write music based upon Old Testament characters, Biblical characters. I'm also trying to write something that might end up being for classical guitar. I don't know what it wants to be yet. I'd also like to do a Latin album. Just straight, flat out, stone cold, Latin jazz album. I try to practice every day. Sometimes it's not possible because I might just get more into composition or doing other things. I like to do a lot of yard work. We like to grow food at my home and I like to hang out with my family. That's my life." ❖

For more information, visit robertomirandamusic.com

Recommended Listening:

- Vinny Golia—*Spirits in Fellowship* (Nine Winds, 1977)
- Roberto Miguel Miranda—*The Creator's Musician* (Nimbus West, 1980)
- John Carter Quintet—*Night Fire* (Black Saint, 1980)
- Horace Tapscott—*Live at Lobero (Vol. I & II)* (Nimbus West, 1981)
- Roberto Miranda's Home Music Ensemble—*Live at Bing Theatre - Los Angeles* (Dark Tree, 1985)
- Bobby Bradford/Hafez Modirzadeh—*Live at the Blue Whale* (NoBusiness, 2017)

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by stating, "He preferred for himself short, intense solos. He listened carefully and was always very supportive."

Johnson passed on three years ago this month on Jun. 27th, 2018. What little remains is a true sonic force who was never given his due. Obscurity aside, what we do have is the work of a musician that was loved, admired and will live on forever. ❖

Recommended Listening:

- Paul Bley Quintet—*Barrage* (ESP-Disk', 1964)
- John Coltrane—*Ascension* (Impulse!, 1965)
- Rashied Ali—*First Time Out: Live at Slugs 1967* (Survival, 1967)
- Paul Murphy—*Red Snapper: Paul Murphy at CBS* (Cadence Jazz, 1982)
- Paul Murphy—*Cloudburst* (Mad Murphy, 1983)