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DAFNIS PRIETO

'EXPLODING IMAGINATION'

BY TED PANKEN
PHOTO BY HENRY LOPEZ

DAFNIS PRIETO'S VIVID NEW BIG BAND ALBUM, BACK TO THE SUNSET, ORIGINATED WITH A PHONE CALL.

It was May 2016, a month after the virtuoso Cuban-born drummer-composer published *A World Of Rhythmic Possibilities*, a well-received book that dives deep into his methodologies and aesthetics. On the line was Eric Oberstein, who'd become friendly with Prieto while serving as executive director of the Afro-Latin Jazz Alliance, the umbrella nonprofit that sponsors Arturo O'Farrill's Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra. ALJO had recorded Prieto's "The Triumphant Journey" on the 2015 Grammy-nominated album *Cuba: The Conversation Continues*, and "Song For Chico," which served as the title track for ALJO's 2008 Best Latin Jazz Album Grammy-winning recording, both of which Oberstein produced.

"I fell in love with 'Song For Chico' the moment I heard it," Oberstein recalled in early February. "Dafnis' beautiful, lush melodies captured me, and I've never met anyone with such an incredible sense of time. His pieces are little journeys that take hairpin turns, but he's always in control as he takes you down his beautiful path." Oberstein was looking to branch out, and decided to suss out Prieto's interest in a collaboration.



Steve Coleman, Brian Lynch and Henry Threadgill all are featured on drummer Dafnis Prieto's *Back To The Sunset*.



TOM SCHWARZ

Before Oberstein finished asking, “What’s your dream project?” Prieto declared, “I want to do a big band with my arrangements.” That aspiration dated back some 30 years to Prieto’s adolescence in Santa Clara, a city of 215,000 in central Cuba, where he was focusing on classical percussion in conservatory and teaching himself to play drums with exercises from a technique book by George Lawrence Stone. Prieto fueled his imagination at performances by the local big band Orquesta La Musica Moderna, propelled by drummer Juan Carlos Rojas (“El Peje”), who would subsequently spend consequential time with pianist Chucho Valdés’ band, The Afro-Cuban Messengers.

“Through them I heard not just Cuban music, but American music and any other kind of music—played well,” Prieto said by phone from his Miami home. “Always in the back of my mind I hoped some day to record my music with that great, rich sound.” And so, with the cessation of funding from his 2011 MacArthur “Genius” award and a substantial corpus of original music from five quartet, quintet and sextet albums on his own imprint, Dafnison, Prieto decided that the prospect of professional support in navigating infrastructure and logistics made this a fortuitous moment to take the plunge.

As spring transitioned to summer and summer to fall, Prieto and Oberstein looked for a narrative thread. Prieto decided to construct a notes-and-tones autobiography through tributes to a Pan-American cohort of heroes who influenced and inspired him.

Three of the nine pieces on *Back To The*

Sunset are features for Steve Coleman, Brian Lynch and Henry Threadgill, who each recruited Prieto for their bands not long after he arrived in New York in 1999. Each of those musicians is also a dedicatee, as are Jane Bunnett, Andrew Hill, David Samuels, Eddie Palmieri, Jerry González, Michel Camilo, Roberto Carcasses, Bebo Valdés and père and fils O’Farrill, one time Prieto employers.

As Prieto composed new charts and expanded older ones, Oberstein tasked himself with financing the enterprise and convening a 17-piece band consisting of five saxophones, four trombones, four trumpets, piano, bass, percussion and Prieto on drum kit. The core members were saxophonists Peter Apfelbaum and Roman Filiú, trumpeter Mike Rodriguez and pianist Manuel Valera, all long-standing friends familiar with Prieto’s vocabulary.

Oberstein announced the project around Thanksgiving 2016 and launched a crowd-funding campaign through the New York-based nonprofit arts service organization Fractured Atlas. They created tiered levels of rewards that, at the Producer level, included access to the recording session. Via this modality, a May 2017 fundraising concert by Prieto’s Si O Si quartet at Manhattan’s Jazz Gallery and several grants, they raised about \$60,000 and decided to self-release the project.

“The recording session was relaxed,” Valera recalled about the August sessions in Brooklyn. “Most of the tunes were two takes, with hardly any overdubs. ... Dafnis’ writing for big band reminds me of the way Thad Jones wrote, where

all the lines could stand on their own. He applies his rhythmic concepts to give the big band forward movement, push-and-pull, similar to those old Cuban bands—less about harmonic complexity than the different sections playing the melodies and rhythms.”

As an example of Prieto’s rhythmic legerdemain, Valera mentioned “Out Of The Bone,” dedicated to Coleman and Camilo, on which, after a stentorian baritone saxophone overture by Chris Cheek, Prieto states a ferocious 7/4 time feel that conveys the illusion that two separate drum kits are in play, or that he perhaps deployed an extra limb—or two—in addressing his instrument.

Prieto first encountered Coleman in Havana in 1996. He made 1997 and 1998 sojourns to the Stanford Jazz Workshop at Coleman’s instigation and played drums on Coleman’s 2003 *Lucidarium*. “Through Steve, I discovered the playing and music of Max Roach, which was huge, and music from South India and Ghana,” he said.

The refracted motif of Dizzy Gillespie’s “Manteca” introduces the album opener, “Una Vez Más,” which Prieto composed for the jazz quartet he played in with Palmieri, Lynch and Boris Kozlov in the early 2010s. Lynch—a co-dedicatee with Palmieri and Tito Puente—follows Valera’s Palmieri refraction with a clarion solo that signifies why he and Prieto have remained close since 1997, when Lynch played a concert at Stanford with him and Yosvany Terry.

“Right away I knew something special was

going on with both guys,” Lynch said. He told Prieto to call if he was ever in New York. Lynch followed through in '99, hiring Prieto to replace Antonio Sanchez for a band he was leading.

“He had a lot of finesse, obviously a lot of knowledge and understanding of the rhythms from his culture, and a real ear for what the soloist is doing,” Lynch said. “He’s able to pull things into a creative place while respecting the form he’s playing. He plays like a composer, always.”

Both Lynch and Apfelbaum played in Prieto’s early ’00s groups, developing the repertoire that appears on 2005’s *About The Monks*. Apfelbaum emphasized the linear ingenuity of Prieto’s quartet and sextet music, comparing it to a tree with different branches. “Now each line is harmonized and played by a different section comprising four or five instruments, and the tree’s branches are now filled with fruit,” he said of *Back To The Sunset*. The overall effect, he added, is like “seeing a movie that seems familiar, but in 3-D with surround sound.”

Prieto dedicates the title track to Threadgill and Hill. Threadgill uncorks a searingly vocalized alto saxophone solo, marking his second recorded sideman appearance with Prieto, following “Afrotango” on *Absolute Quintet* (2006). Both masters availed themselves of Prieto’s skills in 1999, and Threadgill hired him for his paired 2001 albums *Everybody’s Mouth’s A Book* and *Up Popped The Two Lips*.

“Dafnis operates at a very high level of musicality,” Threadgill said. “He’s able to translate non-percussion ideas into percussion ideas, to look at a piece in terms of the entire picture of the composition and not just his part. As a composer, he has command of the resources he uses and an ability to carry it out.”

Prieto observed that Coleman, Threadgill and Hill “showed the possibility for music to sound like yourself—it doesn’t have to be generic.” He first heard Threadgill’s music during a 1998–’99 sojourn in Canada under the sponsorship of Jane Bunnett that directly preceded his move to New York. “I thought it was surrealist, the music I could hear in my dreams—and when I wake up, it disappears,” Prieto said. “I learned from Henry that each tune should have its own character and intention upon which you put your own voice. You create your own world, which reflects your set of beliefs and structures and content, and it comes through in your artistic vocabulary.”

As he describes in *A World of Rhythmic Possibilities*, Prieto has practiced techniques that evoke a panoply of sounds on his drum kit, endeavoring to make his instrument a vehicle to represent or imitate various Cuban folkloric percussion instruments. He speaks the rhythms, speeds them up and slows them down at will, plays and subdivides any theme on any limb at any time, and deploys the rhythms to

serve synesthetic or abstract imperatives—a notion of visual art, a philosophical principle or the sound of thunder.

His compositional process transpires mostly by ear. “I like scores from classical music, like Bartok’s string quartets or some Stravinsky works,” he said. “It’s like they consist of words, and the game is how you play with those words—you see what results. The quality of the performer is also part of every composition—a melody played by Henry is almost a different melody than the same melody played by someone else.”

Prieto first conceptualized his procedures on mid-’90s tours with Chilean pianist Carlos Maza, an admirer of the M.O. followed by Brazilian composers Hermeto Pascoal and Egberto Gismonti (acknowledged on “Two For One” and “The Sooner The Better,” respectively), whose own drummers played from an orchestrative, textural perspective. As his horizons expanded, Prieto increasingly felt stifled by the absence of a platform in Cuba. Unwilling to play commercial jobs, he left the island, landing in Barcelona, then Toronto, then New York.

After the aforementioned Zoho albums,



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Prieto's dream project has been to convene a big band focused on his own arrangements.

Prieto launched Dafnison in 2008 with *Taking The Soul For A Walk*. “I was basically swiping my credit card, or saving money from the gigs for my own projects, which wasn’t easy in an expensive city,” he said. “But I wanted and needed my own label. If no one wanted to release my albums, I had to do it myself. It gives me absolute control over the product, from the first note to the last artwork. I have the courage to challenge myself economically to make it happen. I make a record, and I don’t know how much I’ll make or how much exposure it will get—I depend on an industry that rolls on other principles. ... I always joke, ‘I don’t need anyone to make myself poorer; I can do that very well.’”

At the beginning of 2018, Dafnison released *Transition*, by the Kairos Sextet, an

ensemble that Prieto assembled during his first academic year (2015–’16) at Frost School of Music at the University of Miami, where he teaches composition, as well as drums and ensembles.

“For me, teaching is one of the highest spiritual paths,” Prieto said. “There’s the reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving; you feel the students develop through time, and feel their gratitude for what you are giving them, just as I feel gratitude for what the musicians who I honor on *Back To The Sunset* did for me. They see I’ve done it on my own, and they ask why I did it, what the challenges are, why I made the decisions I made.”

Prieto lives 10 minutes from the Fort Lauderdale airport, from which Jet Blue runs

a direct daily flight to Santa Clara, facilitating visits to his mother. But increased proximity to his homeland hasn’t resulted in invitations to perform or teach there. “I’ve never even been invited to play a jazz festival in Cuba,” he said. “I wouldn’t ever be able to do in Cuba what I’ve done in the U.S. as a leader and creative musician. In order to work with a Steve Coleman or a Henry Threadgill, to do what I really wanted, I had to come here.” On the other hand, he continues: “In Cuba, you can dream about what it’s going to be like, but when you get here, it’s not what you thought it would be. It takes a lot of time and courage, a lot of strength to keep your belief alive.”

For now, Prieto is focusing on the challenge of working with Oberstein to spread the word about *Back To The Sunset*, to book gigs for the orchestra and to find personnel with whom he can tour. Ever the pragmatic risk-taker, Prieto is both optimistic and realistic.

“If the budget allows, I want to use the guys on the record,” he said. “But I’m open to using other musicians. To play these pieces, you don’t have to be a specialist in Latin music—though you need to be good at rhythm. But this isn’t generic music. We’re not playing ‘El Manicero.’ It’s completely new material. Besides being strong as a musician, they have to be open-minded in order to accept it and be able to execute it.”

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