

A Conversation with flautist, Mark Weinstein

On the Release of Con Alma (Jazzheads, 2007)

*Interview by **Tomas Peña***

Tom: Congratulations on yet another fine recording! This is our third conversation in two years. On to Con Alma ... tell me about your concept going in, and why you chose this particular group of musicians to accompany you on your journey.

Mark: My notoriety in the Latin Jazz community is still based on my 1967 trombone recording, Cuban Roots, and the two sequels on flute, Cuban Roots Revisited (2001) and Algo Mas (2005). It is of an avant-garde player of Afro-Cuban folkloric-based jazz. I had also recorded a number of albums of Brazilian jazz, Tudo de Bom (2003) and O Nosso Amor (2005). I decided to make a mainstream Latin jazz album to broaden the presentation of my music and make it more radio friendly. The key was to hire one of my oldest friends in the business, **Mark Levine**, to perform and co-produce the album. Mark has very deep roots in Latin Jazz and is a great jazz pianist with nothing to prove. I knew any project that he participated in would be deep and musical. Once Mark agreed, we chose a selection of classic material by Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane and Wayne Shorter as the core and then added other material to round out the album.

TP: That would be Mark Levine's La Coneja Loca , Santi Debriano's Santi's Africaleidoscope and your Broadway Local.

MW: With Mark in place, I picked bassist Santi Debriano who played on two of my other records and is both a great soloist and totally comfortable with Latin drumming of all sorts. I knew Pedrito Martinez as a master of folkloric drumming, but when I heard him play with Conrad Herwig's band, I realized the depth of his contribution as a conga drummer in jazz settings. I asked him to get me a trap drummer and he picked an old friend from Cuba, Mauricio Herrera.

TP: Given the material you chose, would you say this is your most "conventional" recording to date?

Mark: It is my attempt to connect with a larger audience by addressing the Latin jazz tradition, as it is generally understood. It is also an attempt to display my bebop chops as a flute player. By playing classics and referencing the harmonic vocabulary of the saxophone tradition, I am asking to be evaluated in light of those standards rather than by the flute tradition that comes out of Charanga flute. I am a jazz flute player who loves world rhythms. So when I play a Maraca tune, I don't solo on the montuno (as he does on his recording of the tune), I play the very difficult changes on the "head" and let the drummer play on the montuno. Even when we play a Charanga style composition like Mark Levine's La Coneja Loca, I play jazz and only allude to the Charanga tradition as a stylistic variant. And so my original, Broadway Local, is based on Giant Steps changes modulating through three keys. And I play Evidence the way Coltrane does on the Town Hall Concert with Monk, double-timing the entire solo.

Whether you want to consider that conventional is up to you, but I see it as an extreme move in Latin jazz flute moving away from the traditional basis in dance music into the domain of the jazz saxophone. I also think other aspects of the record are cutting edge, including the way we play the changes of the tunes for all solos. This requires Mark and Santi to play very differently from the traditional Latin jazz style, which relies on simplifications of the harmonies for the soloists and so permits piano and bass to play dance band patterns. Another of the innovations

is the concept of the drummers. Pedrito and Mauricio are among the deepest soloists I have ever played with and their choices of basic rhythms include patterns I have rarely, if ever, heard before.

TP: I hear a noticeable difference in your sound, although I can't quite pinpoint what it is. I read somewhere that you purchased a new flute (or flutes). Also, it seems to me that you are playing "freer." Maybe it's just me ...

Mark: I think this is the first album that I recorded where all of my instruments are top of the line. I play a Powell, concert flute, a Sankyo alto flute and a Yamaha bass flute. That is about \$25,000 worth of flutes and I hope to be playing on them for quite some time. But the secret to my sound is my recording engineer Phil Ludwig who knows just how to record and mix my albums.

As far as free is concerned, strangely it is easier for me to play with a broad range of techniques when I have changes to play on. When I recorded Algo Mas I was very inhibited playing the toques de Santo since I didn't want to play anything that might seem disrespectful. Even playing rumba requires a careful attitude towards time and harmony. But with all of those changes to play with, I could really stretch out. I played a completely free album (not yet finalized) with **Omar Sosa** and some African musicians in Berlin a few years ago and when I listen to my playing I realize that playing free actually is more demanding than playing changes since you have nothing to carry you except your own sense of melody. But with changes the harmony carries you along and so the ideas really can flow. Of course, that requires that you have mastery of harmony, something that I have been working on for 30 years, playing endlessly with Jamey Aebersold recordings.

TP: Pedrito Martinez is probably best known as a founding member and percussionist with Yerba Buena. What most people don't know is that Pedrito was the recipient of the Thelonious Monk Institute's Afro-Latin Jazz competition in 2000. In a recent conversation, you compared him to some of the great drummers of the past.

Mark: I have been blessed by the drummers that I have recorded with; the roster includes Julito Collazo, Tommy Lopez, Sr., Frankie Malabe, Patato Valdez, Kako, Milton Cardona, **Francisco Aguabella**, Nengue Hernandez, John Santos, Steve Berrios, Gene Golden and others less well known. But I have never played with a conguero who has the swing, the speed and the daring of Pedrito. His basic time is perfect and with a tremendous drive and his solos exhibit tremendous technique, but never for mere display. He always uses speed in order to take the time to another level. We recorded the album in one twelve hour day and the last tune we recorded, Stella by Starlight is as fresh as the first tune, Santi's Afrikaleidoscope. But, on this album at least, you can't talk about Pedrito without talking about Mauricio. Mauricio was the perfect complement to Pedrito, he never overplayed, had a good sense of what to play on which numbers and his solos were superlative, pushing the boundaries of the time without ever destroying the swing. He has a very light touch, which is especially important in a small ensemble, and like Pedro never 'showboated,' always played for music. We did the session cold, with no rehearsals. They came up with a concept for every tune, inventing all of the rhythms and breaks on the spot. And the time never stops swinging, even on the slowest danzon. .

TP: In terms of your lifestyle, you seem to have achieved a perfect balance - Professor by day, musician by night. How cool is that? Describe a typical day in the life of Mark Weinstein.

MW: I practice at least four hours a day, teach, read student papers and work on my own academic research. That's when I'm not recording, mixing or performing, so I have a full and busy life.

It has taken me some time to get the balance right since teaching and my academic writing have always been very important to me. I started playing flute, in part, as a relaxation during the period I was writing my dissertation in philosophical logic. Now it is reversed, I write logic papers to relax from the pressure of practicing and recording. I teach in an education department and have always felt that teaching teachers is the most socially important thing I can do. I love teaching and love working with teachers, who are among the most dedicated people I have ever met. Of course, a professor's salary gives me complete artistic freedom, which has been both a blessing and a curse, since recording whatever I felt like resulted in most of my records getting very little radio play. Con Alma should change that.

TP: For what it's worth, Con Alma is on heavy rotation in the Peña household. My track of the moment is Monte Adentro, where you perform some fancy flute work and Maurico takes an incredible solo. I like it so much I went into my archives and dug up Maraca's version, which appears on Havana Calling (1993, Qbadisc Records).

I have often wondered what compelled you to abandon the trombone. You were one hell of a trombonist and you performed on some of the most important recordings in the history of Latin music. When was the last time you picked up a trombone? Do you ever miss it?

MW: I haven't played the trombone in over thirty years. I had a very good trombone that I gave to my nephew Dan Weinstein who is a working trombone player out of Los Angeles. The main thing I miss about the trombone is playing in a section and hanging out with other trombone players. I've been running into Steve Turre at jam sessions in Cecil's, a jazz club in New Jersey, and whenever I hear him play I would love to be up there with him. I think, in my prime, I could have given him a run for his money.

TP: Here, here! Is there a trombone player of this generation that tickles your fancy?

MW: Steve Turre and **Papo Vazquez** are great players, coming out of two of the greatest trombone players of my generation, Slide Hampton and Curtis Fuller. I was more influenced by Bill Harris, Jimmy Knepper and Roswell Rudd, trombone players who played less like J.J. Johnson and more of a rough almost Dixieland style. But, of course, my biggest influence was Barry Rogers. Trombone players today have thrown away the book. The level of technical facility that is now common among the best players blows me away. But for speed and agility I still think Frank Rossolino wrote the book and for sound and general "trombonistics" Bill Watrous still sets the standard. The trombonist on the Latin Jazz scene that impresses me the most is Conrad Herwig and of course **Chris Washburne** always needs to be included in any discussion of Latin trombone.

TP: Speaking of great musicians, I am sad to report the passing of "El Comandante" on August 10 (2007). Rumor has it that he played twenty-three instruments. You performed with Mario and knew him personally. Do you have a Mario Rivera story you would like to share?

MW: May I add my condolences to Mario's family on his passing. Mario was a member of my generation, a supportive compatriot and an exceptional musician. His contribution, along with Arnie Lawrence on alto sax who passed away within the last few years, to Cuban Roots made that album the classic that it turned out to be. Along with Hilton Ruiz, Mario gave me the

confidence I needed, when in Mario's apartment they sat and listened to my first album on flute, Seasoning, in 1996. Mario picked up his flute and gave me a lesson on the spot.

TP: There's a jam session for Mario at The Nuyorican Poets Café, this Sunday (August 19th) at 3PM. Mario was an institution and a mentor to a slew of up-and-coming musicians. I hope to be there. The turnout is going to be amazing.

MW: Mario Rivera, Barry Rogers Ray Maldonado, Arnie Lawrence, Herbie Mann, Charlie Palmieri and too many others who are part of my personal musical history. I only hope I can keep on playing music the way they did, con alma.

TP: Mark, as always, it has been a pleasure speaking with you. Congratulations on a wonderful recording and kudos to Larry Harlow for the interesting and informative liner-notes.

For additional information on Mark Weinstein Visit:

<http://www.jazzfluteweinstein.com/>
<http://www.vinilemania.net/vMARKWEINSTEIN.htm>

Partial discography:

As a Leader:

Algo Mas (2005)

Cuban Roots Revisited (1999)

Jazz world Trios (1999)

As a Sideman:

Eddie Palmieri – Justicia (1970)

Alegre All-Stars – Te Invita (Compilation, 2006)

Cal Tjader/Eddie Palmieri – El Sonido Nuevo
(The New Soul Sound, re-released 1993)

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