



Omar Sosa GOES DEEP

By Dan Ouellette

When he was commissioned by the Barcelona Jazz Festival in 2009 to be one of three artists to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue*, Omar Sosa told a Barcelona reporter that what he was being asked to do was like being thrown into a lion-packed arena at a Roman circus. But the Cuba-born, Barcelona-based pianist/keyboardist/bandleader, who has recorded more than 20 albums and garnered three Grammy nominations, did his homework, studied the original compositions closely, assembled a sextet featuring guest trumpeter Jerry González to decipher his complex arrangements and held court at L'Auditori for his festival performance. Sosa, a risk-taker with an adventurous streak and a no-borders attitude, plugged in and presented an electronically hued version of *Kind Of Blue* that was more like the 1969 Davis blitzing into *Bitches Brew* than his mellow modal jazz of 1959.

Donning a white robe and a white cap, Sosa opened by fleetingly alluding to “So What,” but for the rest of the evening avoided playing too close to the recognizable phrases and melodies of the classic. He coaxed drummer Dafnis Prieto to play bombastic drums in pockets, conducted waves of exclamatory horns inspired by Peter Apfelbaum on sax, soothed González to play a sublime muted solo on a gorgeous ballad, then bubbled the proceedings with mysterious stretches that frothed into funk, balladic measures that jumped into rhythmic leaps, and strident piano and electronic keyboard lines setting up dense-to-stark passages that were both boisterous and beautiful. Each piece became a journey of tempo shifts, rhythmic vivacity, exhilarating conversations and pensive breaks of silence.

For 90 minutes, Sosa led the charge through his image of *Kind Of Blue*, which was explosively imaginative in some people’s eyes but for others was an audacious affront to Davis’ art. He included a spoken word sample of Davis talking from the stage at his last concert in Paris before he died. Certainly, Sosa’s interpretation was markedly different from the straight-up take of original *Kind Of Blue* session drummer Jimmy Cobb’s variations on the album songbook two nights earlier and Spanish pianist Chano Domínguez’s flamenco-styled rendering of the album three nights later.

The next day sitting in his apartment (“my home, my temple”) in the labyrinthine old section of Barcelona, filled with small altars to the gods from his Cuban heritage, Sosa good-naturedly scoffed at the critics, one of whom lambasted the show in a local newspaper. “I knew that some people were going to be negative and complain that I write complex on purpose,” he said. “I knew I was going to be a target because so many people have their own perception of the album. But I say that someone can try to dance like Michael Jackson and may get his steps but never be able to truly dance like Michael Jackson. That’s impossible. In the same way, I didn’t want to play like Miles. I respect him, Bill Evans, John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, Paul Chambers and Jimmy Cobb too much to do that. I never play standards, anyway, but I wanted to research and interpret these songs in my own way. You never play like the masters; you have your own voice.”

Sosa read books on Davis’ life and listened closely to the solos, the tempos, the conversations that were taking place on the album. He then combined rearranged solos and reharmonized melodies in a post-modern pastiche of suspended harmonies, rushing syncopation and snippets of lines from one song stitched into another. “What I did was a more cubist, angular style of arranging,” he said. “All the album solos and melodies are in my interpretation. I just mixed them all together. If some people aren’t willing to listen for it, that’s not my problem. It’s the way I hear harmony. And then I put in elements of Miles’ later style. I was born in 1965, so I can relate to that period when he was experimenting with different tempos and colors.”

One point that Sosa found particularly offensive was when the reviewer wrote that *Kind Of Blue* has nothing to do with Africa. Sosa commented that before he wrote one note, he was totally immersed in his understanding of how Davis possessed the spirit of Africa. “All of my music—every single note—is based on the African tradition, but some critics don’t understand what the spirit of Africa means,” he says. “I played a chamber music concert in Spain with my Afreecanos Quartet and a symphony orchestra. Some people complained that the evening was too refined and didn’t go into the deepest spirit of Africa. What? It was as if the spirit of Africa has to be dirty, or a black guy sweating and being wild. It can’t be refined and sophisticated?”

That notion of delving into the depth of his African heritage is at the heart of Sosa’s Afro-Cuban-infused music. It’s coursing in his blood and intertwined in his DNA. While he first studied marimba and percussion in the conservatory in his hometown of Camaguey, he switched to piano while in formal studies in 1983 at the Escuela Nacional de Musica in Havana in pursuit of the musical motherland he was drawn to. While classically trained, he had jazz albums around the house when he was growing up (including the album *Pianoforte* by Chucho Valdés) and listened as a student to a jazz radio program hosted by the father of drummer Horatio “El Negro” Hernandez. It was during this time that he was introduced to the recordings of Thelonious Monk, who became a major influence.

After school, Sosa began his worldwide odyssey, moving to Quito, Ecuador, in 1993, where he discovered the African-rooted folkloric music of Esmeraldas and formed a fusion group. Then he settled in San Francisco in December 1995, landing there unexpectedly. While living in Ecuador on a Cuban passport, Sosa set off to Mallorca, Spain, to do some summer gigs. When he prepared to go home, he lost his visa so he was stranded there and living illegally. Previously he had applied for an American tourist visa, which was approved. “I used it one day before it expired,” Sosa said. “I got on a plane and landed in San Francisco, where I knew no one and couldn’t speak a word of English.”

A friend of his ex-wife picked him up at the airport, and they both bounced from friends of friends’ apartments. “In one month, I lived in something like 12 houses,” Sosa said. “I cried like a baby. I had no friends, no job and no money. Welcome to America.”

Sosa had recorded jingles in Ecuador, with the paychecks being delivered to him in the Bay Area, which gave him three months’ worth of living expenses. In February 1996, he answered a classified ad looking for musicians to be a part of a Latin combo. He joined the band and began playing Spanish, flamenco, cumbia and salsa. He showed up on albums recorded in 1996 by Pancho Quinto (*En El Solar La Cueva Del Humo*) and Carlos “Patato” Valdes (*Ritmo Y Candela: African Crossroads*), and gradually

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became acquainted with several stars on the local scene, including percussionist John Santos, who with his band Machete Ensemble was exploring the history of Cuban music.

“Meeting John moved me to another level,” Sosa said, “He helped me to express myself based on what I feel. Everything took a new direction for me. He told me to stay on my own road even if it’s going to be a really long walk. John knew more about my tradition than most people in Cuba. I learned how to hear my own music as well as my tradition.”

Santos recalls first meeting Sosa when he subbed in a band that the conguero often performed with at the Elbo Room in San Francisco. “We were connecting all night,” he says. “It’s as if we were thinking the same things at the same time. Omar spoke no English, and my Spanish is OK but it’s not my first language. But what was cool was that we both knew Afro-Cuban folkloric music, which I had been exploring my entire life. We started playing together more and we knew the same musical language. In Omar’s melody line I could hear the Cuban music, so I would respond with my congas. That would set him off, so he would respond with another melody that would get me driving. Omar made me play stuff that I never thought of playing.”

They first played a duo concert together in 1997 at KCSM radio’s Jazz on the Hill festival at the College of San Mateo and later performed concerts throughout clubs in the Bay Area, including La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, where they recorded the album *Nfumble*, released in 1998.

Another key person to Sosa’s growth was saxophonist Peter Apfelbaum, at the time one of the most important jazz artists in the Bay Area. In one of the first shows he attended when he arrived in San Francisco, Sosa went to a small club on Market Street, The Upper Room, and caught Apfelbaum playing with his band. “Peter instant-

ly became one of my heroes,” said Sosa. “I saw him play the keyboards, then jump onto the sax, then jump over to the drums. He started singing and doing spoken word. I didn’t know who he was, but I thought, this is the music that I want to do. It was multikulti with a lot of tradition, and it was crazy.”

The pair officially met a few years later when Sosa was playing a gig at the Great American Music Hall with drummer Josh Jones, a veteran of Apfelbaum’s big band, Hieroglyphics Ensemble. “Omar and I felt a common bond,” says Apfelbaum, now based in New York. “I started out when I was young drumming and listening to a lot of African music, so rhythm became a big part of what I do. It’s the same with Omar. He approaches his music with a rhythmic foundation, and when I play with him, he always encourages me to improvise on my saxophone over the Afro-Cuban rhythmic foundation he lays.”

As Apfelbaum got to know Sosa better and participated on many of his projects, he became impressed with how many trails the pianist was blazing. “Omar is one of those idea guys,” he says. “He’s prolific, which I admire. Some people work hard, but never really change what they play. But Omar is constantly changing because he has so many ideas of what he wants to do.”

Another key Bay Area contact was Scott Price, a former newspaper publisher who oversees Sosa’s career to this day. He created Otá Records exclusively for the pianist to pursue his multifarious projects (the label is part of the Harmonia Mundi distributing network) and to help manage his career, even to the point of occasionally working as a road manager on the pianist’s 150-dates-a-year tours, which included a gig at the Highline Ballroom in New York in October 2009. “I wanted to give Omar the opportunity to record widely and frequently,” Price said over coffee at Union Square’s Joe’s Art of Coffee cafe. In fact, since his first album, *Omar Omar*, Sosa has recorded a whopping total of 23 albums, including his upcoming solo piano album, *Calma* (to be released March 8) and the much-heralded *Across The Divide: A Tale Of Rhythm & Ancestry*, a 2010 Grammy-nominated album in the Best Contemporary World Music category that was an unusual collaboration with New England vocalist/banjoist/American folk ethnomusicologist Tim Eriksen. Produced by Jeff Levenson, the CD was released by Half Note—the only Sosa disc not on the Oakland-based Otá label.

Even though Sosa has released multiple albums within a year’s time on a couple of occasions, he sells well, especially in France. While his Grammy-nominated 2002 CD *Sentir* is arguably his top seller (an estimated 30,000 copies worldwide), Price reports that today with digital distribution, the sales figures are more difficult to calculate.

Sosa, who has been living in Barcelona for some 12 years and has two kids (ages 5 and 8), is planning to record his *Kind Of Blue* arrange-

ments in New York in May (he also performs a week at the Blue Note, from May 3–8) with his Afro-Electric quintet including Apfelbaum, German trumpeter Joo Kraus, bassist Childo Tomas, drummer Marque Gilmore and a special guest, 78-year-old South African vocalist David Serrame. Known for changing his material up improvisationally, Sosa will be delivering a different session than the show at Barcelona. The tentative title is *Alternative Africa*, and the CD will be issued late this year or early 2012.

Meanwhile, Sosa is immersed in another exuberant project that he unveiled for Spanish eyes at the 2010 Barcelona Jazz Festival: his big band adventure with the NDR Bigband of his originals arranged by Brazilian great Jaques Morelenbaum. The album of this material, *Ceremony*, was released early in 2010. Sitting in the lounge area of the Gran Hotel Havana a few days before the performance at the majestic Palau de la Música, Sosa, draped in a baggy pants and vest suit, with a blousy white shirt and dangling bracelets with shells on his wrists, says that the experience of the recording was a dream come true. The opportunity came about because of a scheduling glitch when he was touring with his quartet in Europe.

“I was performing in Germany, then needed to leave that night to play in Poland the next day,” says Sosa. “We didn’t know we needed visas to travel there, so we were forced to miss our plane and stay overnight. So we hung out in a restaurant and drank a lot of wine. Stefan Gerdes of the NDR band asked me if I’d like to do a big band album some day, and if so, who would I want to arrange the music. So, I said Jaques, who is another one of my heroes because of all the work he had done with Brazilian musicians.”

Off to Poland the next day, Sosa forgot about the exchange. But Gerdes did not. He contacted Morelenbaum, who had first become exposed to Sosa when he heard the pianist at the New Morning jazz club in Paris. He was impressed. In the liner notes of *Ceremony*, he writes that the project was a dream gig for him, too: “I could not imagine I was going to meet an artist capable of making a complete and natural synthesis of what music is today on this planet. From that moment on, I began to dream about sharing the music that emanates from Omar with such expressiveness. Now, here he comes, offering me not only his music and his freedom, but also the chance to listen to my arrangements performed by the fantastic ensemble.”

Meanwhile, once Morelenbaum signed on to the project, Gerdes contacted Price, who relayed the news to Sosa. “Wow, I could hardly remember that conversation,” he says. “But thank God and all the spirits of my life. It turned out to be an amazing project. Jaques and I became good friends, and I learned so much about arranging from him. He sent me titles of my songs he wanted to arrange, and I wrote two new pieces. I gave him the scores and said, ‘Fly.’ The result is that my music sounds so different with all the complexities and voicings but still main-

tains who I am. Funny thing is, Jaques told me that this was his first all-instrumental big band album.”

Apfelbaum marvels at Sosa’s eclectic oeuvre. “The vocabulary Omar uses is broad,” he says. “That’s something that I find is a reflection of the time we’re living in, but that many musicians are not recognizing even though there is a lot more harmonic advancements and wider rhythmic variety than there was 30 years ago. The way Omar structures music is universal, but the foundation is always very Africa.”

Santos, who continues to tour and record with Sosa on occasion, says, “Omar has an insatiable appetite for music. He’s like a creative sponge. He’s doing exactly what he set out to do: travel the world and play for many different audiences. He’s restless. He always has a new project he’s working on. And he attracts the most esoteric and creative people in the world, whether it’s in Europe, Africa or the Middle East. We toured together in the Caribbean, Spain and Italy, and he mesmerized the audience in every show. He’s a magician. He brings magic to each project.”

Certainly Sosa’s recording output reflects his passion for diversity, with dates with a range of performers, including Venezuelan percussionist Gustavo Ovalles, L.A.-based percussionist Adam Rudolph, clarinetist Paquito D’Rivera and trumpeter Paulo Fresu (a duo album is now in the works). Another idea that Sosa was planning to embark on after his big band date in Barcelona was his Africa tour where he was going to visit nine countries and record with traditional musicians from each. “The album will be called *Deeper Into The Tradition*, which means we’ll be going deep,” says Sosa. “It’s going to be interesting. For example, we’re going to Sudan, which is the tenth largest country by area in the world, but they only have three pianos there, and all uprights. So that’s what I’ll be playing.”

With a dance-like bounce to his step and rapid-fire zeal in his voice, Sosa is in surge mode, yet he has yet to fully break through in the U.S. market. During his time in Barcelona, Sosa knew that Chano Domínguez was close to signing with Blue Note to record his *Kind Of Blue* rendition. Is a major label deal something that he’d be interested in?

Usually voluminous in his responses to questions, Sosa shakes his head and bluntly says, “No.”

Why not? “The way I look at the picture is that if I feel something musically, I try to put that out as a recording,” he says. “It’s a blessing to have my own label. I can put out whatever I want to, whenever. I record every message that comes to me. That’s why I have more than 20 records in a decade-and-a-half, and I own 100 percent of my publishing. I want my legacy to go to my kids, not to a record company. Maybe I would have a higher profile if I did a record on a major label, and I’d get more publicity and attention. But I figure the more you control your own music, the more opportunities you can have in the future.”

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