

Lando, Ceviche and Huacas: SWOJO's jazz adventure in Peru

by Cynthia Mullis

Musicians thrive on the opportunity to perform in situations that put their day-to-day musical life into perspective. Recently the Seattle Women's Jazz Orchestra (SWOJO) had a musical and cultural experience that shed new light on the music they play and their purpose as a band: this past April SWOJO traveled to South America to perform at the XVII Festival Jazz en Lima, Peru. The band first performed at this festival in 2003 and was invited back to perform again this year. As a tenor saxophonist in SWOJO, I had the pleasure of being part of this return trip and for me it was a unique, challenging and exciting musical experience that recharged my enthusiasm for music and travel.

This year, the festival ran from April 9th through April 14th and featured over a dozen bands in concerts and master classes in Lima, Peru. North American musicians from Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Seattle joined bands and musicians from Brazil, Peru, Columbia and Argentina for a weeklong cross-cultural musical exchange. The festival was comprised of 24 concerts and daily master classes through the six days, with music starting at 10am and lasting until the middle of the night. The featured performer of the festival was Ndugu Chancler, first-call L.A. studio musician and drummer with Miles Davis, Weather Report, Santana, and Michael Jackson. Also featured were New York trumpet player Joe Magnarelli and lead trumpeter John Thomas from L.A. In addition, a number of students associated with the University of Southern California, Northern Illinois University and students and teachers from the Jazz House Peru music school in Lima were involved in concerts and master classes.

The festival is run by Gabriel Alegria and his wife, saxophonist Laura Andrea Leguia. Together they did the bulk of the work producing and running the festival along with a small, mostly volunteer staff. Alegria is a fine trumpeter and composer associated with USC, where he earned a DMA. The festival had substantial support and backing from the Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano (ICPNA) and the US Embas-



Laura Andrea Leguia and Cynthia Mullis in a rehearsal (via jazzperu.org)

sy. These two organizations play a large roll in promoting a cultural connection between the U.S. and Peru.

The Festival Band

Gabriel Alegria's connection to the music scenes in Peru and L.A. formed the bridge for a musical cross-cultural collaboration in the form of an 18-piece festival big band. This centerpiece project of the festival, led by Gabriel and Laura Andrea, combined nine musicians from SWOJO with musicians from L.A. and Peru. During the week this group had only four rehearsals (and some sectionals) to prepare the music before performing four concerts in three days towards the end of the festival. From the first shaky rehearsal on Monday morning to the final energetic music on Saturday night, it was quite a musical learning experience.

Several SWOJO musicians were involved in the festival band including Lisa Gordanier (alto and soprano sax), myself on tenor sax, Ann Babb (bari sax), and trombonists Carolyn Caster, Mariah Ralston, Erin Easley and Jenny Kellogg. Daniel Barry and Dennis Haldane played trumpet along with John Thomas and Gabriel. Rounding out the sax section was Laura Andrea and Ruben Romero from Peru. The festival band played at the Satchmo Jazz Club in the Miraflores district of Lima on two nights, and at ICPNA theater in concerts that also featured Alegria's small group from his recordings. The band was joined by Joe Magnarelli in a festival showcase performance at the palatial U.S. Ambassador's residence for the Peruvian upper crust and foreign dignitaries.

The repertoire of the band consisted of four Afro-Peruvian jazz compositions by Alegria that were arranged for modern big band by USC pianist Michael Collins. The charts had been printed out only days before the festival began and the first time they were played was in the first rehearsal that Monday morning. Originally these were small-group pieces recorded by Gabriel and Laura Andrea on their CD entitled *Nuevo Mundo*. The horns were joined by the Peruvian rhythm section of Walter Velasquez on guitar, and Joscha Oetz on bass, plus Peruvian percussionists Freddy "Huevito" Lobatón and Hugo Alcazar, and drummer Ndugu Chancler. Since the Peruvians were comfortable with the tunes, they were in charge of leading the North American musicians through the complex rhythmic and melodic arrangements. These arrangements were some of the most challenging music that many of us had seen in a long time. For the saxophones, it was an exhilarating and sometimes frightening flurry of Afro-Peruvian jazz melodies and counter-melodies. Even Ndugu Chancler admitted to being kept on his toes by the polyrhythmic undercurrents of the charts.

Some of the music was based on an Afro-Peruvian rhythmic pattern called the *Lando*. This is a 6/4 rhythm that can be counted (and felt) in 6/4, 12/8 and 6/8, often simultane-

ously. It ran the subdivision gamut of eighth note triplets, half note triplets, dotted quarter notes, eighth note duplets and dotted whole notes. Laura Andrea explained that unlike northern swing eighth notes that are felt like triplets, these were triplets that could be felt like straight eighth notes. The musicians had to count like crazy while relying on the natural feel coming from the Peruvian rhythm section. Ultimately, Ndugu was the glue that held it all together: every time we'd wonder where the "and-of-5" or some other weird syncopation was, he'd lay it down, clearer than quarter notes in Rubank's Elementary Method. In one of the band arrangements, I had the thrill of soloing with Ndugu and this amazing Peruvian rhythm section on an extended solo in 5/4 (we're not talking Brubeck's 5/4 but rather a ten-beat rhythmic phrase as Ndugu pointed out in the first rehearsal.) For me, it was the musical equivalent of paragliding off the cliffs of Miraflores: pull the lines, trust the wind, enjoy the ride.

SWOJO's Performances

In addition to being involved with the Festival band, the musicians of SWOJO had the opportunity to perform their unique repertoire of original compositions by musical director Daniel Barry, Jill Townsend, Hazel Leach and others in a series of concerts. The first performance was Monday night of the festival at the Satchmo Jazz club. For



SWOJO performing at the Satchmo jazz club (via jazzperu.org)

this concert we were joined by Peruvian percussionists Freddy Lobatón and Hugo Alcazar. These two musicians brought the complex polyrhythms of traditional Afro-Peruvian music to SWOJO's tunes and added a rhythmic intensity to the band's performance. At the Satchmo Jazz Club, located a short walk from our hotel in the Miraflores district, the band set up on the floor of the club, and the audience was seated on the stage and at tables surrounding the band. This club was a funky little venue—it was hot and lots of people were smoking—but the intimacy of the venue and the enthusiastic, attentive audience added to the excitement of performing in a foreign country.

As pianist in the SWOJO rhythm section, Ann Reynolds had this perspective about performing with the “two fabulous Peruvian percussionists” who joined us for several tunes on our gigs: “Their playing added an exciting new dimension to the band sound, but also presented a challenge for the rhythm section. When additional players and instruments are added to the rhythm section, new sounds and different rhythmic patterns need to be accommodated and incorporated into the overall groove. As we only had one quick rehearsal before our first gig, adjustments within the rhythm section were still evolving on the first gig. The playing was exciting and interactive—we had to listen and adapt. I heard Jeremy (Jones) changing up his grooves on the drum kit and adding interesting accents and I found myself comping differently. We all smiled a lot.”

For many of the SWOJO musicians, the highlight of the festival was our second concert which was performed in the La Victoria neighborhood of Lima. The U.S. Embassy sponsored this concert as an outreach event in what is a very poor area of the city. The Embassy provided a nice bus to the gig, an outdoor stage, and lighting and sound system for the show. When the bus started to get lost in the far reaches of Lima on the way to the gig, we ended up with police escort leading us to the venue. The stage was set up in front of some ruins, called a *huaca* as we later learned, that served as a storage area on the Inca trail. The “green room” behind the stage was the building the archeologists use to clean and inspect the artifacts found at this active site. Before the sound check we explored the *huaca*, hung out in the garden under avocado



Percussionists Freddy Lobatón and Hugo Alcazar (via jazzperu.org)

trees, and checked out the exotic spiders on the huge cacti. The sound check for the gig was pretty grueling—the music stands and the electric piano had not yet arrived, the lighting was still being set up and it took a long time to get the monitors, mics, horns and percussion adjusted correctly. To their credit, the Peruvians were very accommodating of our wobbly Spanish explaining our need to hear ourselves correctly and they worked hard to make things right.

The concert made all this effort worthwhile though. For me personally, it is in my top-ten of favorite gigs. In the end, the sound was excellent, the lighting was good and when I looked behind me I could see a lightshow projected onto the ancient ruins. The band played very well and again with the addition of the Peruvian percussionists, we couldn't resist giving into a serious groove. For this concert, everybody was in synch with the ensemble and it truly felt like a *Band* rather than 19 individual musicians. In addition to Freddy and Hugo, John Thomas was a featured trumpet soloist on “Manteca” and “I Can't Get Started.” Daniel Barry was also featured on trumpet solos on a few of his compositions, including “The Mighty Urubamba,” (about the river near Machu Picchu in Peru.) Several other musicians in the band had a great night of soloing as well.

It was a blast performing Daniel's South American influenced music for an appreciative South American audience. They were participating in the music in a positive way, clapping and singing with the music— this was an-

other element that made it such a fun concert. Since the stage lights were so bright from the stage, we couldn't see that all the chairs were filled, and that all the way to the back, the park was full of people. Festival organizers estimated that there were at least 1,500 people in attendance. The concert opened with the mayor of La Victoria giving a welcoming speech to the crowd, as did a representative from the Embassy. Carolyn Caster, lead trombonist and executive director of the band, emceed our shows in a halting but comprehensible Spanish and the audiences seemed to appreciate the effort. We finished our 90-minute set, played an encore, and then headed backstage through a line of police officers keeping the crowds at bay. The barrier proved to be unnecessary as the crowds were mainly teenagers and their parents, but apparently the Embassy didn't want to risk an incident. We got to meet and talk with some of the audience and gave out some CD's. The warmth and enthusiasm from the kids and the amount of good feeling from the audience was very encouraging and

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refreshing, despite the language barrier.

Daniel Barry said that for him “performing for less privileged people for whom a live concert is a rare and special treat” was what made the concert fun for him. He says that “this kind of experience helps me validate my own work as a musician and it ultimately has more to do with communicating and sharing with my fellow human beings than with making money or getting famous. For me, this kind of experience is an affirmation of why I keep doing what I do.”

SWOJO's third and final performance of the festival was at the ICPNA theater on Friday night. We had been soaking up the music and sounds of the week and gotten more acclimated to the city and culture by this point. This performance was in a nice air-conditioned theater and we played to a full auditorium. For this concert we played a number of tunes from the new SWOJO recording, *Meeting of the Waters*. Several songs from the CD were inspired by trips to Brazil and Peru, such as Daniel Barry's “Encontros Das Aguas,” “Miraflores” and “The Mighty Urubamba.” Throughout the week we played these tunes plus Hazel Leach's “The Tulip Wonder,” as well as “Amet Island” and “Waltz of the Jellyfish” by Canadian Jill Townsend, and Brazilian and Cuban arrangements from the travels of various band members. This was also our third concert with Freddy and Hugo on percussion and we were feeling comfortable enough at this point to relax and stretch out rhythmically. Peru was becoming part of our musical consciousness.

Being Tourists

When not involved in the festival, most of us had the chance to check out Lima and other parts of Peru. Lima is a sprawling and dense urban area of over 8 million people—our hotel was a short walk to the Pacific Ocean in the upscale district of Miraflores. For many people food was another main attraction with excellent Argentinian beef, *Ceviche* (raw fish marinated in lemon juice), tropical fruits, avocados and potatoes, and pisco sours to drink. A buffet breakfast was served every morning in the courtyard of the hotel which became a fun musician hang. For Carolyn Caster, one of many highlights was having breakfast with Ndugu Chancler who she regards “a fabulous musician and all-around warm human being.” Dennis Haldane had this to say about the breakfasts: “Each



Rehearsal for the Festival Big Band (via jazzperu.org)

morning at the hotel, sitting in the open-air atrium at 7am, blue sky, 70+ degree temperatures, having a nice strong cup of coffee and a selection of wonderful tropical fruits, that's a slice of heaven. Being in a foreign country is always a big thrill for me.”

Dennis also describes his impressions beyond breakfast: “As big band is my life, I was also thrilled and honored to be a part of the Festival band, to have a chance to hang with Ndugu Chancler, John Thomas, and all of the other world-class musicians in the group, to undertake some pretty challenging music that wasn't written in 4/4 time, and to pull it all together in short order for performance. I was extremely proud of the SWOJO ‘bones, of Lisa fearlessly leading the way in the sax section, and of Cynthia and Annie. Daniel stepped right up and provided us with inspired soloing, as he always does. All of the soloists were wonderful. SWOJO 2007 made a lasting impression on many musicians at the festival—the end product was good and I'm proud to have been a part of it.”

Baritone saxophonist Ann Babb has this tale to share:

My favorite moment in Peru was when my husband Todd and I were sharing a romantic lunch at the Rose Nautica Restaurant on the pier in Miraflores where we were engaged four years ago. After our lovely meal, we walked out on the pier and looked up at the cliffs above, and I noticed a bunch of paragliders. I am completely afraid of heights and won't even ride a roller coaster, but for some unknown reason, I blurted out, “let's go and jump with those people!” We rode in silence as we took what felt like an eternal cab ride to the top of this HUGE hill to the park where the small group of paragliders was congregated. I asked the instructor if it was windy enough to go paragliding, hoping that he would say ‘no, not today.’ Instead he said it was a little weak but still adequate to go. The ride was tandem with a professional, so my mantra became, “he doesn't want to die, so he won't kill me!” As my paradrifter Marco and I jumped off the cliff and dipped down below until the wind filled the chute with air, I shrieked as loud as I possibly could and kept my eyes shut. Marco screamed at me, “flap your wings!” so I flapped my hands like a bird, and immediately opened my eyes and was no longer afraid. We soared far above the ocean, high above and away from where we had taken off, and in the silence, the sunshine and above the beautiful ocean, I felt like a

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Breakfast “hang” at the hotel with Ndugu Chancler, Lisa Gordanier, Dennis Haldane, Kathleen Grace, Carolyn Caster, and Erin Easley.

bird. We were in the air for almost a half an hour, and then Marco made a couple of sweeps at the cliffs. I was brought back to the reality of my situation when I realized that we were not going to land anywhere near where we had started on the cliffs, but rather in a tree near a lighthouse. It was a rocky landing but perfectly safe. What possessed me to agree to do it, I have no idea, but it made my trip!"

On Tuesday most of the people in the SWOJO entourage took a very long but rewarding day trip to visit the Caral Ruins six hours north of Lima. Then, while most of the musicians flew home on Sunday, several people from the band stayed longer to visit Machu Picchu and the jungle. Pianist Ann Reynolds says this about her side trip:

"Several of us traveled to the Amazon, near Iquitos, the furthest up-stream port of the Amazon. Although we were only in a small portion of the Amazon basin, we still got a

sense of the enormity of the river, the expanse of jungle and the density of life within the jungle—lots of tiny frogs, very big bugs, tarantulas, huge toads, iguanas, beautiful birds, amazingly diverse trees, four foot diameter lily pads and beautiful bromeliads. On one afternoon jaunt, we visited the ReNuPeRu botanical garden where an effort is being made to preserve some of the knowledge that the Amazon peoples have of medicines from the jungle. While there, we sampled some of the medicines derived from the forest and the shaman performed purification/preparation ceremony for individuals. My own experience with the shaman, as he chanted over me and brushed herbs on me, was a sense of being placed in a cocoon. It was very peaceful and I am not sure if I have completely emerged from the cocoon yet."

Trombonist Mariah Ralston tells this story of her travels to the jungle:

"In Iquitos, we had the wonderful opportunity to visit a very small village elementary school. The kids there ranged from age 3 to 14. They were all so excited

to welcome us into their humble school house. A group of boys—called "Max's Band"—played a few tunes for us. There was a drummer, maracas and a flute player. They were full of energy, probably around 6 years old each, and they had that music DOWN. Then the performance continued with the entire school singing us several songs in Spanish. Afterwards, they had us sing them some songs in English. We sang "You are my Sunshine," and "America the Beautiful" in honor of all the people throughout all of the Americas.

For me personally, I enjoyed the time walking around the La Barranco and Miraflores neighborhoods of Lima. One of my favorite moments outside of the festival was one afternoon when a bunch of us went to the Peruvian market to do some shopping. Although I'm not much into shopping,

I started to get excited about the Peruvian musical instruments and bought two *Quenas*, which are wooden vertical flutes.

Carolyn Caster found a shop with a good deal on a boxed-shaped drum called a *Cajon*. Shortly after those purchases were made, we ran into Jenny Kellogg and Sarah Nelson who were also looking for instruments so we took them back to the shop where we'd just been. Word spread quickly through the open air market that the *gringas* were spending money, that all they wanted were musical instruments, *and they can play them!* I think we made that shopkeeper's day (and put her kids through college) with our musical spending spree.

Another thing worth mentioning is how warm and friendly the Peruvians

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Street scene in Lima. The sign translates to "No trumpet playing in the median!"



Satchmo Jazz Club in Lima, Peru

were, from the cab drivers and shopkeepers to the VIPs at the Ambassador's residence. It was impossible not to get caught up in this open and friendly attitude and return the feeling, plus it was a nice change from the day-to-day guardedness and "get outta my way" vibe of home.

In the end though, playing my saxophone with excellent musicians from all over the Western Hemisphere in a great week of music was the high point for me. All I had to do for a week was eat, sleep and play music; and since I was learning so much and was immersed in such wonderful music, it reminded me of being in band camp. When opportunities like this come along for inspiring music, interesting travel and fun people, they are to be savored and remembered for being as special as they are.

More photos of the trip:

<http://www.flickr.com/people/cynthiamullis>

Lima Jazz Festival: www.jazzperu.org

SWOJO: www.swojo.org

Gabriel Alegria: www.gabrielalegria.com ■



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