

International Jazz Day in Costa Rica: Carlos Valerin Explains Circular Breathing

Posted by Jaime Lopez on April 30, 2012 in Entertainment

All eyes are on May Day or International Worker's Day tomorrow; after all, there will be elections in the National Assembly in Costa Rica and labor unions are planning massive demonstrations. While the importance of May Day must not be overlooked, the UNESCO has declared today, April 30th of 2012, the inaugural International Jazz Day.

In observance of this important day, The Costa Rica Star brings you this interview which took place last week in Curridabat with Carlos Valerin, a Tico musician who has played with jazz luminaries like Dizzy Gillespie, Victor Paz, Arturo Sandoval, Tito Puente Jr., and Machito (Francisco Raúl Gutiérrez Grillo). Carlos Valerin has a unique musical background: as a young trumpet player in New York in the mid-1980s, he played in the midst of the Golden Age of Salsa and Latin Jazz. You can learn more about his musical career in a previous interview with The Costa Rica Star.

This interview took place at Carlos Valerin's home in the eastern San Jose suburb of Curridabat.

The Costa Rica Star (TCS): Maestro, we talked back in early January, and you mentioned being very active on Facebook. Since that interview, I have subscribed to your social media stream, which is full of interesting jazz tidbits.

Carlos Valerin (CV): I enjoy sharing stuff about jazz. It has a very rich history.

TCS: I agree. I have noticed that you have posted videos of a few variations on the same theme: Flight of the Bumblebee interpreted by jazz performers. Can you tell me more about that?

CV: That's a classical music piece by Rimsky-Korsakov written for many instruments, mostly strings. It's very demanding, so that's why soloists perform it to showcase their talent and skill. Heavy metal guitar players love it.

TCS: So it wasn't written for brass instruments? But you have posted renowned trumpet players performing it.

CV: Yeah, even a tuba player from the Canadian Brass.

TCS: I am intrigued by the performance by Wynton Marsalis. I've listened to it and watched it, and not only is he going very fast, he does not seem to breath for an entire minute! How does he do it?

CV: That's circular breathing. So he is taking in air at the same time he plays.

TCS: But how?

CV: Wynton Marsalis is a virtuoso. What he does is he stores air in his cheeks, he breathes that air through his nose and uses it as needed. That is true mastery of air control, and can be used to play something like the Flight of the Bumblebee interlude or to hold a note for a long time. You don't hear Wynton breathing because you are listening to the musical output recorded by the microphone. If you stood behind him as he is performing, you can hear him pushing that air through his

cheeks and breathing in a controlled manner. For a brass performer, it's very technical.

TCS: And you met Wynton Marsalis once.

CV: At the Village Gate Club in Manhattan, a long time ago. That was backstage, we were both young and he had not yet become the Maestro he is today. I did not know who he was.

TCS: Is he the king of circular breathing?

CV: Look, he is a jazz master, no doubt, and one of the best brass performers ever. But let's talk about Rafael Mendez. This is a man who played cornet for Pancho Villa's troops during the Mexican Revolution, he made it out alive and then later he scored Moto Perpetuo, which is an interlude for violin by Paganini, for trumpet. That's even more demanding than Flight of the Bumblebee, and Rafael Mendez would play these furious solos with double-tonguing and circular breathing, and you would think he was going to pass out.

TCS: How can a brass performer master circular breathing?

CV: It takes a lot of practice. I have heard that Maestro Mendez suffered an accident that split his lips. His father rehabilitated him by forcing him to play C below staff the entire day for like a month. That's how he grasped it and mastered it.

TCS: Any other examples?

CV: Yeah, you know the Theme from Rocky? Canadian master Maynard Ferguson recorded a version that was very popular, all circular breathing. He played that way all the time. I met Maynard Ferguson once at one of his concerts, and he would practice backstage using circular breathing on very high notes like F sharp. To be able to execute circular breathing constantly, you have to be a professional who practices all the time.

TCS: Does the instrument matter? What about musical genre, is there one suitable for circular breathing?

CV: Circular breathing can be performed in any genre, from ska to classical. It's really good for jazz phrasing. Any trumpet would do the trick, but I am a Fides endorser, and I have found that this instrument offers better response as the sound is more defined and accurate. If you listen to a classical trumpet soloist like Ruben Simeo, or a professional like Luis Aquino, you can hear the difference, and they are both Fides artists. They can probably master circular breathing without breaking a sweat.

TCS: You mentioned something about Kenny G

CV: I almost forgot. He holds a Guinness World Record for holding a note on his saxophone, I think it was E-flat, for like 44 or 45 minutes, that's crazy! Anyway, that was all circular breathing.

TCS: And you are working on a Guinness World Record project as well?

CV: Yeah, La Salsa Mas Larga del Mundo. We are hoping to get the record later this year. I play on it, representing Costa Rica, of course, but no circular breathing on it.

TCS: Can you play Flight of the Bumblebee on trumpet?

CV: I can try, but it will probably sound like Crash Landing of the Wasp instead![[laughs] I am out of that range. I am not a concert soloist. I practice everyday and I teach what I know well, like phrasing, but if I had to pick up circular breathing at my age... It would be like picking up a new instrument, almost.

TCS: Thank you, Maestro. How do you plan to celebrate International Jazz Day?

CV: Onstage, playing.

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