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PAQUITO D'RIVERA
NEA Jazz Master (2005)

Interviewee: Paquito D' Rivera (June 4, 1948 -)
Interviewer: Willard Jenkins with recording engineer Ken Kimery
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Willard: Please give us your full given name.

Paquito: I was born Francisco Jesus Rivera Feguerez, but years later I changed to Paquito D'Rivera.

Willard: Where did Paquito come from?

Paquito: Paquito is the little for Francisco in Latin America. Tito, or Paquito Paco, it is a little word for Francisco. My father's name was Francisco also, but, his little one was Tito, like Tito Puente.

Willard: And what is your date of birth?

Paquito: I was born June 4, 1948, in Havana, Cuba.

Willard: What neighborhood in Havana were you born in?

Paquito: I was born and raised very close, 10 blocks from the Tropicana Cabaret. The wonderful Tropicana Night-Club. So, the neighborhood was called Marinao. It was in the outskirts of Havana, one of the largest neighborhoods in Havana. As I said before, very close to Tropicana. My father used to import and distribute instruments and accessories of music.

Willard: And what were your parents' names?

Paquito: My father's name was Paquito Francisco, and my mother was Maura Figuerez.

Willard: Where are your parents from?

Paquito: My mother is from the Riento Province, the city of Santiago de Cuba. My father is from Havana.

Willard: How old were your parents when you were born?

Paquito: My father was 36, and my mother was 25.

Willard: Do you have other brothers and sisters?

Paquito: I have a brother, Enrique which was born in 1950, and Rosario, which was born in 1961.

Willard: Where did you spend the majority of your childhood?

Paquito: Uh, in my neighborhood, in Marinao.

Willard: So, you pretty much lived in that particular neighborhood for all of your years growing up?

Paquito: All my life, I live there until I, I mean yea, in the same neighborhood, until I came to Spain first, and then six months later to New York, yes.

Willard: Do you come from a large family?

Paquito: On my mother's side yes; it's a large family. My father was the littlest born.

Willard: Where was the majority of your family from?

Paquito: All of them Cubans. My mother's father was from Santiago; my father's father from Havana. So, they were supposed to hate each other, but no, they love each other. [Both laugh]

Willard: Did your parents have brothers and sisters?

Paquito: My mother had eight brothers and sisters. My father was, uh, just him.

Willard: He was an only child?

Paquito: The only child.

Willard: Was your family a close-knit family? And did you see your relatives often?

Paquito: Yea, yea because the relatives of my father, my grandmother and grandfather in the father's side, died when I was a very little kid, but the family live across the street. Now, they live in New Jersey. And my mother's family live a little far away, but we see them very often. Yes, we have a close family life.

Willard: Talk about your parents' education.

Paquito: Uh, my mother has a, I think went to high school. She studied to be a nurse. She didn't graduate because my father want to marry her, and he didn't want her to work, which was his mistake. And, my father had to go very early to work to support his mother, because my grandfather, he went insane at the end of his life. But, very early, my father decided that he didn't want to work in anything else, but music. And then he bought an alto saxophone, when he was like 14, 15 years old. I don't know how he learned how to play it, and then he became a musician, a really fine one.

Willard: Were there a lot of musicians and a lot of music in your neighborhood when you were growing up?|

Paquito: Uh, well, Tropicana. Tropicana was 10 miles away and my father had this business of importing instruments and accessories. So he sold to the musicians and we used to go there, five or six days a week to see the show and the rehearsals. So, I grew up surrounded by musicians.

Willard: Your father acquired a saxophone at what age?

Paquito: He was 14, 15 years old.

Willard: What motivated him to want to play music?

Paquito: First of all he didn't like the hard work. He used to be an apprentice in a printing shop. How you call that in English?

Willard: A print shop.

Paquito: A print shop. So, in those days with no computers and stuff like that, was the real thing. So, type made out of lead and all that—

Willard: That was my father's profession.

Paquito: Ah, I see; very hard work. And then, all that lead, and he say, 'No, no.' And then he like music, he liked music. And he worked with a teacher in Guanalaho, which is another name to teach him how to play instrument. I never met the teacher or anything, but he learned to play the instrument; he became a very fine classical saxophone player.

Willard: So he learned the instrument from a private teacher first?

Paquito: That what is it is, yea.

Willard: Did he ever, go to school for music?

Paquito: Yes, I have in my house, his title of saxophone teacher. He graduated from the Guanalaho Conservatory. I never met the teacher, or anything. I would like to meet him, you know.

Willard: How did your father go about developing himself as a musician?

Paquito: I have no idea; he never talked much about that. I know that he got interested in classical music and the development of the classical saxophone in Cuba. He imported the—because there is a picture—he imported the French school of saxophone in 1946, all the books from a classical saxophone place in Paris to Havana in 1946. So, he created a group called "Cojuntos Symphonicos en Saxophones" –Symphonic Ensemble of Saxophones. In 1946, that was the same year that Marisol created his famous quartet in the conservatory, so that can be easily the second one in the history of the saxophone.

Willard: So your father in addition to learning to play the instrument, he actually sold the instruments as well.

Paquito: He used to be the agent, very small agent in Havana, or the seller of saxophones. Sell many saxophones and clarinets also, and trumpets. He used to sell also accessories and printed music and things like that. So, that's why I ran into people like Cachao; he used to go in there to buy his things and Chico's father used to go there to buy trumpets, and Chocolate Armenteros, a family musicians for example, Mario Bauza was a dear friend of my father's.

Willard: So all these gentlemen were coming around the house?

Paquito: Yes; around this little office in the center of Havana.

Willard: Your father had an office in Havana?

Paquito: He had a little office. In the center of Havana, just one room and a bathroom. Then he'd have all those instruments. I'd be in the toy store, because I used to go with him all the time.

Willard: Was your mother a musician?

Paquito: My mother was a seamstress. She liked dress designing and everything like that. She retired against her will, when she was—I don't know—almost 80 years old. She's complaining. [Both chuckle]

Willard: Talk about music around your house when you were growing up.

Paquito: My father was a very editorial person. In the sense that he always believed that there were only two kinds of music, good music and the other stuff. So he played Mozart, for example, and Webern. Those were two composers that he like very much, Anton Webern and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. So he used to play the Mozart concerto for flute on saxophone and the Webern concerto for clarinet. But then he played the Benny Goodman version of the Mozart concerto for clarinet, back to back with Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall with Ziggy Eman, Gene Krupa and Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton. So, for me it was very confusing, but happily confusing. For me it was just music; that's it.

Willard: So you grew up with all different kinds of music around the house.

Paquito: Every type of music. I heard Marcel Moyse, the great classical French flutist, back to back with Alberto Soccarras playing Jazz with his flute, or the Machito Orchestra back to back with the London Symphony Orchestra.

Willard: Did your father play in dance bands?

Paquito: He also play in dance bands, but he preferred to stay home and give lessons to me and study his saxophone. So, his main way of living was his little office and for some reason, which I think was a mistake, he abandoned his recital, his soloist career to give me a career; to give career to me.

Willard: At a certain point he played in orchestras?

Paquito: He played in dance orchestras and also in cabaret. He did different types of music, but that was very common in those days of Cuban musicians. Cachao used to play in the symphony in the morning and in nightclubs at night.

Willard: And these musicians, like Cachao and Chico O' Farrill and Chocolate Armenteros, and other musicians who were associates and friends of your father's, did they come around the house?

Paquito: Not so much; they get together in, there was a very nice, I don't know how the word—a bar, a salon, a deli—the standing up; there was no sitting area, so the musicians used to go and talk about baseball and music and all of that. And, my father had that office two blocks away from that place. So, I don't remember seeing the musicians too much around my house, but around Los Palados bar, or cafeteria.

Willard: As child, did he ever take you around these musicians?

Paquito: Oh, all the time; all the time. Many people think that I am older just because I inherited those friends. I inherited the friendship of Cachao and Chocolate and Chico O' Farrill and all those guys. Those were my friends. Well, I made friends later on, but still today, some of those old guys are my friends. Those are the ones who come to my house to have black beans and rice together.

Willard: As a young child, when you'd be around these musicians, what did that mean for you? Did that encourage you to want to be a musician as well, or what?

Paquito: I think, from the very beginning I have no choice. I was meant to be a musician. No surrounding of those people; in those days I didn't know that it was so great, that it was going to make history. They were just the friends of my father and the musicians who played in the clubs and the symphony and all those places. But they make my mind up for me, that I wanted to be like them. For example, I love to imitate Chocolate's way of dressing; he was, Chocolate was the most elegant musician in Havana. He always had his cut, uh suits and the very, very skinny ties, and the elegant shoes. I wanted to be like Chocolate, and still today, I want to be like Chocolate. [Both laugh] But nobody can be like Chocolate; he's unique.

Willard: How old were you the first time you picked up an instrument and tried to play?

Paquito: In 1953 my father imported a soprano [saxophone] from the factory in Paris; probably imported it before because he had to order it. And he taught me how to play it, and nine months later he presented me in public. So, I was five years old when I first picked up an instrument, maybe a little less than that.

Willard: Nine months after picking up an instrument he presented you in public. How did he present you in public, and where did he present you?

Paquito: Now, the end of a semester in a school that I used to go to in my neighborhood—the name of the school is Emila Ascada—and every year, they have like a little music and dance school there, more dance, you know and acting. And most of them were girls, and some of them played piano and recited poems. So, my father presented me with a saxophone quintet.

Willard: Was it safe to say that what you were playing was classical music?

Paquito: Not really. We'll have to come back to this later, because my throat is going. There was a combination; I played like maybe three pieces. There was a swing piece because my father liked swing music very much. I don't remember, it was "Who's Sorry Now", the other one "Alavera port Tu," and I don't remember the third one.

Willard: How did you learn to play these pieces?

Paquito: Because before teaching me how to play the instrument, he teach me how to read music, which is very important. There is something that is taken for granted amongst some of the Jazz players; that's a big mistake. I remember that even Clack Terry told me in a story, that in order to get a job, he was recommended by Doc Cheatham, or something like that, he was recommended for a band, and the first thing that the band director asked him, 'do he read music?' And then Doc Cheatham had to say, "Yes, but just a little bit. You don't have to worry about it." [Both laugh] So no reading music was something not very good. He drink, but with moderation; it's the same things. So, first I had to read and chant the music and then play the saxophone. That's how I learn that.

Willard: Was your father a tough task master?

Paquito: My father was a dictator, in a nice way, but that doesn't make it much better. Like he was a Nazi, but in a nice way, you know.

[Both laugh.]

No, no; I am very thankful to him. He was a little too tough sometimes, but I was a too tough boy too. I was extremely tough boy, because I too developed sense of humor. I inherited it from him; he was a practical joker too. So, he was always complaining because I was a practical joker, and people like Chocolate, for example, would say, "Paquito, you'd be even worse it wasn't for him. He learned music from you and also to be a practical joker. So don't kill him." [Both laugh]

Willard: Ok, so you were five years old when you started learning music. Tell me how it went. Did you go to your father and say, 'I want to play music.' Or, did your father come to you and say, 'You must play music.' Or, how did it start?

Paquito: He retired from the army in 1955, I believe, but even before that, he used to practice his saxophone 26 hours a day. I never saw that instrument in the case. It was always in the stand, or in his mouth. All the time, playing the saxophone, practicing and practicing. And then there's a picture—I can't find that picture—of me playing next to him, the plastic saxophone. So, trying to copy the way that he played the saxophone. So, there was no choice. You freely want to be a musician; you want to play the saxophone, then he put his instrument and he taught me how to play. It was a very natural development.

Willard: So you, you made your first performance as it were, you said five months after you picked up the instrument.

Paquito: Nine.

Willard: Nine months after you picked up the instrument.

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: At what point did you begin to study music with outside teachers?

Paquito: Well, he took me to, to the Havana Conservatory and he want me to get with a specialist in theory and solfeggio and all that and harmony. He was not very good at harmony, or he was a just a very fine saxophone player. So he want to expand my horizons, so he took me to the conservatory. That was around 19—probably 1959 or 60.

Willard: What was it like at the conservatory?

Paquito: The life at the conservatory in some ways good. Private teaching is fine, but the life of the school is always recommendable because you have relations with all of the students, you know, you can compare yourselves with, you learn to share your life with others, you develop private jokes with others. Is always important the life of the conservatory, and I regret that I never have the chance to go abroad to study, but we have what my father have in mind—and still I have the letter—is to go to study a couple of years in the Portu Conservatory with Marseille Muir. But that was not possible, so, I finish in the conservatory while I be in the army; I was in the army, I enter the military, the obligatory military service in 1965.

Willard: Let's go back to your formal education. Talk about going to school and the schools you went to, other than the conservatory.

Paquito: Oh, I attended just the high school. On the eve of continuing, I say to my father say, “You know, I don’t see a need.” He say, “You decided to be a musician.” I think that’s a very silly question; I have no choice here. [Both laugh] He say, “Ok.” He didn’t like the idea.

Willard: He encouraged you and made it possible for you to learn music and to pick up the instrument at a very early age, but he didn’t like the idea of you being a professional musician.

Paquito: No, no. He didn’t like the idea of me leaving the school, the formal school. He say, “You should leave in a year; I want you to graduate from high school, or whatever the equivalent is before going to the University. “ I say, “I am not going to the University; I don’t see any point in keeping with doing this.” And he say, “Ok, I will accept it, but I really don’t like the idea, but if you do that, then you have to double the time you spend studying music.” I didn’t like that idea either because I am not a very good student anyway. But, I say, “Ok, if you help me.” And that the way it worked. So, I studied until second year of pre-university, and then gave the entire full time to the conservatory, studying harmony and counterpoint and all those things. And the clarinet with a very fine clarinet teacher.

Willard: Now before that, I understand that at age 10, you made your first performance with the national theater orchestra.

Paquito: The National—yea.

Willard: Talk about that please.

Paquito: Yea, well I used to go around, I became what you call, uh,uh, a show boat. You know—

Willard: A child prodigy.

Paquito: Yea. So, I made jokes, I play the saxophone in the store, I would play different kinds of music, and beside that I give some recitals of classical music. It was a combination of both. I used to do TV shows.

Willard: How old were you?

Paquito: Seven. Eight. Even I think the first time I did a TV show, I was like six.

Willard: So, you were like the Boy Wonder of the saxophone.

Paquito: Ah, something like that. [Both laugh] And I used to copy solos by Artie Shaw or Benny Goodman and play a solo, and take the Bennie Goodman or Artie Shaw orchestration, then I play

with the orchestra, I play the entire solo, and I improvise solo, I transcribe it, by ear. I used to do that.

Willard: As a child, would you say the saxophone, or the clarinet was your first instrument?

Paquito: The saxophone was my first instrument. But then my father had a tremendous time. He learned in those days, he wanted me to be a classical clarinet player. So he learned to play, he bought a clarinet once, imported from the same company. Learn how to play the clarinet. Well, he never majored in that, so his friend in the cabaret, they teach him how to play the thing. So, he taught me how to play the clarinet. He was my first clarinet teacher without being a clarinet player himself. He taught my brother how to play the piano without—I have never seen him put a finger to the piano. So I say, "No, you are playing that the wrong way." He say, "How do you know that?" I say, "Because Carlito told me." Carlito was his friend, a very fine piano player; he had that talent to teach. I am sure that he can teach you nuclear science without knowing nothing about it because he got the books. And how he was able to do that, I cannot make it, but I know that that was the wrong way to make it. So, later on he discovered that his instrument was limited, the same thing that he knew. They say, 'now we are visiting a real clarinet player, and it was my teacher, Enrique Pablo, who was a wonderful clarinet player. He used to play the first clarinet in the Havana Philharmonic. He was the person who round my style and the technique and the symphonic and the chamber skills on the clarinet.

Willard: And how old were you when you started studying with him?

Paquito: I am 12 or 13 years old.

Willard: Did you also have a specific saxophone teacher?

Paquito: No, in that, he was the best; in that field, he was the best. There was a thing that he used to do with the instrument, still today I cannot do it. I am still trying.

Willard: So, you developed your abilities on the clarinet and the saxophone in parallel, kind of, at the same time.

Paquito: Well, I play, I stopped playing the clarinet when I was around 11, 10 or 11, yea, around there. I play the saxophone like five years solely. I play the curved soprano [saxophone], and then when I grew up I pick up the alto, when I was like 12, 13.

Willard: You mentioned that your brother learned to play piano; did your other brother play as well?

Paquito: He used to play the piano and then he learned to play the saxophone. He was never a musician in his heart; he never wanted to be a musician. And I don't blame him. [Both laugh] No he developed some other things. He liked painting. that type of thing.

Willard: So neither of your brothers became professional musicians?

Paquito: No, Rosalito, he's a painter, a very talented painter and designer.

Willard: And how old is your sister?

Paquito: My sister is now 50, and my brother is 60 already, probably 59 or 60.

Willard: You and your father were the only musicians in the family?

Paquito: Yea; professional musicians, only him and me.

Willard: So, as a teenager, as you were learning to play these instruments and learning music, what was happening with your father and his professional music pursuits?

Paquito: He retire from the army and teach older people, I think for free. You look around and all the old people, he was teaching them. And he played in the Teatro Marti; he used to play in the theater called Oh say Mariti Theater. It was a popular theater. So, I'm doing cabaret once in a while and he never went back to his recital career for some reason. In those days Castro came to power, so he lost his little business. There could be no more instrument imports, so everything changed. I was not able to go to Paris because of that.

Willard: Was your father playing in dance bands as well?

Paquito: No, he didn't really like too much then. So he begin to play in the theater, uh, that is what he did most of the time.

Willard: At what age did you leave high school?

Paquito: When I was 15, 16, because then they called me for the army.

Willard: So around 15 or 16 you went into the army?

Paquito: I went into the army, yea.

Willard: How long were you in the army?

Paquito: Almost three years, two years and a half. It was supposed to be three years, but I get rid of it because of the integration of the commander who liked to compose music. The

Commandante Almay, that was his name. He loved to compose the little songs like that, and I recorded some of his pieces, and then he liberated me from the army in six month.

Willard: So, you were in the army until you were about 18 years old?

Paquito: Yea. Before that, I was for two years in the Act de Musical in Havana, which is a fantastic group of theater, of Mexican theater created by the Mexican actor called Alfonso Arau. You remember that movie, *Three Amigos*? He was the one of the amigos. So he created this theater in 1962, or something like that, and then he asked me to be part of the orchestra. And it was there for me 13 years old, until I was 15. It gained the will of my father too because he wanted me to stay in the conservatory. I said, "Ok, I will stay in the conservatory, but at night, I will do the theater." So, I get that all done together, and then they got me for the army.

Willard: While you were in the army, were you able to play music at all?

Paquito: Yes because in the army, I was in the marching band. They have a concert band, in the army. Pretty good, pretty good, because they have many of the young musicians in the streets, in the cabarets and in the symphony and all that, and they put it together a pretty good concert band.

Willard: And, were there other musicians in that army band that later became professional musicians?

Paquito: Many of them; not a lot of people, but yea; some of those kids were first line in the conservatory in those days.

Willard: And, while you were in the army, were you able to continue your studies?

Paquito: Yes, I finish my studies in the conservatory while in the army. I got waited in the Havana Conservatory, while in the army. In 1966, around there, I was able to go to the conservatory two or three times a week to study, to fit in my clarinet studies. Actually, I did my recital, my graduating recital in the conservatory, dressed as a soldier, because in those days, I have a service and I have only to wear fatigues.

Willard: So, you finished the conservatory while you were in the service, and where did you go from there are far as your studies?

Paquito: In those days they created an orchestra called Orchestra Cubana de Musica Moderna; a big band. In those days, Jazz was a four-letter word there. Jazz wasn't part of the music, I know that, but at the same time there they were receiving visits from Black organizations in the United States. The people in the Black Panthers, the young bloods, you know, people like that. So, of

course, they like Jazz music. How are we going to tell these people that Jazz isn't played music. It's going to sound like a totally nonsense thing. So, they organized this orchestra in 1967, and in that orchestra, we played music that had been forbidden six months before. That was imperialistic music, so they order us to play the same thing that we prevented to do so long before. So, no se, and in that whole orchestra they put together some talented musicians, like Chucho Valdés and Carlos Emilio and Carlos delPuerto on the bass and that was the cream of the crop of the musicians on the island, to make that orchestra.

Willard: Were these musicians that you personally knew before they came together in this orchestra, or were they people you met when the orchestra was formed.

Paquito: No, it's a very small island, so I mean, it's a very small group of people that know each other in Havana. So I knew them, and I used to work with Chucho in the theatricals; he had got out when they formed the Musica. So, I was hanging around the same group with people from the symphony and the TV orchestra, they form this orchestra.

Willard: You are described as one of the co-founders of the Orchestra Cubana Moderna, right?

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: How did you come to be one of the co-founders?

Paquito: When they say co-founder it was because I was the first call together with Chucho and Leo Brouwer, the guitarist. So, the person who formed that orchestra was Armando Romeu, a very fine conductor and Jazz arranger who conducted Tropicana orchestra for 25 years. So, I was among the founding members of that orchestra, and I was very proud because I was around 15, 16 when they called me to do that. I was the youngest one in the orchestra.

Willard: When you were coming up as a young musician during this time starting with as a child prodigy performing in the national theater orchestra, and then through your studies at that first conservatory and as you were coming up in the army, was there any recognition of race among the people that you were coming up with?

Paquito: I don't understand the question.

Willard: Was there any sense of separation of people by race?

Paquito: No, no.

Willard: So that was never a factor?

Paquito: Not really. The best musicians on that island were the Black people. Well, not only,because Ernesto Lecuona was white and was the representative of the Afro-Cuban composers was a white guy, was Ernesto Lecuona and nobody denied that. And I never feel that in that sense. It's very simple, if you discriminate against the Black guys, there's no music. [Both laugh]

Paquito: Ain't no music. No, we never feel that. Racist people you can find all over the place.

Willard: Was there discrimination, or separation of any kind when you were in the army?

Paquito: No, not at all. No army. [Both laugh] What can I tell you. Now you mention it, the 90—I ain't talking about the percentage and all that—the mass majority of the army officers, the high rankings were white. Now that you mention that, I remember. And the party, the center, the Communist party, there was just one Black. And he's that guy, that like to write music, Romeu. There wasn't any discrimination, per say, but yes, now that you mention it, I see, there were very few Black officers. Very few, even the conductors of the orchestra or the band was always white. But I don't think, that in the music, in the music field, I never felt that way.

Willard: You mentioned that politics came into play as far as how certain types of music were viewed after the revolution.

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: How did that effect you and your peers' opportunities to play music?

Paquito: Oh, when the war, it decide everything for your life; it's impossible to do nothing, you know. You do things against all odds. For example, Jazz music, you want to play, you play Jazz all your life, that is what you want to do. Jazz is imperative, it represents the enemy, so why can't I do now, this is what I do? And you cannot leave the country, because in order to leave, in order to present your papers, uh, soliciting going out of the country, you have to be 27 years old. So you start to fight the process when you are 27 years old. So, people have wait for 20 years, my friend Avento Romero when we in the army, he wait for his exit visa, la visa de salida, for 20 years. Aberto, man with a great sense of humor and a very positive person, but if that happen to me, I don't know what to do; 20 year waiting for his exit visa. So, they wanted to, they control everything. They let you know what to play, when to play, with whom to play. So, it effect you all the time cause you are never the owner of your own decisions; your decisions have to be always in accordance with the government, always. So, if you are lucky enough that you have decided, that according to the government, fine, but if not, you could not go, not even if you had the money.

Willard: Obviously, the government wasn't able to control your activities for 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There would obviously be opportunities where you could go off among your fellow musicians and play what you wanted to; talk about that.

Paquito: I never make a living, very few people while I was there, out of playing Jazz music. That was always a hobby. We would organize Jazz sessions in houses, in places with piano. We found piano and so, let's get together on Saturday afternoon because the specialist kind enough to lend his piano. So, it always, it's always like, for a prisoner, it's impossible to get out of jail, but some people escape. It's not as dramatic, but that's the way it is; it was a way to escape. There was some, a place called three-o-clock, there was a little Jazz club, a little night club that the manager liked Jazz music; Maurito was his name. He called it, "I love Jack music. I love Jack." But he loved that type of music, I mean he didn't know the names of people, but he loved the sound of that music, the sense of freedom that jack had. So, they, he allow play every Monday there; they have Jazz Mondays. We play there, but that was problematic. Some people didn't want to go to that place because the political police was always around there. Never happen nothing, all we wanted was great music and to go around with the girls, and have some fun. Jazz was not forbidden officially, but If you find something better to do, it was a better for you. It's not forbidden, but 'why don't you do something else?'

Willard: You talked about your father and the music that influenced him, such as Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman and basically from what is referred to as the Swing style of Jazz. At what point did you begin to get a sense of modern developments of Jazz?

Paquito: That's a very good question. My father was a constant force in my life, you know; he was incredible. He came—I remember like today—he had a, one of those silver turntables. So he came with those little LPs, those small LPs, with the face of Charlie Parker, a very young Charlie Parker and that be-bop bowtie and that was totally different image than Ellington and all those people have; it's totally different. He say, "I want you to hear this." The day before we were listening to Artie Shaw and Ellington and Benny Carter. And they play that, "I want you to listen to the entire first side of this LP. And don't talk; we'll talk later. You have time now? Ok." [Imitates rhythm] "Oh, oy, oy." "Shh—listen." When he finished the thing, he say, "You like it?" And I say, "No." And he say, "Me either. They are good musicians, uh?" I remember saying that is the problem that I can't tell these people know what they are doing. Everything is in play, but I hate it. And he say, "You know something, we will have to learn about this thing, because this is what it is now." This is the progress. So, he came, even without liking the music, he came with books, be-bop books by Dizzy and Charlie Parker and Monk all that. And more LPs and all that, and we ended up loving that music. He had that intelligence to, if you don't like something, but pay attention first and see why the people enjoy the thing. So, that was my first encounter

with be-bop and I make it a living after that, and it's been a living for the last 40 years. It was a blessing, that language that Dizzy and Parker—

Willard: At what point did it begin to make sense to you, and did it begin to make sense enough to you that you knew this is what you wanted to play?

Paquito: Almost immediately, almost immediately. That much I know.

Willard: But you did describe that your first reaction was that you didn't like it.

Paquito: No [chuckles]—

Willard: How did you come to like it?

Paquito: I don't remember how that was, but I remember that it was almost immediately, a couple of pieces. I remember that the next LP was of a guy almost balding, a very fine alto and baritone player. That guy used to play baritone with Stan Kenton orchestra. And I remember that he had racing pianist and I don't remember which of the men was playing drums, and that was a little more like post-bop type of thing. And I find I enjoy that, and then that happen to me again with the Miles Davis new quintet, the quintet with Herbie Hancock and Tony Williams and Ron Carter. Who was the other one?

Willard: George Coleman.

Paquito: George Coleman. I was in the army listening very quietly because it was forbidden to listen to Jazz music, listening to Willis Conover the voice of America Jazz hour. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, tonight we present the new Miles Davis Quintet with George Coleman and Herbie Hancock,' blah, blah, blah. When I'm hearing that, I'm saying what is the tempo? [Willard laughs] I was used to [imitates rhythm/style] that be-bop type of thing, and I wasn't used to that.

Willard: You'd just gotten into that.

Paquito: I got into the bebop.

Willard: And now here comes something else.

Paquito: Yea, here comes something else. So, my friends say, "You like it?" I say, "No." "Me either." Because it was Tony Williams has a great swing, swing in him like a, suddenly he stopped [imitates rhythm]; what happened with the cymbal, man? It was part of the thing, part of the style. So now he tell me the story.

Willard: So this group that you became a part of, Orchestra Cubana de Musica Moderna, what was the repertoire of that orchestra?

Paquito: Music that was forbidden six months before. For example, "Route 66."

Willard: You were in the army, and then you finished the army after six months, right?

Paquito: Yea because they formed this orchestra, the Orchestra Cubana Musica Moderna.

Willard: This orchestra was your exit from the army?

Paquito: Uh, huh, exactly.

Willard: How did that happen; how did this orchestra come together?

Paquito: I am almost sure that this orchestra was formed in order to improve or to deny the impression that the revolution was blocking Jazz music.

Willard: So this was an officially sanctioned orchestra?

Paquito: Officially what?

Willard: Officially sanctioned.

Paquito: What mean sanction?

Willard: Sanctioned meaning that the government saw this orchestra as a vehicle. The government tolerated this orchestra to a certain extent—

Paquito: They formed it.

Willard: How did that happen?

Paquito: Nobody knows; suddenly, six months before that, we, I wanted to play that type of music. We play in the jam sessions very quietly, you know. In order to avoid that type of music, conflict with the government for playing and all that, we started to avoid conflict with the government for playing foreign music. So suddenly they decided to form this orchestra for playing foreign music. As simple as that, foreign music; most of the music—except for this one time I had a very Americanized arrangement of "Cuando Novela"—the rest of the repertoire was music by Peter Gun, Heavy Mancini, for instrument. And the instruments were imported from France and some from the United States and Canada; they sent saxophones, guitars, and all that, in order to play American music.

Willard: Who was the director of this orchestra?

Paquito: The director of the orchestra was my teacher, Armando Romeu. Armando used to be the conductor of the Tropicana orchestra for 25 years. So, many important musicians were extracted from different organizations—from the TV orchestra and from the Symphony. Cachaito was from the symphony. And so, people from the theatrical musical in Havana—Chucho for example, and me from the army.

Willard: How was it decided that these musicians would be part of this orchestra?

Paquito: Maybe Armando and a group of all this decided to go ***[Disc 2]***

Willard: With Chucho and all these other musicians, they knew about you and they brought you all together?

Paquito: Yea; we, we know each other, you know. And they pick up the people that really know Jazz and all that, Diego Loverto was the drummer.

Willard: What was the instrumentation?

Paquito: It was a typical big band, but a real big one, five saxophones, four trombones, five trumpets, two drummers, three percussionists, piano, two guitars.

Willard: Two drummers?

Paquito: Two drummers. Like, Don Ellis, remember Don Ellis had two drummers, yea, something like that. Uh, three percussionists, piano, Chucho play the piano on a little organ—portable, and two guitars, it was a organ that played only one, but Chucho, he never liked to play that thing, Chucho was always a great pianist. And two conductors.

Willard: And who determined what that orchestra would play?

Paquito: Uh, mainly Armando Romeu. I think mainly Armando Romeu; Armando was a very oriented person in terms of music. He always liked Ellington and especially Stan Kenton; he loved Stan Kenton. We played a lot of Stan Kenton's arrangements. That band used to transcribe a whole orchestra chart in nothing, in three hours [imitates sound] boom. An entire Pete Rugulo arrangement. , or Gene Roland in nothing. So, we play a lot of Kenton.

Willard: Do you have any sense now that since this was an orchestra that was encouraged or permitted by the government to exist, did you have any sense that someone was dictating to the directors what this orchestra would be, and what this orchestra would play?

Paquito: Everything dictated by the government there. So, everything has a political intention, absolutely everything. Nothing is done for nothing, it's always a political end.

Willard: So now at the time when you were a part of this orchestra, and you talked about the music that was played, and the way you described it, it sounds like a lot of theatrical music. Like I would consider Mancini music for example, because it was used so much for film and that kind of thing, I would consider that to be somewhat theatrical. At this point in your own development as a musician, you father had already exposed you to Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and all those musicians; where there other musicians like you who had a kind of modern outlook in that band?

Paquito: Oh, yea, Chucho was there. Chucho had a very wide vision of music, combining different things. We had many different mentalities in that orchestra. It was a big band, with so many people there, a few leaders also. For example, the lead trumpet, he love to play like Bobby Hackett. He was a very very good lead player, but he loved Ray Anthony. The Ray Anthony orchestra, or that type of high society thing; you know the trumpet player like Harry James and all that type of thing. Chucho liked the Afro-Cuban combination, especially he loved Oscar Peterson. It was a time when Chu Chu play a sake like Oscar Peterson, or like a compliment. When he was young he have all this Oscar Peterson, and he have all his, uh, and he got the chance to do it. In order to copy Oscar Peterson, you had to be mostly a pianist. And he have all the Ray Brown solos and all of that and Ed Thigpen. So, the guitar player, he love all the heavy be-bop players like Herb Ellis and Barney Kessel, so we have different types of people. There was a saxophone player that love to play tangos or Bosso Nova for him to play. So, there was, the orchestra that was developing was for playing different styles of music, you know. So, something like this is impossible to achieve in the free orchestra, in another type of orchestra. They literally formed an orchestra to play certain types of music. Here you have to play many different types of music, and that's good in a sense.

Willard: In a way, the repertoire of this orchestra was similar to the way that you learned music, in terms of playing just a broad variety of different things, as opposed to focusing on one thing.

Paquito: The only difference is that this orchestra was very commercially oriented. The music that we play by Mancini was [imitates rhythm] that big band type of sound was on old movies, I know that, was made famous by Ray Charles, it was a big hit in Havana in 1965 [imitates rhythm]. That was very commercial orientated, most of the time, but at the same time, we play a piece written by Loria who was a type of obligatory music, but mixed with pure percussion, I know that, and a drum solo, and even that contemporary atonal type of music become very

popular because it was very effective. Because it uses the two drummer they play in one combination, was a nice period; it was very different.

Willard: How many years did that orchestra last?

Paquito: Many years, but the splendor of the orchestra last maybe one year, two at the most, because the orchestra accomplish its goal. That was taking away from the government the accusations of anti-Jazz, anti-foreigner accusations. That's all they want; they want to erase the image that, 'Jazz isn't our type of music and we don't want nothing that is coming from outside.' As soon as they accomplished that—

Willard: So, the orchestra served the government well?

Paquito: Yea, and we were happy to do it. See, we play the music; we wanted to do it to play music. So, they let us play the music and then after two years—that's why Irakere was born also then.

Willard: What years did you perform in this Orchestra Moderna?

Paquito: Orchestra started in 1967 and I was main director in 1970.

Willard: So you were about 19 when the orchestra started?

Paquito: Uh, huh.

Willard: And you were main director—

Paquito: 1970, for one year.

Willard: And what did being the director, what did that mean? What were your responsibilities?

Paquito: When the orchestra was dying and everybody was abandoning the boat, Armando retire, I believe or something—I don't remember when Armando Romeu went—I think he retire, he was very old and ready. He went to another place and was no more director. So, I took care of the orchestra, and I started doing Jazz, and refused to accompany more singers. No more singers, no more pop singers; no, I didn't want to do that, I want to only Jazz music here, or creative music.

Willard: What kind of music did you encourage the band to play when you were the director?

Paquito: Mostly Jazz oriented music, and that was that. Jazz was already again becoming "imperial music". So, that was not a good idea to play Jazz. You know, the Black Panthers were

not any more around there, so we had nobody else to impress here. So, Jazz is “imperial music”; they didn’t mention that officially, but Jazz was a four letter word again, and all I wanted to do was Jazz oriented music. So, creative music in general, and I didn’t want to do more problem music. And that only lasted one year, until they, in a year they send me home to rest. I was not tired. [Both laugh] I want to rest; rest for what?

Willard: Give me an idea of whose music you had the band playing and what tunes you had the band playing.

Paquito: Wow, that happened so many years ago. I wrote the piece called “Hello to Stano;” and it was a piece dedicated to Stano, for alto, tenor, and big band, that was one piece. Some other pieces by Chucho Valdés, wonderful Afro-Cuban type instrumental music by Chuchos Valdés um, and some arrangements from Armando Romeu that in those days he got a couple of them when they have a big band in the village. That type of music, and some European friends that send me charts, also from Finland, from Sweden, so that was Jazz oriented music.

Willard: What kind of gigs did your orchestra play?

Paquito: A lot of totally useless gigs, you know. Playing in mostly pub things, then they pretended to play my Jazz thing in the middle of a pub gig, you know. In the theater, they have to sing the Italian ballads and things like that. I was trying to be annoying, that’s what it is.

Willard: Was it playing mostly what you could call concerts?

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: The orchestra wasn’t playing clubs, or anything?

Paquito: No; sometimes we play Tropicana; we play Tropicana, there is a show there, but we didn’t really have a content, demands for that orchestra, because it was a dance orchestra, it was too big also. It was a novelty; it become an oddity, the orchestra.

Willard: So you became the conductor in 1970—

Paquito: -70.

Willard: And that lasted one year?

Paquito: One year.

Willard: How was your departure from the orchestra determined?

Paquito: I received a call, a late call from the minister of culture. “Paquito, we decide that the situation is a little complicated these days culturally in the country, and we don’t want you to get hurt here, and I think the best thing you can do, is to go home and rest for a little while, to rest.”

Willard: What did that mean?

Paquito: Well, you tell me? “Go to rest.” Huh, I say you want me to go to rest. “Yea, because is complicated everything, and we want you to rest.” Then I went to rest for two years; I did nothing. What they say was even more humiliating, they say, “You don’t have to worry about anything economically. We will pay you a salary every month, and you have all the benefits and everything. You don’t have to worry about money.” So, they pay me a salary every month two years for doing nothing, absolutely nothing.

Willard: Would you describe that as a kind of musical exile?

Paquito: Yea, that’s what is, yea. Yea, it was a paid exile, they pay me every year, every month the salary.

Willard: During those two years, what did you do?

Paquito: Playing with people for free. I conducted the Tropicana Orchestra for the food.

Willard: For meals? [Willard laughs]

Paquito: For meals, yea. The food situation in the country was horrible in those days. (About the same as right now) So, and still today there is a trumpet player Guerido Elarvarde, he still play for years at the Tropicana just for food. At night, he go play the show, for the food. So, I play that and I conduct the Benny More—Benny was dead for several years—the Benny More orchestra used to accompany the show in Tropicana for a whole month. So, a friend of mine Marcus, he used to play the lead and conduct, it was very, very hard for him. So, he call me, and say, “Paquito, you know that you are doing nothing at home. You want to conduct the orchestra; they have good food in Tropicana.” [Both laugh] “Ok; very good.” Every night I direct, and then I go and conduct the short orchestra for a whole month.

Willard: So, this was around 1971-73, around there?

Paquito: Around there. I mean in those days Chucho created Irakere.

Willard: What was happening during the time when they told you to rest? What was happening with your personal life?

Paquito: It was very depressing, extremely depressing. And that is what they wanted, for me to be depressed, and for me to understand, that I have to do what they say, to the system. To be ready to be ordered to do things, and to do it without complaining so much, you know. And not insist anymore in doing the type of music—we insist anymore that you do that; it was a way to say no to totally alienate me, totally, but—it was like a warning.

Willard: Were you married at the time, and if so when did you get married?

Paquito: The second time in 1970.

Willard: You'd been married before that?

Paquito: Yes; I was married in 1968.

Willard: For how long?

Paquito: Nine months. [Both laugh]

Willard: And what happened to that first marriage?

Paquito: Maria, a very fine harpist, fantastic ears, pianist also. But in those days, I was a womanizer, I like women too much. I still like them, but at least I learn how to control myself. [Both laugh] Boy what a problem. So, I—

Willard: So, you were married for nine months.

Paquito: Nine months, and then one day I came back home, and Maria's harp wasn't in the living room, and I said, "Oh, oh." There is two things here; the harp was stolen, or Maria left me, and it wasn't the second. Nobody stole the harp; nobody steals a harp. [Both laugh]

Willard: So, how did you meet your second wife?

Paquito: While married to Maria, I was playing in the orchestra at the university, and then one day, a beautiful woman, when I finished playing my Saturday at the orchestra there, uh, we were packing and we were ready to go to have dinner in the university, so this beautiful woman dressed all in white, she was sitting in the middle of the audience. Everybody left, so I approach her, and I say, "What are you doing here, you're so pretty." And she say, "Well, I am here to watch your instrument while you go to have dinner." And I say, "You think I am going to go have dinner with such a beautiful woman here by herself? No, I am going to watch you, while you watch the instruments." [Both laugh] The rest is history, and now we have about a 34 year old kid. Of course the marriage was a total disaster, but the—

Willard: You were married 10 years the second time.

Paquito: Yea. That was something very sad.

Willard: So, you left the orchestra, and for a time you conducted the orchestra at the Tropicana. How long did that last?

Paquito: The Tropicana conductor was a month only. but then, most of the time, I was writing also, writing some big band charts, and I did sometimes play with Emiliano Salvador, the wonderful Cuban pianist who died prematurely. A very great pianist and drummer; many people don't know he's a drummer. With the three of them - Carlos del Puerta on the bass. We used to play in places for free, just to go in and play the compositions together. And these some work also with a group called Groupo Experimentacion Sonora, sound experimentation group in the movie industry, and the band, we used to work there. But nothing professional, I was just doing something here, but nothing steady, I didn't have a steady gig.

Willard: What was the next steady gig?

Paquito: Irakere.

Willard: And how did you come to be a member of Irakere?

Paquito: It's very interesting, still today, I haven't really explain for. I received a call from Chucho Valdés, who used to play in the orchestra with me, in that dying orchestra. Chucho called me, and said, "Meet me at this park in an hour. Can you do that?" "Yea, ok." Then Chucho say, "We are forming a group because we don't understand that musicians that are not as good musicians as we are, are traveling all over the world, and we are still in-landed here. How come you, how come we are not international? We have to do that. And I say, "Well, it is not my fault." And he say, "Well, we are going to do a group, and uh, we are going to call it Irakere." And I say, "What—what is that?" This means jungle in some African language. And I say, "Why you don't call it that way?" And he didn't finish; he say, "The word Jazz is out; we are not going to use that word here. They don't like that word, and you know it." So, I say, "Well, and what are you going to play, because I play all my life Jazz." "You keep playing whatever you want; they are not going to notice it. Play whatever you want, but don't say the name." We recorded some Afro-Cuban charts, and we make some dance music here. And, I was very anxious for Chucho; I say, "If you put me in your group, they are not going to let you travel. He say, "That is not my problem. The group is from this way, and these are the people that I want in my group. I don't care if we travel or not. We will try; you want to kick people out of the group? I think you better." I say ok." "They may accept it though as the beginning of the end."

Willard: And so, what was the instrumentation originally?

Paquito: The instrumentation originally was, Chucho playing the piano, Carlos Emilio playing the guitar; Carlos del Puerta playing the bass, the bass guitar; Oscar Valdes Jr. playing the percussion and singing, he never sing before. He was trying, and he create, and in the beginning, we didn't like too much what he was doing, but he created a style. He ended up creating a style. And his brother, I don't remember the, Tata was the name, another percussionist. Verona, Jorge Variona was playing the trumpet and I was playing—the soprano that my father imported from France—alto and baritone saxophone. That was the group—two brasses, two wind instruments, and a rhythm section.

Willard: Chucho wanted to avoid that four letter word, Jazz, and so you developed a kind of music that incorporated a lot of different things. How did that happen?

Paquito: Naturally, so naturally. In the group we have, people that have different interests, came from different fields, so Oscarito Valdes he, uh, he wanted to sing that type of very popular music, you know. That Afro-Cuban type of popular music, and the available his Afro-Cuban instrument that he had, and they put together a machinery, and a incredible motive to move that thing. And the machine together was absolutely incredible, a little too loud for my taste, but the combination rhythmically, was something that I'd never heard before. The way he put together the American drum set with the Cuban conga and the African bongo, they created a rhythm called ba-tum-ba-bop, because of the combination of el tumbordora and the batal drums with the drum set, so I, I wrote a piece based on the second movement of the Mozart concerto for clarinet. That has absolutely nothing to do with that, and Chucho with his Oscar Peterson influence, he created an unbelievable sound, it may seem something, so anti-lapping, but Oscar Peterson is, together with his Cuban roots, the combination was incredible. And we didn't know that we were creating such an amazing and different sound. It like Dizzy, and Dizzy told me that, when they were working the be-bop thing with Charlie Parker, they didn't know they were creating such an mode. I'm not trying to compare with what they were doing, but the way of doing were the same.

Willard: How did Irakere develop?

Paquito: Well, in the beginning, they didn't let me go out. I was right, in the first two or three year they did, I was not allowed to go out.

Willard: How did the band begin touring?

Paquito: It was complicated; the first trips were to communist countries. Still, the Berlin wall was there. So, our first tour was Bulgaria and Hungary, not Czechoslovakia and the Soviet

Union. So, the first travel to, the first time we travel to a free country, was to Jamaica. To Jamacica when Michael Manley was the president; was a socialist president we have there. And then, we, it was very interesting because they put in my room, they put me to share the room a member of the communist party, in order to keep an eye on me. But the problem is that the guy who was appointed to be my guard, he was my, he told me that he was there for that. [Willard laughs] The name of this guy was Enrique Pla, the drummer, so we went to Finland, Jamaica, Italy; we went to the festival La Lower Italia, which is the festival organized by the Italian communist festival party. I saw that that guy was always around me, around, and I say, "What happened?" And he say, "I had to appear in most of the pictures that you are taking, because I have to prove that I was around you all the time." And I say, "why?" He say, "I have been appointed to be your guardian. How can you, you are my personal friend, how can, have a common interest. We like Jazz music." He was very funny; he was very honest."

Willard: And what did he play?

Paquito: He played drums, very good, fantastic drummer. He is a friend of mine, only that he was member of the party, only that he was supposed to do what he as told to do.

Willard: So, Chucho started the band?

Paquito: Uh, huh with Oscarito Valdes.

Willard: How did the band qualify itself to tour? In other words, obviously you had to go through some kind of process where you proved to the powers that be that you were worthy of being sent out of the country as a representative of the country, because obviously at that point anybody that was sent out was a representative of the country. How did the band go about developing itself, and proving to the powers that be that this was a good product to send out to other countries?

Paquito: Well, I give the credit Oscarito Valdes, the singer, he was a very good percussionist. He a was a very, he was involved very much in the, with people from the government. He knew people from the government, and especially from the political police; he knew and he had links to them. He was in the military in the revolution, in the 60s, until 65 probably, or 64. So, he developed links to the political police, probably, and he took responsibility to what was going to happen. I feel so sorry for him, because when I left, probably he was the first one I was called to declare. I have no choice, I think he was the main person who put that group together. He was a very organized guy who know how to do things the way that we can head the right path.

Willard: Before you got the opportunity to make these tours to Eastern Europe and then to Jamaica, did the band record?

Paquito: We recorded a piece that was an immediate success. It was a hit immediately, and that called "Bacalao con Pan." Bacalaos con pan means, uh, Codfish with bread, and it was an immediate hit in, the hit parade in Cuba was that thing. So, we took it from there. There was a succession of hits, and the band became very popular in the island. Then in 1977, Dizzy Gillespie was there with Stan Getz with a group of musicians, on a cruise ship called *The Daphne,* and Earl Fatha Hines; it was a very impressive group of musicians. We didn't know anything, because the newspapers say nothing, but we receive calls to present ourselves in the place and play with some American musicians. And then when they came back to New York, they talk about the group to Bruce Lundvall in CBS. And that was the way we become involved with CBS, and we recorded with CBS.

Willard: Now those early records, the ones you describe as making the Cuban hit parade, were they recorded for Egrem? Did you make an album for Egrem?

Paquito: A few of them, yea.

Willard: You made a few albums for Egrem?.

Paquito: Yea, at least a couple of them, but that first one was a big success on the radio, you know that. I don't remember the name of the other pieces, but "Bacalao Con Pan" was a boom, and they love that to dance.

Willard: These musicians Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz, Earl "Fatha" Hines, and the other musicians who were on this cruise ship, how did you meet them?

Paquito: That night we play with them, but before that we got a jam session in the former Hilton, which is the Havana Libre hotel. You'll see at least a couple of pictures around there of Stan Getz in short pants and Fatha Hines was around there. We receive a call to meet these people there. They didn't mention at all what was happening. "Present yourselves at Havana Libre hotel."

Willard: What year was this?

Paquito: 1977.

Willard: And how did you happen to personally meet Dizzy Gillespie?

Paquito: Well, it was very funny. I wrote a short story, a very funny short story called *Shell of Combs in Havana*. Why? Because I arrive home, and I found a piece of paper written on a paper bag—in those days they still have paper bags, now they don't have nothing—a piece of paper

bags, he say, “Paquito, we been looking for you. Donde estas? Dizzy Gillespie.” I say what type of joke is this. Paquito, ‘Donde estas? We been looking for you.’ This is Dizzy Gillespie. Then I went to the concert; the guy who was attending him at the grocery store, said, “Did you see the note.” I say, “The note, what note?” I was smelling something funny there. “What note?” say, “There was a guy, a chubby Black guy with very heavy glasses, smoking a pipe, and dressed like Sherlock Holmes, with big cheeks.” Big cheeks, dressed like Sherlock Holmes in the middle of, that had to be Dizzy Gillespie. And when the guy say, “Yea, he mention that name.” “Well, that is impossible.” “Well, he was here, and he was making jokes.” But what is Dizzy Gillespie doing here in my neighborhood; it doesn’t make any sense. Well, the thing was that Arturo Sandoval, he was going to, driving around his very old car that he have, the pier in Havana, I saw this big , boat, and he came down. He say Dizzy Gillespie. ‘What is Dizzy Gillespie doing here?’ “Are you Dizzy Gillespie?” “Yea.” “Well, I play the trumpet.” He say, “Yea, well you want to come with me, I have a friend that have some records of you.” And then he took him to my house, and I was not there.

Willard: So, that’s how Dizzy Gillespie came to know who you were, through Arturo Sandoval?

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: And, so how did you eventually meet?

Paquito: In that jam session, because when I arrive, the telephone ring, “Ring. Paquito present yourself in the Havana Libre Hotel.” Then I have a clue what happened. “What happened?” “No, no, no. You just grab your saxophone and go there; there is a group of people that want to meet you.” Or whatever.

Willard: And that’s where the jam session was?

Paquito: That’s where the jam session was with Stan Getz and at the hotel Libre people say, ‘Wow, who are all these people?’ Because the newspaper didn’t say anything.

Willard: And who did you play with that night?

Paquito: I played with Irakere; we played with Irakere, but at the end we have a jam session with Los Papines and Stan Getz play a couple of songs with us, Ray Mantilla also played with us, and Mickey Roker played in the jam session also, and I was impressed with him when I heard that jam with Sonny Rollins years ago. And he became one of my favorite drummers. He was playing with us there, and he was rooting for us I believe, the only clarinet there. So, for us was a like a dream that we never dreamed.

Willard: You played with these musicians that night, did you and the members if Irakere have a chance to interact and to talk and to socialize with these musicians that night?

Paquito: Oh, yea, yea. Because in the back of stage, of course. Many people that you'd never know who they are when you were around them, you know. Just quiet and listen to all those who talk. The one who speak the most was Ray Mantilla, because it was the first time I heard his Spanglish spoken.

Willard: Spanglish [Willard laughs].

Paquito: Ray Mantilla speak half in English and half in Spanish. And I was watching, and I was, "What type of language are you using?" And he was, "Ah; everybody speak this in New York; this is a New York thing." That was the first time I heard Spanglish spoken.

Willard: And so, that night is when Dizzy and the other musicians on that trip, that's when they first heard Irakere?

Paquito: Uh, huh.

Willard: And what happened from there?

Paquito: Dizzy and Stan Getz call Bruce Lundvall, probably, I think in those days Stan Getz was signed with CBS. And they mention this group, and say, "You have to meet these people; you have to meet Irakere." They mention our names and all that. And, Bruce Lundvall took a plane—I think it was a private plane—and flew into Havana with a few executives from CBS. In those days, it was not Sony yet; it was CBS. And then they went there and they talked to the representative in the Ministry of Culture, but Irakere know that. Up to that time they have also us politically blocked; they did not give that opportunity to us, to travel, or anything—

Willard: Why?

Paquito: Because they suspect that we were Jazz musicians. [Both laugh] We were suspicious, and Chucho was the main one all the time. It was funny because Chucho was in a strong way denying our involvement with Jazz. 'They are accusing us of being Jazz musicians, and that is a miserable lie, and they want to prejudice also.' And I say, 'Chucho, don't get too dramatic because you sound very ridiculous,' you know. Denying something like that, and that's why they didn't want us to be too prominent. But after the Americans decided that they like us, that's how everything change. When the enemy have a good opinion of us, then everything change in our favor; that's a total nonsense you know.

Willard: How did it change?

Paquito: Well, immediately we start traveling more—

Willard: To where?

Paquito: Uh, to here. We came to the United States. The first move was when they organize Havana Jam in 1978. That is what it is; they organize a, CBS organize a gigantic spectacle, extravaganza called Havana Gem. They have two double LPs.

Willard: I have those records.

Paquito: They have Rita Coolidge, Stan Getz, Dexter Gordon, eh, I wonder why Dizzy didn't come; Dizzy didn't come, maybe was so busy, you know. Um, and then, from that recording, we went to New York and then to Switzerland to do the Montreal Jazz festival.

Willard: Just backing up a bit, you mentioned Ray Mantila, and your first time mentioning what you refer to as Spanglish. What was your first sense, and what was the Cuban sense of the Fania All Stars? Because in a way, it was like the Fania All Stars were bringing your music back to Cuba from the United States.

Paquito: Sort of. Yea, well, I have to confess that that group didn't impress nobody there. There was a lot of talente there, but the music wasn't nothing new. We weren't interested in listening to Jaco Pastorius for example, that was something really new for us, you know, or the trio that they did with John McLaughlin, the Trio of Doom. There was something really, nobody for us, but the funny for us, something that didn't impress us at all, and it's not because it was bad, it's not bad, it's just, I don't know what.

Willard: This is what you knew already.

Paquito: We didn't know this already.

Willard: You knew that music already.

Paquito: We knew already and I don't even remember the, I don't even remember what they play. I remember that I cannot forget Trio of Doom, or Weather Report, when they came out of that cloud, that was so, "Wow! What is this." They look like they were coming from Mars, or something. That makes an impression, and I met there a person I have very much, he who, in those days, he was not very popular yet, in the airport he sit down and play some things on the guitar, and show me all his new compositions.

Willard: So, for you and for some of your fellow musicians, this was your first time ever seeing some of these musicians perform live. You mention Weather Report and you mention the trio with Jaco Pastorius, Tony Williams, and John McLaughlin, that's what I was going to ask you about. You'd been exposed to and interested in be-bop and in post-bop and those kind of things you'd heard some of the records. What was your impression of the acoustic musicians of like Stan Getz and Dexter Gordon and Woody Shaw and Bobbie Hutcherson that were on that program? What was your impression of what they were doing?

Paquito: Well, I was very impressed by Hubert Laws Spanish too. He spoke very nice Spanish too. Those people I admire them so much. Woody Shaw had a real different way to speak the trumpet, to make the trumpet speak. He was unique; Woody Shaw, I don't have enough words to explain what he was doing with that trumpet. Oh, my, I think he was the only trumpet player that impress Miles Davis. He was always talking about Woody Shaw, and he had that beautiful gigantic sound, you know. I met him in Portland, in 1970, I met him. And Stan Getz was the sound, I remember that old Downbeat; Getz he had an incredible timbre sound and ideas and all that. They say he have totally different way to play the tenor, and all the sound that sense of swing. You think that he is not going to make it [imitates scream of anticipation]; you think he is not going to make it and he always make it, and well, well you were lost on one of the greatest, uh, things of all times. I was very impressed, we all were very impressed with those musicians.

Willard: They were all impressed with you, and with Irakere. How did they express that to you?

Paquito: Well, by talking about us with Bruce Lundvall and the people in New York. I think that is the best way to express their admiration for what we do. It was very , very rewarding to receive the demonstration of sympathy from people that we have been admiring for so long.

Willard: So, you made that live recording of that concert, and that was the first American or US exposure to the band, to Irakere. How did you come to make your first solo record for CBS?

Paquito: Well, after that live recording, we came here, we came to New York, and then to Switzerland. When we came back we recorded the first numbers of Irakere. Is that the name of the LP, Irakere was a very nice album. And we won a Grammy for it, and then we did the second one; it was Irakere II and in that occasion Bruce Lundvall proposed me to record by myself, an LP by myself for CBS. So he kept that promise when I came back for good in 1980.

Willard: After the band made the first record for CBS, what did that exposure mean for Irakere? What did that do to help the band?

Paquito: Well, CBS is a gigantic company. So, the resolution of that size company is that, is very impressive. Exposure is what's very important in what's working with a company like that. We received a world exposure that helped a lot to publicize the group, and very soon, the contribution of the group was recognized around the world.

Willard: I was here on this side as a journalist, a writer and I was hearing about the band from the time that they made that tour, that trip to Havana and made that concert, which was your first recording opportunity for CBS, so we were hearing about the band because there were some writers who came down on that Havana Jam trip, and they wrote in *Downbeat*, for example, about your band Irakere. So we were hearing about that band before you made your first full album for CBS. And what we were hearing was basically a Cuban Jazz band. So, obviously that kind of exposure got back to the Cuban government. How did the government view that exposure?

Paquito: Too late. [Both laugh]

Willard: I mean because now, the band is becoming known around the world as a Cuban Jazz band.

Paquito: Well—

Willard: But originally the whole idea of Chucho, yourself, and the other musicians was to suppress that notion that you were a Jazz band, but now it's like the genie's out of the bottle. This is a Cuban Jazz band. What was the official government response to all that?

Paquito: They have nothing to do, and the thing is that Irakere was the first band, no the only band in the world, that I know—at least in Cuba the only band that I know—that have two totally different repertoire, totally different. We had, we decide on purpose a concert repertoire as well as a dance repertoire, totally separated. So we play in a theater for a Jazz audience—which was not most of the time—we can play an entire night of no danceable music, oh music that you can move your feet certainly, but a concert where you call concert repertoire. But also you can go to an outside dance floor and play the entire dance music, but all of that the Jazz spirit. And I am going to quote Herbie Hancock; in the 1960s I believe, he say in *Downbeat* he was asked about what is Jazz, and he answered in a very wise way, "Jazz is something impossible to define these days, and very easy to recognize." Isn't that wise. So, American people recognize in me at least a Cuban Jazz band when, even while playing dance nmusic you can feel the Jazz, it's like when Herbie Hancock play those commercial type of things it's like, you can feel the Jazz beat behind there. Even something he's playing, you know, it shows his Jazz roots. So, the same thing happen, but in the case of the Cuban officials, Chucho say, "Keep playing whatever you want,

and they are not going to notice if you don't mention it." So, that's the way it is. And when they notice that the Americans found the Jazz, they say, 'I told you, these people were playing Jazz.' But it was too late already. [Both laugh]

Willard: With this kind of exposure that the band was getting from that very first concert recording on Columbia, the two-record "Havana Jam" set with all the other artists, and then the next point was when you made your first record for CBS. Obviously, the band was gaining world-wide recognition. Now before that point, even before the cruise ship opportunity where you first met Dizzy, before that you described the fact that the great majority of your travels were primarily to Eastern Europe, or what was then known as the Communist block countries. After the exposure of the Columbia recordings, obviously there were going to be a broader range of opportunities. How did that happen? Where did the band go? What new places was the band able to tour as a result of that exposure?

Paquito: Well, remember that I left almost immediately when this success start to happen. I left in 1980, and in I think April of 1980 it happened that, a very sad event of the Mariela boatlift, so we came to New York in 78 and 79.

Willard: That's when you played Carnegie Hall, right?

Paquito: We played Carnegie Hall in 1978, and it was a coincidence that Bebo Valdés was visiting New York when that was happening. So, he got the chance to see his son after almost 20 years without seeing him.

Willard: When Irakere made its first trip to New York, what were the details of that trip?

Paquito: Well, I think that was after, immediately after Havana Jam; we took the same plane, we flew with the Americans. We flew from Havana to New York to John F. Kennedy. So we stay here, I don't remember if we record first, or what. I remember that we went to Switzerland, and I remember that I told Stan Getz, "Wow, what a beautiful country." And he told me, "Yes, for three days, you're going to get bored down here. There's nothing to do except eating cheese and women." [Both laugh] Stan was very crude you know. And then we came back and record in 78, and uh, in 79 we came back to do a tour, ah, what the name, with Stephen Stills.

Willard: Let's go back to 78, when Irakere played at Carnegie Hall; what was the response of that audience?

Paquito: It was very interesting, because that was not announced. When we play in Carnegie hall that was not announced. Probably you can call it the wrong night, because it was a piano night. Mary Lou Williams was playing there, a piano solo; McCoy Tyler and Bill Evans, was a

beautiful night. Piano night was a very quiet night, and then suddenly, eh, Bruce Lundvall came out to the stage and say, "Ladies and Gentleman, we want to give a talking to you. A group—" blah, blah, blah, and he announced Irakere. "If you want to stay, you can stay, and I think you won't regret." So the people stay there, and they have a great time, because they came to see Bill Evans and here they are listening to a Cuban Jazz group that play dance music also. And Stan Getz showed up and jammed with us at the end of the show. And the crazy thing is that the guy who came with us at the end of the show, uh, the guy from the political police, he refused to let the Americans play with us, and that was very, very embarrassing. Because try to imagine that there was somebody from the FBI come up to an American musician and say, 'The Cubans cannot play with you.' That is very embarrassing, you know. I don't know they settle it, but they didn't want to let Stan Getz play with us. Finally they manage to play something; at the end was very nice, but was a little rocky in the beginning.

Willard: How did the audience respond considering the fact that they were there for a quiet evening of solo piano, and all of a sudden this large ensemble playing Cuban music comes on the stage. What was the audience response?

Paquito: Well, many years have passed since that night. I don't have a clear view, but I think they took it right, I think it was a success, especially when I play my version of the Mozart concerto that was very well received by the audience, and not very well by the critics. They say, "What Mozart have to do with the Cubans?" [Both laugh]

Willard: Well, I can tell you that the things that I read about that night were very complimentary.

Paquito: Yea; I don't remember anymore.

Willard: And it was the sense that this was something fresh and new for the American audience.

Paquito: Well it was fresh and new for anyone. Even in Havana, in Cuba, the only other orchestra dance orchestra, that the people don't dance and watch all the time was Benny More. Benny More was most charismatic singer and comedian, and he had a dance orchestra. Benny More and his tribe; it wasn't his orchestra, his tribe. So here was his tribe; he had a big orchestra. Bennie used to go out with big hat and a cane dancing and all that, and he was the only one dancing because everyone was looking at him. And the only time that happened in the history of Cuban music was with Irakere. They could not believe what they see, how we put together all that different sides of music—Classical with Jazz and Afro-Cuban and singing and all that together---people didn't want to dance. And [the Tropicana owner] hate that, because he wanted

to have a dance band, and the people didn't dance with that band. [Both laugh] They did love it, but they didn't dance.

Willard: So your first time in New York was 1978?

Paquito: The first was 1978—

Willard: In Carnegie Hall. The second time was in 79—

Paquito: In 79.

Willard: And when you went to New York in '78 Bebo Valdés —

Paquito: The first time, Bebo was there.

Willard: He just happened to be in New York?

Paquito: Here's the thing. He's uh, his uh sister, visiting her.

Willard: How did that reunion go between Bebo and Chucho?

Paquito: My mother call me. Chucho was very afraid—in those days, not any more now—in those days contact with people for the exiled people, some of them they don't like it. They are very afraid of them; me no, I like it. I told them I go to see my mother and my father and all that refuse to leave here already. Uh, I never denied, but not everybody was the same. Chucho was very afraid. So, my mother called me and say, "Bebo is here. He bought ticket for us for Carnegie Hall." Bebo was very generous, all his life he was like that, and he want to see his son, he want to see his son. Ok, I will talk to him. So, I call him and say, "Chucho, he want to see you; he want to talk to you in private. Let's be brief. Your father is here; receive the telephone number, he want to talk to you. You don't have to answer him." Because sometimes in that type of system, they get afraid of known things. Like with the mafia, when you know too much, they kill you or something. You better be, this guy knows too much. So, I say, "You don't have to answer him. You don't have to talk. Don't tell me, I am not interested. Your father wants to see you; here's the telephone number." And he said, "No, I don't want to be a part of the thing." "Do what you have to do; do whatever you want to do. I will forget now." And years later I find out that they get together and the meeting was not very fruitful. They didn't talk too much, maybe Chucho was too regretful, I don't know how that work. Bebo told me that in those days, they didn't talk too much, no more than 10 or 15 minutes, after 20 years.

Willard: Your parents were already living in the US by this time?

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: When did they leave Cuba?

Paquito: My mother in 1968 through Spain; my father 1970. He decide to stay a couple of years more, because me and my brother were in the army. Then he decide to stay there to support us.

Willard: And where did they end up in the U.S.?

Paquito: In New York. Yea; my mother love the city.

Willard: And what did they do in New York?

Paquito: My father never went back to playing the instrument again. Even though I brought one of those, in 1978 I brought his tenor, uh, he got so emotional when I open it. He say, "Why you bring this thing here? I don't play the saxophone anymore." My mother was more enthusiastic; she work in the garment district, in the fashion design world. She had a very nice career here, and then she retire against her will at 81, 82 years old, but my father acclimate himself to the country. A country that he admire so much, but was not made for him; not for an old person, you know. When he arrive here, he was almost 60 years old, so it was very hard for him to acclimate himself. My mother loved the city, New York City, and I am very happy that she did not move to Miami, because Miami is not a good place for musicians. Miami is a good place when you want to sell cars or tamales. [Both laugh]

Willard: Talk about the 1979 trip.

Paquito: In 1979 trip. Ah, we did this trip with [Stephen] Stills. From Stills, Crosby and Nash. And it was still a single with Stills, a Rock-n-Roll group and then they put Irakere as an opening act. And I don't think that they mean any progress for us, popularity wise because the type of audience that approach Stephen Stills had absolutely nothing to do with Jazz, or with Latin oriented music or anything. It was very rock and rollish; a very, very typical rock and rollish audience; I don't even think that they remember seeing that group; all that they want to see was Stephen Stills.

Willard: And how did that Stephen Stills audience react to Irakere?

Paquito: I don't remember, you know what I remember? I remember a group of people yelling, "Rock, Rock." They want Rock; they are Rock people, you know. Die hard rock people, you know.

Willard: Was this just one performance? Or was it a tour?

Paquito: I remember there was 22 concerts in the East coast, they organize a tour. It was a very happy tour, because Steve and his people were very nice. We tour in big busses, Rock-in-Roll style. In my opinion that didn't help us at all. It was bad; to think that we had so much exposure, but exposure to people that say, 'Who they hell are these Cubans doing all this jumping up and down here, and playing all these percussion instruments?' For them it was not very impressive, in my opinion.

Willard: Playing all those horns.

Paquito: Ah, playing all those horns [imitates music]. That's what they wanted.

Willard: As you were touring with Stephen Stills, what was your sense of the country?

Paquito: Oh, I love the tour; we all love the tour. There was a guy who, I can't remember his name now, who organize that tour. Still I see him every once in a while; very nice man. He went to Cuba and we met him in the place that we used to go to rehearse. And then I remember Enrique Pla, that drummer that used to be my personal guard, he say, "Oh, yea. We just came back from a tour of the Soviet Union, the Socialist Country." And I remember [the tour operator] say, "Mr. Pla, let me tell you that a tour in the United States have nothing to do with a tour in the Soviet Union, believe me." [Both laugh] I will never forget that, because it's not the same thing. Touring Paris is not like touring the South Bronx; they're not the same thing. So, we noticed that immediately here. The tour was a first class tour. Stephen Stills was a very popular artist. We play mostly universities and things like that. And well, for us was like a, being in Disneyland. It's a very attractive country with so many, uh, it's like being in a toy store coming from a Communist country toward the East coast of the United States it's like being in a toy store, that's what it is.

Willard: And what kind of venues were you playing on that tour?

Paquito: We play some universities and arenas, well, that happen so many years ago, more than 30 years ago, but I remember some universities and arenas.

Willard: Did you play in New York that trip?

Paquito: Yes, but I don't remember where. We play in New York, but we did not play in Manhattan. We play in a university or New Jersey, or something like that.

Willard: So then after that tour you went back to Havana.

Paquito: Uh, huh.

Willard: And how did things go for the band from there?

Paquito: We keep traveling. We keep traveling, where did we go? Ah, we went to Mexico, we did Canada. A couple of times we did Canada. We play Montreal and Toronto and a couple of places there. And shortly after that we flew to Spain and I defected in Spain and came here six months later.

Willard: Well let me back up a bit. When you were on that tour with Stephen Stills, did you think about defecting then?

Paquito: No.

Willard: Why?

Paquito: I was in love with that woman very much, and I have a kid, and they knew it. Franco was three or four years old, and I was very happily married to Anneda, this was her name. And, I had opportunity to do it, but I didn't want to leave my wife or my son there, and they knew it. It was like having a hostage there, a couple of them. But in 1980 that thing in the Peruvian Embassy happened, 11,000 people in a patio in the Embassy, you know that was horrible. They were harassing all these people just because they want to leave the country; they threw stones and eggs, it was pretty horrible. And then I was so desperate that, so depressed that the next trip, I am leaving, I cannot live here anymore. And then later on, I see what can I do with them.

Willard: You went to Spain in 1980, what month was that?

Paquito: I think was May.

Willard: You went to Spain in May for a tour, or for one concert?

Paquito: For a tour; it was a tour in Europe. It was a tour of the southern countries and Spain, but then I decided that I was going to defect in the first port.

Willard: Describe how the whole defection happened.

Paquito: For some reason, our instruments weren't in the store for a whole month; we hadn't being playing for a whole month. We hadn't been playing since—the instruments were broken, like in April. So the instruments were sent to fix them, because all the electronics was broken on the instruments. And in those days, they have the Peruvian Embassy phenomenon and then the Mariela boatlift and all that. The institution was very depressing, very oppressing for the people, they were beaten literally, just because they want to leave the country. They were beaten with sticks and all that, even with—how you call that—golf sticks; that was very ugly. So, I decided

that the first opportunity, I was leaving the country, I don't know how. So, in those days, I receive a call; "We are leaving for a tour in Poland, the lower countries, and Spain in May." So I talk to my wife, I say I am leaving, and let's see if I can come back to pick you up.

Willard: And what did she say?

Paquito: She say, "Well, we have no choice here; it is very hard to live." So, that become my year. I didn't see them in nine years.

Willard: You left the band in Spain—

Paquito: The first port of entrance in Europe was Madrid, and there we have to wait for eight hours to take the plane to Sweden—I still have the ticket. I never board the plane.

Willard: What did you do?

Paquito: I had a telephone number of international rescue, and I keep calling and calling and calling, and later I realize that it was Sunday. [Willard laughs] Nobody answered. So, I wait until I board the plane, and I was last, and Chucho was in front of me, I said, "Chucho, I forgot my saxophone." He say, "Run, run to pick it up." I left my saxophone behind a table; so I pick up the saxophone and took the wrong door, not the door of the plane, but the door of the street.

Willard: And where did you go?

Paquito: I got a address for a friend of mine and a jewel that she gave to give to her daughter and a hundred dollars that a friend of my mother gave to me to buy some things for her, and I say, 'Oh, I pay back this hundred dollars three or four years later.'[Both laugh] Say, "I'm sorry." "You stole my hundred dollars." "No, I just use it."

Willard: So you went out the wrong door—

Paquito: Yea, and I took a taxi.

Willard: And you took a taxi—

Paquito: And I give the address to the taxi driver, and he say, "Eee, this in the other side of the planet." And I say, "Well, how much is going to cost me?" And then mention the amount, and was almost all the hundred dollars, and I say, "Ok. Take me there."

Willard: So you went to that address and what happened?

Paquito: I open the door and when she opened the door—I can't imagine the affect that I have, because she back off. I had a big afro and it had a dandruff attack; all my hair was white. I was so nervous. So, I had my saxophone, my head, and a little hat, and this face all sweaty and all that. "Who are you, and what do you need?" And then I put my hand in the pocket and show her the little jewel, and say, "You recognize this?" "Yea, my mother give that to me when I was 15 years old." "Well you have it back. Can you give me cup of coffee?" [Both laugh] I come inside, got me a little cup; I was very thankful to that lady.

Willard: So she let you in.

Paquito: She let me in, and the next day she, the same day, she call my mother in New York and say, "Your son is here." "Oh, I'm so happy." "Yea, but he's not coming back, he stay here." Oh, my God. Then my mother came later. She took me to the police, in order to legalize me, my waiting start in Spain. Two days later my mother came with her passport and all that to go to the American Embassy and all that, you know. And ask for the residency, the American residency.

Willard: How long did you stay in Spain?

Paquito: Six months, I stay in Spain.

Willard: That's how long it took to process your papers?

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: And what happened after your papers were processed?

Paquito: I came to New York. Well, before that I wrote some music for the Finnish Radio Orchestra. I had a friend there called Esko Linnaveli who used to be the conductor the big band there. So he commissioned me some arrangements.

Willard: Probably to help you out.

Paquito: To help me out, yea. And, I work with a group of South American musicians [in Madrid]; that was my first professional Latin Jazz gig. The whole week we in a called Dahlia's Club, was a Jazz club. So, they help; there they pay me a salary in that place. Then I came here after six months.

Willard: What was your sense of the Cuban government's response to your defection?

Paquito: They were very insulted.

Willard: Did they try to contact you?

Paquito:No, they never tried to contact me.

Willard: Did they contact your family?

Paquito: Yes; they contact my wife, directly from, the Minister of Culture. And first of all they took my car from my wife—

Willard: Took the car.

Paquito: Took the car; you are not going to have the car anymore, and they told her not to ever try to, never intend to leave the country, because you are never going to be able to leave the country, never. So, try to remake your life here, because we are not going to allow you to leave the country. So, it look like she believe that, because after a year or something, the marriage fall apart, and we, I never gave her the divorce, because if I sign the divorce is going to be harder for her to come to this country, to leave the country.

[Interview resumes the next day]

Willard: I'm Willard Jenkins; this is Saturday, June 12 2010, the Smithsonian, Oral History Project, National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters Program, Paquito D' Rivera. Paquito, when we left off our conversation yesterday, we were talking about your defection, when you defected to Spain. You said that you arrived at the doorstep of someone who's name you'd been given; take it from there.

Paquito: Well, ah, we took the Cubana aviation, flight from Havana to Madrid, was on a tour going to, I believe was Sweden. 30 years have passed, but I believe was Sweden we were going, and then we wait for six to eight hours in the airport. So, when they call the flight, I was extremely nervous, you know, but—because when you are going to make an escape like that, you are leaving forever, you know, your country, your family and everything. So, I left the saxophone underneath a little table that they have at the airport—

Willard: You left it at the gate?

Paquito: Yea, at the gate, around the gate area, and when they call the flight, I was the last one, the only that was in front of me was Chucho Valdés, and I say, "Chucho, I forgot my saxophone." And he, "Hurry up; go and pick it up." So I run back—

Willard: Chucho must have known something was up right then, right?

Paquito: No; Chucho, he didn't know nothing at all. He hadn't the slightest idea of what was going to happen. So I took the saxophone and went to the wrong door, the door to the street. So, I have to get a visa, my Spanish visa and my passport, my Cuban passport, then I went down the stairs and I present my passport and my ticket. So the guy say, "The flight for Sweden is upstairs." I say, "No, no I not going to Sweden; I stay here." "You're going to lose your flight; it's like $100." "I stay here!" So the guy put a seal of improvement, then I went to the apartment of the daughter of a friend of mine, an old lady that I Carmen Guarello in Havana. She gave me a jewel to give it to her daughter. In order to identify myself. And, I did it; I went there, and when she open the door, I must look like a totally mad man or something, because she back off, and say, "What do you want?" And I saw the face of terror that she had, so I pull out the jewel, and say, "You know this?" "Oh, my mother give that to me when I was 15 years old." I say, "Well, now you have it back." So she help me in my first days in Madrid, in exile.

Willard: Tell me about those first days in Madrid.

Paquito: Oh, when you take that type of step; it is very traumatic, extremely traumatic. So, two days later, my mother came to join me with a passport to go to the American Embassy for residency in—

Willard: Well, that's what I was going to ask you. You said that you only had a few days left on your visa that allowed you to be in Madrid. What happened at the end of, did your mother arrive before those few days were over, or what?

Paquito: Yes, we went to Carmen, which is the name of the daughter of my friend. She took me to the police in Madrid, and told me to explain what happen and then they gave me a temporary visa to stay in Madrid—I explain what was my situation, that my mother was coming from the United States and to apply for an American green card and so on—and then they give the permission to stay there as I did. I stay there for almost six months.

Willard: How many days or hours or whatever after you arrived, at what point did the Cuban government learn that you had taken this step ?

Paquito: Almost immediately.

Willard: And how did they find out, simply because you didn't make the flight?

Paquito: I didn't make the flight, Carlos Emilio, he was our lead guitarist, later on when I saw him a year or two later, he told me that there was complete chaos in the plane; Chucho want to come back to Cuba, somebody told me that Chucho start crying, "How did this happen to me. We have to go back." And Bebo Valdéz, Chucho's father, went of course to meet his son again.

So, he told me that when they asked about me, he said, “No. Paquito didn’t want to come. He stay in Cuba giving lessons.” Say, “He giving lessons; he did not want to go on this trip?” “No, he did not want to go, so he stay there in the school; that is what he want. He want to be a teacher.” Well you know that Woody Allen say that, “Comedy is Tragedy plus time.” So, not very funny, but that moment was very traumatic for me. So, they found out immediately, cause I was not on the flight, and, uh, it say that Enrique Pla, the drummer, in the middle of the chaos and the meeting that they have there in the back of the plane that they have there say, “What are we going to do now? We didn’t know that that was going to happen?” And Pla was very pragmatic, “You knew perfectly that Paquito never liked the system. All of you knew that, so is our fault to accept him here, and to take the risk of bringing him on this traveling thing.”

Willard: You had mentioned earlier that Enrique was a member of the party who was basically assigned to watch over you—

Paquito: But he make the mistake of being my friend too, so—[Both laugh]

So, he knew it; he knew it.

Willard: He knew right away what you’d done. That you’d missed the flight on purpose?

Paquito: On purpose—

Willard: Not accidentally—

Paquito: Not accidentally. He immediately, they say that Enrique say that, “We all knew perfectly that sooner or later he was going to do this.” Of course I didn’t tell him, or anyone what my intentions were. But he knew it; he was suspecting that in any minute.

Willard: Your mother arrived how many days after you were in Madrid?

Paquito: Two or three days, no more than that.

Willard: When your mother arrived, what happened then?

Paquito: So, we went to rent a place to stay, what they call, un hostel; it’s like a bed and breakfast, the Spanish version of American bed and breakfast. And then we immediately went to the American Embassy and applied for, for—what do you call it—a green card, but the thing is that my passport was totally full of traveling all over the world, and including two visits to New York; one to Angola in the days of the war and an extensive travel to the Soviet Union. So the American Council say, “You have been in Angola, when the war was happening there? And you went to Angola; do what in Angola? And travel extensively to the Soviet Union, plus you have

been in New York two times. Why now? This is very strange; what are you going to be doing in the United States now; spying?" And I say, "Oh, Jesus Christ, what is this." Then I have to explain that my mother had been there since 1968, and then the Council say, "I will think about this; I will talk to my people, and then come tomorrow and we'll talk about it." And I was scared to death the entire night. So when I come back and he say, "Ok, you will have to wait for, your green card is authorized, only that you have to wait here for the bureaucracy to come through." So, I stay there for six months.

Willard: It took six months for your green card to be activated?

Paquito: Uh, huh.

Willard: What did you do during those six months?

Paquito: Well, most of the time, my mother would send me money for me to pay the rent or something like that. In those days was very hard to work in Spain, very hard. You had to do a lot of—and the next, in two or three months, I made a friend called Carlos Carde, a drummer from Uruguay; he had been living there forever. He had a group of people that played mainly Brazilian Jazz, was a wonderful group of South Americans—Argentinians, Uruguayans, and Brazilians. And an American guy who play the trombone called Bill something, Bill Smith and they give me work. They give me gig in a place called Dahlia's, Dahlia's Jazz Club, in Madrid. And a friend of mine from Finland, an arranger, send me some, uh, commission me some arrangements for the Finish Big Band. So, I was more or less paying my bills with those gigs, plus the money my mother sent.

Willard: During those six months you were in Madrid, those were your primary working opportunities?

Paquito: Uh, huh. I had very little, mainly what my mother sent at the beginning.

Willard: Were doing a lot of practicing, a lot of writing during that time?

Paquito: Yea, was doing some writing and preparing for my quintet, for my future quintet in the United States.

Willard: Were people communicating with you from Cuba.

Paquito: Very seldom. I was communicating with my former wife by telephone, in those days we didn't have any emails or anything. So, telephone, and uh, there was a very interesting,

peculiar… The Cubans discover that by injecting vinegar with salt, into the telephones, the telephones where you call in the coin slot—

Willard: A pay phone?

Paquito: In the payphone; if you drop some vinegar and mix with salt, it creates a crystal inside that make a—how you call that—a salt bridge that you can call free. [Both laugh]

Willard: Now, that's a new one, I've never heard that one before.

Paquito: Yea, and only the Cubans and the Vietnamese have used that in Madrid.

Willard: So, you did that all the time to make calls?

Paquito: The trick was, in Spain especially in Madrid, it's full of bars, all over the place, very fun places to go and to have a beer and to eat some cheese or whatever. So all you had to do was go to telephone, drop the vinegar and the salt bump and go to the bar and have three or four beers and wait, just wait. So when you come back beep.

Willard: So you would call the family.

Paquito: I call the family, yea.

Willard: What became of your Cuban marriage?

Paquito: They warn her not to try to leave the country, or to present papers, or to apply for exit visa because she would never get it. So, she believe it; she believe it. And I have to understand that it's hard to leave home with that type of oppression. It was too much of oppression to her. Some friends that I met later in Spain, or in the United States they told that the pressure was terrible for her. The pressure against her was too much, was too heavy, and I cannot blame her to be weak, and to be unable to stand that pressure, so the marriage dissolved. The marriage dissolve, but not legally, I refuse to give her the divorce, to sign the divorce, in order to, she divorce on that side, but on this side I was still married, so I keep that paper, and when I claim them was easy for me to convince the people here that I was married, you know.

Willard: Did you get the sense that the fact that you left became well known across the island, or did they try to suppress that information?

Paquito: Was very hard to suppress that because Irakere was a too well known group, the group was very famous. It was impossible to suppress that. So what they do, they accuse me to be traitor and all that, that I was a recruit by the CIA, that they pay me $2 million dollar to, ah—

Willard: That was the story?

Paquito: That was the story. [Both laugh]

Willard: After six months, when you were finally able to come here to the US, talk about that trip and that, where did you arrive when you came to the US?

Paquito: I arrive in the Kennedy airport, October 23, 1980, was already chilly here—which is the only thing I don't like about New York. It was chilly. [Both laugh] So, I arrive here, and uh, I immediately contact CBS, Bruce Lundvall, [he] had offered me a, some type of a contract with the company, CBS. Dizzy Gillespie had already go home, knew that I was coming, he gave me a couple of gigs, and I call my dear friend, David Amram, [who] was one of the first person to give me gigs in New York city in his quartet, in a place called Jazzmania. I did also some symphonic concerts with him. And with his small group, it's step by step you know, writing some music and arrangements for pop singers and playing a few dance gigs with Tito Puente, songs with Mario Rivera, different stuff.

Willard: You say you wrote some arrangements for different pop singers?

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: Talk about that.

Paquito: Well, there was this one company called Kim Records, K-I-M Records, and there was a lady who was the order, Cookie, a Cuban-American that had been here for many, many years. And in those days there was a Cuban arranger called Chico O'Farrill, he died recently. And he combined it with Cookie, who used to record pop singers, different pop singers in Spanish. So very often they need people that play in the recordings, or write charts, and O'Farrill had a lot of work, and he share the work with me. Also Chico O'Farrill, give me some gigs in the jingle industry. Chico used to write a lot of jingles for many products—Coke-Cola and Kentucky Fried Chicken and other things. So, was very interesting cause once we went to do a commercial for Coke-Cola, there was one note only, and it say, "Coke-Cola" [imitates note], bam. One note, and for one note, we have Jon Faddis, Victor Paz, Anthony Jackson, and Stan Getz, a bunch of musicians that I admire for so long. And I saw them all around me, and I say, "I can't believe I am here to play one note with the most, the most famous musicians in the world; do they need this?" [Both laugh] That was incredible; I will never forget that.

Willard: So you recorded commercial jingles?

Paquito: I did jingles, yea—

Willard: And you wrote charts.

Paquito: A few charts also, yea.

Willard: What charts did you write beyond what you said you wrote for KIM Records?

Paquito: Oh, I don't remember that, 30 years ago, boleros and things like that. I remember the one, one of those days, we did the baritone saxophone, Mario was playing, uh, tenor and he didn't want to play the tenor. His baritone was in the shop or something. So, I say, "Mario, we need the baritone." –

Willard: Mario Rivera?

Paquito: Mario Rivera, Dominican saxophone player. With the baritone, I say, "Call Pepper Adams." "How the heck am I going to call Pepper Adams to play?" It was very basic music, you know. In that case, he say, "Call him, we need the money; you don't need the money. So, you can call whoever you want, and he will come." For me, I don't like those great musicians, but music is music, you know; it is a job and is something you do for a living, and sometimes you are not able to play the music of Stravinsky or Ellington, but some other times you have to play, Bah! That's it; so golden. And I have a picture with Pepepr Adams, myself, and Mario Rivera playing that little [imitates tune]. That was an artist; it was the wonderful musical life in New York city.

Willard: The musical life was quite interesting, obviously for somebody who had just gotten there. Did you become involved in the Cuban American community in the New York area?

Paquito: I In those days was starting to fade, I mean the minority… The dream of every Cuban, of most of the Cubans—except for my mother—is to migrate to Miami, but I made that contact here, Mario Bauza. Mario was like kind of waiting here for me; he was a friend of my father from the 30s and 40s, and um, Graciela and all of those guys, I contact them, but the Cuban community was not very helpful for my work, for the type of work I did, because I wanted to be a Jazz musician, and there was very few Cubans involved in that, as a community. They are, the Cuban community was more involved in Cuban music, or what they called the Salsa movement, but I had little to do.

Willard: There is a large Cuban American community around Union, New Jersey right?

Paquito: Union City, in Union City, when I arrive there, the first, I live like for six or seven month in the heart of the Cuban community in Union City. My mother lived there for many

years on 38th St. They have a lot of Cuban restaurants and all that. It was a very vibrant community.

Willard: Union City is where you were living with your mother, when you first got to the U.S.?

Paquito: Yea, in Union City. They have signs in the store that say, "We speak English." [Both laugh]

Willard: Where did you wind up when you finally got on your own?

Paquito: Later on we move to West New York which is like, 10 blocks from Union City. And then I met Brenda, a wonderful soprano, when I, when my marriage was destroyed, a Puerto Rican soprano called Brenda Feliciano. So we go together, and that happen almost 30 years ago. So I move to New York with her, to a building called Manhattan Plaza. Dexter Gordon used to live there and Adam Makowicz, the pianist. A lot of musicians used to live there. Neil Carter used to have an apartment around there. So was a very wonderful experience living there, all the musicians and actors and choreographers. It was wonderful living in the center of New York.

Willard: And so, what kind of work opportunities were you getting during this time?

Paquito: I start doing some gig with Dizzy, but only as a guest artist. My big break came with the illness of a dear friend, which is Toots Thielemans, Toots had [soreness] in the throat, in those days, and he was supposed to do a tour with Dizzy's quartet in New York, Toots Thielemans was his guest artist, and he was just arriving in the United States, and I was working in a place called Blues Alley in Washington. Then a gentleman told me, "Dizzy Gillespie is on the phone for you." "Oh, yea, Dizzy ok. Hello Dizzy, how can I help you?" "Toots is having problems with his throat." "Oh, that's so sad to hear. How is he doing?" "He's doing ok, he will survive, but he is not going to be ok to do this tour in Europe. You want to be my guest artist?" And I ask Dizzy, "Toots Thielemans is a very, very famous musician, and he was going to be your guest artist and you want me to be—nobody knows me there. You want me to do?" "You want to do the tour, or you don't?" You know how Dizzy was. [Both laugh] "Ok, I will go with you." So, that opened the door for me in all of Europe, and all over the world. Next, the following year—

Willard: What year was this?

Paquito: We are talking about November 1981.

Willard: You did a tour with Dizzy of what duration?

Paquito: Five weeks; I will never forget that tour, five weeks.

Willard: In Europe?

Paquito: In Europe, all over the place.

Willard: What music was Dizzy playing at that time?

Paquito: Oh, his own music and "Round Midnight," wonderful music. Thinking of "Night in Tunisia," "Con Alma"… And we did this wonderful tour that opened the door for me to do a tour the following year with my own quintet.

Willard: That takes me back to a point that you were making earlier. You said that when you first got to New York, you contacted Bruce Lundvall because Bruce wanted to make a record with you. When did you finally make that record?

Paquito: I remember, it was 80 or 81, the beginning of 81; probably it was the January or February of 81.

Willard: Who were the musicians that you got to play on that record?

Paquito: Well, mainly the quintet that I have in those days, was uh, Hilton Ruiz, eh, Russell Blake was playing bass, I wanted Alex Blake to play bass, but he was very busy with the Manhattan Transfer in those days, at the beginning of the time, I asked him, and he recommended Russel Blake.

Willard: His brother.

Paquito: Yea, his brother. Russell Blake, I have Ignacio Berroa playing drums, and Daniel Ponce playing percussion, I had Mario Rivera of course that I met in Cuba before, and the fantastic Eddie Gomez. I had the gall to play one day with Eddie Gomez, so it was in that recording, that record. When Bruce decide to record me, Bruce Lundvall decided to sign me with CBS, he recommended me a manager called Helen Keane, the manager of Bill Evens for many years, and people like that. And, I have a very vague idea of what to do, nobody had an exact idea. There was a couple of music that they want me to do, uh, a commercial CD, I mean a commercial LP. In those days, it was very vague, what they call the Jazz-Rock and Pop Jazz and all that. I didn't like the idea, at all; I didn't like the idea, but I was with a big company, and I was not in the position to give orders to nobody. So, what, Bruce Lundvall came and save me, he say, "I don't want him to do Pop."

Willard: So who was it that wanted you to do pop?

Paquito: Producers, they have professional producers there, you know, Mike Bernicker. They explain it to me, especially Bert. Bert was a very fine man who produced many of those, uh, LPs, Pop LPs, you know, Freddie Hubbard used to do that type of thing. Many of them, Hubert Laws… I didn't like the idea because I wanted to do a Jazz record. Then Bruce Lundvall, he was the President in those days, he save my life, "No, no. He don't want to do that. He want to do a Jazz record first." And then in those days, I have my first New York gig with my old quintet in a place called Soundscapes, 52nd and 10th Ave.—

Willard: Verna Gillis' place…

Paquito: Verna Gillis was the owner of that place in the fifth floor. In order to get up there, you have to take a cargo elevator that sound like the sound of the Dracula castle [imitates sound]. [Jenkins laughs] It was scary man. It was scary because it was on the fifth floor, and you never know if it was going to open on the third floor and you were going to see Frankenstein or something. But I was lucky enough that that night, that I present my quintet there, a writer called Peter Watrous was there, and—I don't know how he looks—but he was there and he like it. So he wrote a very nice article in, in the *New York Times*, so I had that afternoon, I got a meeting at CBS with a bunch of producers and all that, and Bruce Lundvall. So, I arrive there and I have a very vague idea of what I was going to do, you know. I was not prepared to do an LP for myself. I did not have a concert yet, I have some ideas. So when they arrive there, I say, "What are you all going to do?" And then somebody start talking about the Pop LP and all that, and Bruce Lundvall say, "Did you read what they say in the *New York Times*?" And I say, "No, what is that?" So he show it to me. I say, "Wow this is great! Why you don't record with that group?"

Willard: Who was that group?

Paquito: The group was Ignacio Berroa on drums, Hilton Ruiz, Russell Blake on bass, Daniel Ponce on percussion, myself, and then as a guest artist, because I want to have Eddie Gomez; Eddie Gomez recorded a piece that I wrote called, "Basstronaut." He record that piece; Mario Rivera play the alto too on a couple of tunes.

Willard: So Bruce said why don't you record with that group?

Paquito: With that group 'you had great reviews; just record with that group.'

Willard: And what did the producers say?

Paquito: Oh, they go for it, and it was really nice.

Willard: And so, the name of the record again is?

Paquito: *Blowing*, *Paquito Blowing*.

Willard: And, how long did it take to make that record?

Paquito: Two days, because, uh, the group, I have already a repertoire with that group. I prepare a repertoire with the group to play in Verna Gillis' place, Soundscape.

Willard: And what music was the group playing at that time?

Paquito: We have a very, very fine version of "On Green Dolphin Street." I still like to play "On Green Dolphin Street." I wrote most of the tunes, there was another piece that I wrote that was dedicated to Thelonious Monk "Monga". And things like that; we have very wonderful review in *Downbeat* and that was the beginning of my last quintet.

Willard: Were you doing a lot of writing at the time?

Paquito: No, I was doing a lot of arranging. In those days, I start writing more and more.

Willard: What compelled you to start writing more?

Paquito: It's nice to write and hear, experiment with writing and all that. I writing more and more.

Willard: This band that made the record and made the gig at Soundscape, did this become your regular band?

Paquito: That became my regular band, yea. Uh, for a long time, until the Broadway with Dizzy and eh, I used to use in percussion, just to, I ask Claudio Roditi on the trumpet and trombone, I need an extra soloist with me, and I like the quintet, the classical Be-bop quintet is a form that I like the most. So, up the stairs there was another loft, up in the sixth floor, there was a guy called Diego Romero. He was a Brazilian guitarist and composer who had a lot of that.

Willard: Same building as Soundscape?

Paquito: Same building, on the sixth floor of the Dracula castle. So, I met this guy and he told me, you have to meet Claudio Roditi; he's a great trumpet player from Brazil and on those days, I understand that Claudio was planning to go back to Brazil because he didn't have enough gigs here. So, I mention to Diego Romero that I was looking for an extra horn in the group, and I mention that, "You have to listen to Claudio Roditi; I mean he's fantastic" He mix Brazilian music with Jazz very well, and I was in love with Brazilian music for many years. So, Claudio

was a vehicle to help me in the front line, and also to learn more about the Brazilian music. So, he, he came to my band.

Willard: You expanded the band to a quintet?

Paquito: Well, it wasn't a quintet with the percussionist.

Willard: So you used Claudio instead of percussion—

Paquito: Instead of percussion. Yep.

Willard: Now, we know that one of the goals of making a record is to hopefully increase the opportunity to perform. Did that record increase your opportunities to make gigs?

Paquito: Yes. Getting gigs is like a catch 22. When you go to the clock order of the producers and say, 'I want to have a gig.' So, you have a record; so you go to a record company, cause you want to make a record, and they say, do you have a gig? [Both laugh] So, it's very hard to break the catch 22, but eventually it happen. So, that record help me a lot, you know, especially with a big company like that. And they spend little money, so they have enough—being such a big company—they have enough to do what they call tour support and things like that. So, it was very helpful being at CBS for 10 years.

Willard: And that first record, where did it enable you to play that you had never played before?

Paquito: I play the Village Vanguard, for example; that for me was like a dream come true, playing in front of the big picture of John Coltrane that they have there. To be in the same space that Mel Lewis, that young big band recorded, and to become a not close friend, but a friend of Max Gordan and meet all those people there, so I play the Village Vanguard, I play the Blue Note, and all over the place. I play in Chicago, the—

Willard: The Jazz Showcase?

Paquito: The Jazz Showcase and so many other places you know. In Boston, The Regatta Bar Helen Keane was very well connected because of her work with Bill Evans and Al Farmer. So, she use her connection to get me gigs in Europe also, toured some eight years in Europe. I did my first tour in Europe, she organize it with a lady called Gabby Kleinschmit, and that, all that was promoting those CBS records.

Willard: Did you begin to play festivals?

Paquito: I begin to play festivals in Europe all over the place.

Willard: At any of those festivals, did you come in contact with Irakere?

Paquito: I saw them a couple of times, in London, I saw them for the first time I believe.

Willard: What was the reaction like, what was the reception from the members of Irakere?

Paquito: Well, you know that as Woody Allen say, "Comedy is Tragedy plus time." So after all that, "When you didn't write to us, huh." I said, "Well, man what can I do? There was not another way to do it." So, no hard feelings, in the beginning was a little—

Willard: Tense?

Paquito: Tense, but, eh... For example in the Northsea Festival, that was the first encounter. The only one who got the guts to approach me was Carlos Emilio, the guitarist, the only one. Mario Rivera came—Mario was there with Tito, I believe—so, Mario say, "Carlos Emilio want to talk to you." I say, "Yea." "Oh, because the rest are very—" they were surrounded by people who were accompanying them, so they didn't want to risk, to take the risk to meet me and all that, but Carlos Emilio took the risk, and then we met in Mario Rivera's room. So was very nice to talk to a dear friend after so many years. Later on everything went smooth.

Willard: So did you get the sense that after you left, after you defected that they began to watch the members of that band more closely, to make sure that didn't happen again?

Paquito: Well, that happen later on with Arturo Sandolval. That is inevitable; it is very hard to control that. You know what is the definition of a string quartet?

Willard: What's that?

Paquito: It is the Cuban National Orchestra on tour in Canada. [Both laugh] For many of them playing the violin and the cello.

Willard: It seems that Chucho has made the conscious decision that he's not going to defect, that he's going to stay, because he certainly had opportunities to do that.

Paquito: Yes; first of all it is not easy to leave your country forever. That is not an easy decision to say, 'I am leaving everything, my marriage, my children, my house, my everything.' And you are not going to come back; that is very hard to do, and second, I understand that Chucho promise his mother, never to leave her in Cuba. So it's very hard to leave and betray your own mother. So, I was told by him. He marry a woman here for a little while; now they are in litigation and divorce problems, I know that Chucho still living under those slavery conditions he live there, and he say he promise to his mother when Bebo Valdés left Cuba in 1961, Chu Chu

promise his mother that he would never leave her alone. So, in order to comprise that promise he had to accept certain conditions here. Every country has conditions; every single country has conditions, or laws, or here we have to pay taxes and everybody hate it. So, he had to pay those conditions to keep quiet and not to say anything bad about the government and do whatever they tell you and don't try to escape, try to do your own thing. And that is what he's been doing for the last 50 years. I was not able to do that; I was not a person for accepting orders.

Willard: That first record increased your opportunities, that relationship with CBS increased your opportunities. What was your next record after that first one?

Paquito: The next record was called, *Life at Keystone Corner*. There was a club owned by Todd Barkan, in San Francisco, wonderful club. People like Archie Shepp played there and Woody Shaw among other great artist. Helen Keane got me that gig, and she was the person to record live there. That was the first time that Claudio Roditi record with me and play the valve trombone, which my favorite brass instrument. A year later he sold the trombone; I say, "Why you do that to me?" He didn't want to play the trombone anymore.

Willard: What do you love about the valve trombone?

Paquito: That is what I have, the quality of the trombone with the feeling of the trumpet. The [imitates sound] You can feel the finger, because it's a finger instrument.

Willard: So you like the way the valve trombone is manipulated?

Paquito: Yes, the articulation—

Willard: That sound works for you.

Paquito: Yea. I love that instrument for many, many years. The way that wanting soul, or bump intervals in place and Raul DeSouza played the slide trombone and also the valve trombone; I know he played the valve trombone.

Willard: And Bob Brookmeyer.

Paquito: And Bob Brookmeyer, very few. In the history of Jazz have been very few, Billy Eckstine used to play valve trombone.

Willard: My father-in-law was an ex-trombone player. He refers to the valve trombone as cheating .

Paquito: Oh, yea, yea. Trombonists they don't like that. [Both laugh]

Paquito: It's like playing the clarinet with covered holes; that is the same thing. No serious clarinet player would play with a covered hole clarinet.

Willard: So, Claudio brought a different sound to your band.

Paquito: Yes.

Willard: Did it encourage you to write in a different way?

Paquito: Yes, that also, because of the knowledge of the Brazilian music. I think in Brazilian many times, many times. Quite literally, I use the Brazilian part very often; I have become like an honorary Brazilian. The [imitates rhythm] that type of Brazilian thing which you hear, the way the tambourine music [imitates sound/rhythm], that type of pattern, I use in my mind to compose music, to compose melodies. Not all the time, but on many occasions. That is in, said to understand thanks to Claudio Roditi because when he enter my band, I start working more and more with Brazilians. I had a Brazilian also and Michel Camilo who was Dominican, but he know the Brazilian stuff very well, as well as the Venezuelan stuff. So it is that mixing of a lot of music in Latin America in my group. That was the intention, but mainly Brazilian; I love the music of Brazil.

Willard: For that second record, was that same band with Claudio?

Paquito: Claudio, eh, Danielle Ponce on percussion, a bassist from Miami called Steve Bailey, and Carlos Franzetti was the pianist.

Willard: And what was the repertoire, was it your music?

Paquito: Some of my music compositions, but by Chucho Valdés also, and some composition by Carlo Francetti, who was a great composer. This piano player from Argentina, a very talented player, but he is also a very Bill Evans oriented player, but he is also a good composer and arranger. He wrote a clarinet concerto for me, called the *Jimmy and I Concerto* because he was born June 3rd and I was born June 4th, the same year. So he wrote the *Jimmy and I Concerto* for me that I premier here in New York.

Willard: Did you find at that point your writing was increasing?

Paquito: I It was increasing, yea. From that point—

Willard: In what way?

Paquito: I feel motivated to [write] more, but when I start writing more, was when I received the first commission—and I don't remember what year was that—maybe 80, 86 or 87, to write for the Aspen woodwind quintet. They commission me to write a piece that they call *Isles Tropicales*, comprised of six movements, and that piece is one of the most successful pieces that I have written, and the piece that is for the band is a chamber work. So I start writing more and more chamber music, and that happen in 83, 84 around there.

Willard: You mentioned also the fact that in your own music, you began to broaden things by incorporating more of the music of the Americas.

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: You know Brazilian music and you mention Argentina, and of course the Cuban bass of the band and what not. Which leads me to the point of Dizzy's United Nations orchestra, because that happened around that time, right?

Paquito: Yea, around there.

Willard: Talk about that.

Paquito: Always I have the inclination to use elements of Latin America, and the best vehicle to do that is Jazz music. It is the music of the immigrants, is a multi-national culture, but talking about Latin Jazz, for example, Mario Bauza is once he say an exaggeration, but I am going to mention it now. Mario say, a gentleman ask him, "What do you have to say about Latin Jazz?" and he say, "The only person that I know that is doing Latin Jazz is Paquito de Rivera." That was too much; I remember that. There is other people doing that like Jorge Dalto was doing that even before me, long time before me, including, let's put it that I was the only person that he knew that was doing Latin Jazz. He say, "What do you mean by that?" He say, "The rest is doing Afro-Cuban Jazz."

Willard: Well, you know I had a conversation once with Ray Barretto where he talked about the difference between Latin, a true sense of Latin Jazz and what he referred to as Jazz Latin. I asked him for examples, about different bands and whatnot, Tito Puente at the time had a small group. Poncho Sanchez and others, and he referred—respectfully—to what a lot of others people were doing as Jazz Latin. A lot of people were doing Jazz with Latin elements, as opposed to doing what he felt was true Latin Jazz was when you had a more thorough immersion into Latin music, using Jazz elements. What is your sense of that?

Paquito: Well, I am, I am not a very good philosopher, but what I can say that what Mario means with that is that most of the elements used in the so called Latin Jazz are the elelments of Afro-Cuban music, or Brazilian music. They are totally separated; they have the same roots—

Willard: Well, I think that's what, that's kind of what he was referring to was true Latin Jazz is when there's a true meeting of the form—

Paquito: Oh, yea, yea.

Willard: A true meeting of the form—

Paquito: Equal—

Willard: Yes, yes.

Paquito: Equal parts. Um, I probably was one of the few using elements of the music of Venezuela, for example. Venezuela, Argentina, mainly Brazil, and some of the music of Mexico, a lot of places south of the border.

Willard: So Mario was referring to you in that way because you had gone beyond—

Paquito: Beyond Afro-Cuban—

Willard: Afro-Cuban and you had begun to incorporate more of the music of the Americas and all.

Paquito: Yea, and I tried to do the best, because many, many Jazz artist—and I also put classical in there—they had been incorporating the elements in a very irresponsible way. Without, in order to mix one thing with another, you have to know the elements of both sides, you know. Pay respect to the music and all.

Willard: Which is kind of how Ray was referring to as well.

Paquito: Probably he was talking about the same thing, yea. In order to want an element to a certain style of music, you have to learn the most that you can from that style of music.

Willard: What was the first recording you made that was a more complete realization of that philosophy?

Paquito: Good question.

Willard: You were working towards that, you were building that, developing that. Incorporating different cultural elements as you went along, when was the first time you really felt you had begun to realize your goal in that regard?

Paquito: I don't know; I cannot say one turning point. I met a guy called Farid Haque, a wonderful guitarist from Chicago. His father is from Pakistan, mother is from Chile; he call himself, 'a Pak-a-Chile.'[Both laugh] Very funny too; a pack of Chile; that's a different combination. In those days, I was living in a place called Manhattan Plaza, and one morning I heard him playing certain waltzes, and I say, "I hear that before; I remember Leo Brouwer playing those waltzes. What is that?" And he mention the name Antonio Raul. Antonio Rauel is a great composer from Venezuela, mainly of Venezuelan waltzes for solo guitar. So, I fall in love with those waltzes, and we start working on those with the music; I transcribe them, and I record most of them, most of those waltzes. I started working on the music of Antonio Raul, another Venezuelan composer. Venezuela had wonderful music that for some reason never transcend the borders, but the same thing I did with the music of Argentina and Uruguay, the Afro-Uruguayan music, which is the Candomble. So, I start working more and more musical styles I have, but common roots of different leaves. The interesting thing about all those styles are the differences, not the similarities. We know that they have the same roots, Africa and Europe, but the difference is the thing, you know. It's like a family, all have the same surname, or the second name, but the interesting thing is how each one has a different personality. One is a lawyer the other one is a contrabass player, the other one is a waiter in the Hilton hotel. So they have all the same last name, but all of them in different activities; that is the interesting thing, the differences. And I dedicate myself and a great deal of learning about those characteristics and applying to the world of Jazz.

Willard: Take me back to Dizzy Gillespie and the United Nations Orchestra. What year was that?

Paquito:The United Nations Orchestra was created in 1988. And the person who gave shape to that around the figure of Dizzy Gillespie was Charlie Fishman. He got this idea. Dizzy was by, it was something funny here. We play once with the United Nations Orchestra in the National Mall, here in Washington, and there was a guy with a big flag of the United Nations. The United Nations with a one of those signs, you know—against the United Nations—protesting against the United Nations. And the guy didn't realize that we had nothing to do with the United Nations. Dizzy was behind it and they called it the United Nation with no s at the end, so the guy was protesting something that we had nothing to do with.

Willard: But the actual idea was it being musicians from different parts of the Caribbean and the Americas?

Paquito: Yea, well I think that Dizzy's idea was a high concept is that the world is just one nation, and the different nations are just neighbors. That's a very nice philosophy, so they put together this band with Brazilians and Cubans and Dominicans and Americans and, you know, all that together.

Willard: And that kind of fell in line with what you'd been developing, right?

Paquito: That fit perfectly with my philosophy also. To put all that together and respect each other, because when you are going through all that, you must have people to learn what's happening next to you. Not doing our thing, there is something that happen with Jazz players for many years. The use of the Be-bop is so, the language is so useful that you can, you can get away with that thing and you don't have to learn other people language. Is like the English language. The English language is so, so international that wherever you go, you speak English, most people will understand. I have a friend, a trumpet player from Argentina who lived in Sweden for many years. He told me that he spent the last 10 or 15 years in Sweden speaking only English, until he met a woman—a pretty one—and then he learned to speak Swedish. [Both laugh] But what I mean with that, what I'm trying to get the point is that Be-bop language is so useful that you can get away improvising it in the Rumba or in the Samba or in any type or environment playing Be-bop, and it still sound cool. But, I don't, I don't see any point in that, wherever you go, you should learn at least two or three words in that language you are coming, you know. At least learn to say, 'Merci beaucoup.' You don't have to speak like Charles de Gaulle, but at least you can say, 'Merci beaucoup' and 'No thank you', or 'Gracias' while you are in France. So, when you improvise some Brazilian music, you should learn some [imitates rhythm/style]. Learn something about the language and don't try to impose [imitates bebop] which is ok, but at least try to mix that, and it's perfectly doable, perfectly. The bebop language, it allows for many things, even to play Bach. You can adapt the bebop language to all that, but what I see in Jazz players, even if they are not American, they try, they impose that bebop thing in the music without, ignoring totally the, the country they are immersing in. So, every time the music of, uh, Chano Dominguez, for example, which is the Flamenco thing, so what I do I try to learn some phrases, some inflections in order to make the music more convincing, more believable, and to try to pay some respect I am approaching, not imposing my own thing. It's like coming to eat some black beans and rice and you bring your own bottle of ketchup, why? Try to assimilate the taste of it. [Both laugh]

Willard: After Dizzy passed you led the United Nations Orchestra for a while. Talk about that.

Paquito: Well, even when Dizzy was alive, Slide Hampton and myself, we were kind of musical, uh, director—well, Dizzy was the Director, but I don't know how to call it—musical directors. We try to help putting all that together, and then when Dizzy pass away, I conduct the band.

Willard: You made that album A *Night in Inglewood*.

Paquito: Yea, I gave the CD, *Night in Inglewood*, and that's a piece that I dedicated to Dizzy when he died. I remember Dizzy in *Night in Inglewood*.

Willard: In the 1980s and continuing even more so in the 90s, you not only broadened your own perspectives in terms of corporating a broader sense of the music of the Americas and the Caribbean, but your early training as a Classical musician began to come out more as well, and you began to get more opportunities. Talk about how you began to get more opportunities to compose Chamber music and Classical music, and also to perform Chamber and Classical music.

Paquito: Well, in part that was thanks to Uruguayan pianist called Pablo Singer, not to be confused with Pablo Ziegler, the solo pianist, this is a Argentine pianist, who was my wife's pianist in the operetta type of thing. And also, thanks to Mario and Dizzy, they encourage me to play the clarinet again, so I imported my clarinet from Havana, and rebuild the instrument; start playing the clarinet again. And, they determined to force me to play the piano, for clarinet I wrote this and with the Brooklyn Symphony, the Brooklyn Philharmonic. And I say, " So you want me to play Webern concerto, ok, for you? Ok, I have to , relearn that again." So that encourage me also to stop smoking, because I fell down, and I was not able to, to keep the breathing correctly, because I had been smoking so much. 'I have to quit this.' So, I, Webern was good for me in that sense, not to terrorize me, I was not going to be able play the concerto. So, yea, I start doing that more and more. We have a plan to record with Yo Yo Ma with CBS; that never happen. That didn't happen until many years later, but I start doing more and more with Pablo Ziegler. With Pablo Ziegler, the Hawaiian, plus the commissions they start to commission me to write some, some Chamber music pieces. And, I don't know, step by step I came into it. I incorporated, all consciously elements of popular music and Latin music and Jazz into my Classical writing, and that give me a headache sometimes.

Willard: Well, you know we talk about having two sides to the brain, and here you have a situation where you have working quintet, which is identified as Jazz, but which within that context has incorporated a lot of the musics of the Americas and the Caribbean, etc., and then you have this other side where you are increasing writing for Chamber ensemble, writing Classical music, and performing it as well. Uh, do you have opportunities to meet, or are they separate?

Paquito: Yes. I do a lot of work with the quintet and orchestra, and I have a lot of material, you know to work with that extensively. So, I do that very often, and I like the idea. It's not easy to match that, it's not easy because you have to do a lot of concessions from one side or the other. They are not used to working with rhythm sections, so to us them, to follow the drummer, it like, it's like it's a concept that is almost impossible to understand. They are used to following the conductor and also the conductor are hard to convince them not to put your hand in front of the drummer, because is like putting your arm in a fan, you know. You give the tempo to the drummer, whatever you want [imitates rhythm]. You cannot do that, but for them is, for them is like, what do you mean I cannot, I am the conductor. You are the conductor, but you don't do [imitates rhythm]. You cannot do that.

Willard: Well yea it reminds me of as you say not all orchestras are able to do that. For example, a professor who I worked with, where you played in April, we have a relationship with the Cleveland orchestra. The Cleveland Orchestra is one of the big five orchestras; it's one of the greatest orchetras in the woerld, but for years we could never get them to do let's say a program where we brought Paquito de Rivera to work with them. Let's say we proposed to them to bring Paquito de Rivera there and have your quintet to work with the Cleveland Orchestra on the kind of programs you're talking about. Their standard response would be, "We have a great orchestra, but they don't swing." Have you found that kind of attitude among orchestras—

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: In this kind of work you're doing? And you find the difficulty in making these kinds of things happen?

Paquito: Yea, but you have to adapt yourself to whatever you, whatever format you go. Don't try the strings to swing, because you are not going to get it, or the woodwinds—

Willard: But some can.

Paquito: Yea, but it's taking risk, you know, when you write one of those large, and some will charge. You don't do that for one shot, an oirchesetra can't do it. It's better have that that you can play different orchestras. So, it is ways to do it; it is way to do it, so you swing part with the orchestra, I mean with the quintet and then you leave the mellow part, or the [imitates strings] to the strings. You write for them what they can play. It's easy, well, it's not easy, but it's doable.

Willard: So it's kind of like walking a tight rope.

Paquito: Sort of. Yea, but you have to allot to the possibilities, the same way you have to allot the abilities of a bassoon , you don't write too high notes for the bassoon, because it's not for the

bassoon to play those high notes, unless you want your ears shot, you are totally crazy. [Both laugh] But you know, you have to write according to the possibilities of each instrument and the orchestra is an instrument, it's a big instrument. So you have to write, for example, the horn, the French horn they are always behind, always, you look around and it's oooo [imitates French horn]. Pang, no, oooo. [Both laugh] You what you do for them then, you write for them ooo [imitates note duration] and they play ooooooo, ah hah. [Both laugh] There it is; that's the way it is. The same thing with the strings and all that, and you know the processes they are going to be behind because they are in back of the orchestra too. So, the sound is going to be late here. So is a type of knowledge you have, but is nothing more beautiful. Nothing in the world sound like a symphony orchestra; the sound of that is, it have no equals, it's beautiful, but it's like a pretty woman. You have to do what she say, you know. So, you are going to allow yourself to her, because she's not going to do what you want. [Both laugh] So you have to convince her to do certain things and certain things, she cannot do it.

Willard: You can't force.

Paquito: Uh, huh. You cannot force it; it is the same thing with the conductor. Don't force the drummer, because he's not going to start. He say, "Follow me." No, he's not going to; the drummer is not going to follow you, because the rhythm is not going to follow nobody.

Willard: It's obvious that process for you, to where you've had to almost train yourself to recognize these kinds of things—

Paquito: Limitations, yea.

Willard: In order to make these things work. How have you gone about doing that?

Paquito: How have I what?

Willard: How have you gone about training yourself, gearing yourself to that way of thinking, of making those compromises?

Paquito: It is in my spirit; I have been working with symphony orchestras since I was a kid, so I know how I work. I know how heavy the symphony orchestra is; it's a very heavy thing, and I remember somebody saying that harmony and the Cleveland Orchestra, you see that when he do that, that when they see the harmony doing this, and the orchestra, and they say oooo[imitates sound]. For me that doesn't make any sense. You know, I am used to bahhh [imitates sound], you know, but that is the Count Basie Orchestra, that is something else. So I am a understanding that the way it work, you do like ooooo [imitates sound]. I hate it; I don't like it because I am a Black guy born in Cuba. So for me the rhythm is [imitates rhythm]. You know, one is one, oooo

[imitates sound], but it's a different set of rhythm. I was talking to, uh, talking with Stanley Crouch recently about what they call the, uh, the Vienna waltzes, the Vienna one [imitates waltz]. The way they play the one, they never notice that, and Stanley called my attention to that. All those orchestras they play all those without conductor and for them, for the Austrians is normal to do those in the waltz; it's a different sense of rhythm [imitates waltz]. For me, it is almost impossible to feel that. The same thing can happen with the Venezuelans Merengue; it's written in six, but sometimes five, or backwards, it's written in five, but sound like six. They feel it, very naturally, I thought that you have to be Venezuelan to understand that and even to dance like that, but I know a pianist from Israel called Alon that he play that like he was born in Caracas. All you need is some talent, and some attention to the music; don't try to understand. The only problem with the, with musicians is, they interested in learning. Once I have a conversation with Wynton Marsalis, and I say, "How's possible that Americans that have all the possibilities, that have all the possibilities to learn, all the books and all that—in Latin America, they don't nothing, and they learn by listening to the radio and to transcribing. Here you have everything and still don't transcribe, or have all the CDs all the books, all the books, the microphones, recording devices and you don't learn. How is possible?" And he say, Paquito, you learn only if you want to learn, you can take the horse to the river, but you're not going to convince him to drink. Only if you want to learn." I was playing in Argentina a few years ago, Argentina has a different sense of rhythm also, the tango is a very elastic thing; they don't have Africans there, they don't have Black people. So the tango, the rhythm of the tango is very elastic. So, unfortunately I have to tell you they have a poor sense of rhythm; it's not all of them, but generally, it's not the same types of rhythm that they have in Venezuela or Puerto Rico or Santo Domingo. Or in America, like here in the United States, is totally different type of thing. So, I was playing with a symphony orchestra and a quintet. So, the, uh, we were having problems with some rhythm that for me was very simple, was a Samba [imitates samba rhythm], so the string players, was a real struggle to make them play [imitates rhythm], but was very simple for us. So, this violin player come to me, and say, "You know Paquito, we are not used to this type of music." "Yea, but I send this music like six month ago." "No, but you, we still not used to this music. Where are you going now?" I say, "I going to the hotel." "I will take you to the hotel." "Ok." Then I sit in the car; he turn on the radio and Bach. I say, "Give me a break. You're telling me that you are not familiar with the music, and then you are listening to Bach again. You are supposed to be listening to Cachao now." [Willard laughs]"Because Bach you know already; give me a break." So you learn only if you want.

Willard: Exactly.

Paquito: And the same thing is happen with Jazz and Jazz musicians, a lot of music.

Willard: Oh, absolutely.

Paquito: Is something, when you are not familiar with the music, people say, 'Remember that I do not read music.' ' You see, yeah, but you told me that 10 years ago, are you blind, or what?' [Both laugh] So, you learn if you want.

Willard: Now you have, we've been talking about orchestras, but you have also in recent years, you've written very extensively for Chamber ensemble. And—

Paquito:And orchestra too.

Willard: And have had ongoing relationships with chamber ensembles, like the Imani Winds.

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: Talk about your relationships with chamber ensembles and with writing for chamber ensemble.

Paquito: I am very happy that you mention Imani Winds because that is an adorable group; it is a wonderful group of people. They want to develop the chamber world in new directions using elements of what they call today world music. So working with them was a little easier than working with Classical musicians, because they really want to learn about all the types of music, but I also work with, I have written for Yo Yo Ma for some of his CDs; Yo Yo is a very open minded person too. But when the group become bigger, it complicate—well, is like everything else in life—it get a little complicated. I try not to use too much syncopation in the writing, but for me it's impossible, that thing. It is almost, it's very hard, because it's in my veins, and something that for me and for my peers is easy to understand, for Classical musicians is almost impossible. The problem, as Tania Leon puts once is that in the educational system in both sides in the Classical schools or the Jazz schools, they alienate each other. So, Leon say, that is why they teachers teach to us, and that is what we teach to our students.

Willard: There's this separation.

Paquito: The separation, you don't need that. The professors say, 'You play Brahms and Beethoven; you're not going to use that, so play on the beat all the time and that's it.' So on the other side Jazz people are ignoring centuries of music. Jazz is the youngest type of music; it's not, the first time that they say the word Jazz was used was around 1913, that's what they say. And we are in 2010, we are not even ignoring totally the other side of the river. So, while ignoring each other, we are not making any progress because Classical people are missing this whole dynasty of the Jazz people. I was playing once with a group called the Youth Symphony

of America, and I was playing a montuno with a rhythm section. [P. hums beat] And I remember, Remirez told, and I asked the trombone section [imitates rhythm]. That's all they had to do [imitates rhythm]. He, it was like a terror in his eyes; like he had seen a dinosaur or something. [Imitates rhythm]

Willard: Like what are you asking me to do, right?

Paquito: Yea. [Both laugh] He thought I was going to ask him to kill the guy who play the second trombone, or something. No, you have to do it. [Imitates rhythm] But, that's if you only have an idea, how is the musical education of the world. And what a big mistake, that is why I appreciate my father so much. He never had the ability to provide one single note, one single note. He didn't know how to play a note out of the paper, but he took me to his friends that knew how to do it, and that's how I learn how to play Jazz. Not by my father; he didn't know how to do it.

Willard: And even more than that, your father was an orchestral player.

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: A classical player—

Paquito: And it's so—

Willard: But obviously from what you told us yesterday, he appreciated the art of the improvisers.

Paquito: Yea.

Willard: He knew how to appreciate that.

Paquito: Yep.

Willard: He didn't find that to be obtuse, or something that needed to be avoided.

Paquito: All on the contrary—

Willard: He embraced that, right.

Paquito: Yea. So, it is changing little by little, but tradition is still there. And that's why that trombonist had a terror face when I asked him to play one note [imitates not]; one note, that's all. I was not asking him to play the Mozart concerto for clarinet on the trombone [imitates note], but for him that was like seeing a monster or something, you know.

Willard: Are you finding more young musicians who are able to make those moves between worlds?

Paquito: More and more. More and more; thank God. That's happening little by little, but it is, it took years, and still some people, they don't want to close the deal inside. They are afraid of something, I don't know. It's like some people have a block about reading music; it's the same thing.

Willard: In the best of all worlds, if you were to do a residency, an education residency, you would work with both the Jazz musicians and the Classical musicians.

Paquito: Yes, and I put them together. There should be a moment that all of those people, everybody have their preferences and inclinations. When you are studying medicine, you want to be in a specialty the liver—or I don't know—the feet, but in order to do that, you have to study the entire body. You aren't going to study this section only; you have to know how the entire thing work. The same thing you should do, be with music. You have to learn music, uh, Gunther Schuller was talking about that many years ago, about the music school, period. This is a music school, where you take courses of different specialties –chamber music, Jazz, improvisation, contemporary, music Stravinsky, you know, and those composers—you're supposed to have a general idea of what music is about. A little rock, all that, and then you decide what you want to be, if you want to be a Classical player, if you have the ability to improvise; some people don't have the ability to improvise.

Willard: Right.

Paquito: Some people don't have the ability to be a good instrumentalist.

Willard: But some people may have that ability and not even know it.

Paquito: I know that, yea.

Willard: One of the things that brings you here to Washington this week is that you have a relationship with the D.C. Jazz festival. You have a relationship as an artistic advisor. I know that you also had a similar relationship with the festival in, is it Ecuador?

Paquito: Uruguay. Yea.

Willard: How did that relationship with that Uruguay festival start, and what's your general feeling about these kind of relationships and that side of music?

Paquito: Well, the nice festivals is the hard work; there's a lot of things to do, and I know Charlie Fishman for, Oy, 22 years now. So, when he called me to do this thing in Washington, I was very happy because he improvise also in education. I recommended to bring a Cuban pianist from Miami, and there is another kid called Valentino, play fantastic flute, and people from different part of the world also. We can reflect the different styles of Jazz; Jazz like Herbie Hancock say, "Jazz is something very easy to recognize and impossible to define." Theses days, so being involved in a festival is important and you learn a lot from the different approaches, you know. Is, I was reading the other day and interview with Chick Corea, and he say, 'I refuse to accept that creativity in Jazz stop in 1955.' Every day is more and more people, young people with new ideas, always is new idea that we can do with these 12 sounds. It's still a new idea, maybe some people coming back to what happened to history, to Ellington and to Miles and Charlie Parker and all that. But, the history that we are dealing with, they are there. Hughes Panassie many years ago talk about the end on Jazz and Louis Armstrong. Remember when he say that, that famous French writer? The critic. Hughes Panassie, he say, 'where is Jazz going?' I say, "Jazz is not going anywhere. It's very well where it is now." That doesn't make any sense; that doesn't make any sense, and it's not dying. It's not dead. I have been listening about the last giants since I was a kid. When all of these great musicians die, the last Jazz giant die, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, it's never the last giant; it's always something new, I mean interesting. And you don't know if it's a giant until 23, 30, 40 years later.

Willard: You know what your fellow NEA Jazz Master, Jackie McLean used to say about that?

Paquito: No.

Willard: He used to say, "Jazz is like the roach; you can't kill it." [Both laugh]

Paquito: No shit; he say that. [Both laugh]

Paquito: Like the roach; you can't kill it; very good. Oh, you say it so well, it's a type of music that's done in a very creative way. It provides something. Inventing the music—the other thing that my wife always say, "The good cook is the one who cook with what he have." Anyone can cook with a bowl of ingredients; you have garlic, you have oil, and a chicken wing, well you have to cook with that. And if it tastes good, then you are a good cook, but if you have all the elements in your hand; it's very easy to be a good cook. And Jazz, it started with nothing. Slaves, people that have a piece of wood, and I don't know what else, they created a banjo; isn't that a great invention? The banjo is a drum with four strings.

Willard: Right.

Paquito: And a drum set.

Willard: Right.

Paquito: You need people to play percussion instrument; they create an instrument that, one single man can play all those drums. You see, you call that economy. [Both laugh]

Willard: Paquito, you've had a number of awards and crowning achievements in your career, Grammy awards and various awards for your recording and playing. You've also been named a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master. What does that mean to you to have been recognized that way?

Paquito: Well, to be recognized as a Jazz Master, I take it very humbly, if that were assisted in English; I'm very humble about it because there is many, I am in the company of very distinguished people. So, sometimes I feel a little ashamed of that title because the contribution of people like, Jimmy Heath and David Baker and Dave Brubeck and Chick Corea and wow. To be in the company like that, it's a responsibility, more than a compliment, it's a responsibility. And I hope I grow to be a servant of a Jazz Master. I am very proud of that, but at the same time I don't feel any arrogance. I very seldom use that title.