

Ray Barretto

El conguero. The conga player. Cándido Camero, 'Patato' Valdés, Mongo Santamaria, Ray Barretto... The sound of skin on skin. Ray Barretto was arguably the most influential of all. The King of Conga.

In hip-hop circles, handles are generally self-bestowed. Ray Barretto had to earn the honorary 'Mr. Hard Hands' from fans and peers. The hands presumably got ever harder during a career that spanned more than 50 years. From modest beginnings with Eddie Bonnemere's Latin Jazz group in the early '50s, Barretto went on to play with everyone from Charlie Parker to the Bee Gees.

He made the conga a staple of late '50s/early '60s post-Bop jazz; his was the first Latin record to make the American national Billboard charts; he altered the instrumental format of traditional *charangas* by incorporating brass and helped to create the template for what we now label 'salsa'; and he won a Grammy for his 1990 *Ritmo en el Corazon* with Celia Cruz. Later he was granted a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters award and inducted into the International Latin Music Hall of Fame. All this while garnering the respect and affection of just about everyone who knew him. A big man whose big glasses lent him a slightly professorial air, Barretto was described by flautist, Dave Valentin, as 'the most intelligent man I have ever known... One of the greatest musicians of his time'.

To lead a band – many different bands, in fact – over a 40-year period demands durability and self-reliance. In his dedication to his mother in his final CD, *Time Was – Time Is*, Barretto sketches his childhood in the Hispanic communities of New York. 'It seems that we were always on the run, from Brooklyn, to Harlem and finally to the Bronx. It was in the Bronx that my father left [to return to Puerto Rico], and... my mother and her three kids were to meet life head on.'

Born in 1929, Ray Barretto soon grew to love music: that of his Puerto Rican heritage via his mother's treasured collection of '78s', and jazz via the radio when she went out to night school to learn English. 'While they [his brother and sister] slept, I listened to our little table radio until I heard her key at the door'. He would listen to broadcasts of Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and other great swing bands of the time. When he was older, his dance-mad mother would take him out to local clubs. One memorable night he saw the legendary Machito Orchestra: his favourite of all Latin bands and 'the direct link between Cuba and New York'.

At 17, young *Senor* Barretto thought he'd give his mother 'one less mouth to feed' by joining the US Army. Jim Crow still operated in the forces, but the time he spent in the company of his 'colored' colleagues helped cement his love of jazz. At the Orlando Club in downtown Munich, he would sit in on jam sessions organised by black soldiers using the back of a banjo head as rudimentary percussion.

Here he first heard Chano Pozo, the legendary Cuban *conguero*, with the Dizzy Gillespie big band. Their signatory 'Manteca' 'was, he confessed, 'the music that spoke to me on the most personal level. It reflected the kinds of music I had loved all of my life, Latin and jazz... It helped make my future path clearer.' Demobbed and back in New York, he bought some second-hand *tumbadors* and served his apprenticeship in clubs like the Bucket of Blood. Ray Barretto was now a man with a purpose.

In 1990, he would appear in an honorary concert at the University of Puerto Rico billed as 'The Two Lives of Ray Barretto'. There were always two Ray Barrettos. Ever the pragmatic family man, he recognised that his first love, jazz, wouldn't pay the bills. So, while forging a reputation as house *conguero* for the big three jazz labels of the time – Blue Note, Prestige and Riverside – he held down the conga spot (vacated in 1957 by his perennial rival, Mongo Santamaria) with Tito Puente for four years.

During this time, he recorded with jazzmen great and small: from Dizzy himself and Wes Montgomery to Oliver Nelson and Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis.

Riverside recruited Barretto for two albums as leader: *Pachanga with Barretto* and 1962's *Latino*. Typically, that same year he released a brass-enriched *Charanga Moderna* on the Tico label. It spawned the boogaloo hit, 'El Watusi', which went gold the following year. Though it helped support the family, the record became something of an albatross. 'It was all the kids wanted to hear. And the label always wanted another one.'

When he signed with Fania Records in 1967, 'it was like "Watusi" had never happened. I could start fresh.' That year, he brought out *Acid*, the first of a rich seam of classic recordings – like *Hard Hands*, *Que Viva La Música* and *Indestructible*. It was tight, brassy dance music to complement his role as percussionist and later musical director of the Fania All Stars.

'Mr. Hard Hands' ruled a period of transition when 'Latin' became 'salsa'. While suggesting that salsa was nothing new, he acknowledges that 'there **was** something different... than in the eras before, about the force in the charts that drove the brass, about the sheer **drive** pushing the rhythm section'.

Nevertheless, a niggling frustration that drove him back to jazz is evident in his recollection of the rivalry with Eddie Palmieri. The so-called Barretto/Palmieri wars. 'It's Eddie that sends you guys over the top, pounding the keyboard with his elbows and shit... Here I am, laying down some jazz shit and you guys are drooling about the elbows!'

And so Ray Barretto finished his illustrious career with different permutations of his Latin jazz septet, New World Spirit. He died, of heart failure, in February 2006. Trombonist Jimmy Bosch hoped 'that the legacy of this Afro-Caribbean musical giant never fades away'. **Two** musical giants, in fact. There were always two Ray Barrettos.

AS SIDEMAN

Kenny Burrell *Midnight Blue* (Blue Note, 1963/1987)

The tasteful conga colours Kenny Burrell's laid-back guitar to create quintessential late-night smooth jazz, decades before Jazz FM promulgated the cliché.

Fania All Stars *Live at Yankee Stadium vols 1 and 2*

Ray and Mongo go head-to-head among a galaxy of Latin stars, propelling some of the most pulsating live music of any genre you will ever hear.

AS LEADER

Ray Barretto and New World Spirit *Ancestral Messages* (Concord Picante, 1993)

On balance, my favourite of the uniformly classy New World Spirit releases if only for the fine versions of "Killer Joe" and tenor-man Eddie Harris's "Freedom Jazz Dance".

COMPILATIONS

Ray Barretto *Ray Barretto* (Warner Jazz (France), 1997)

Lovely varied compilation of best moments from Prestige and Riverside days, including an extended 'Manteca' with the Red Garland trio, pianist with Miles Davis's 1950s quintet.

Ray Barretto *Descarga Criolla* (Palladium, 1992)

No dates or personnel details provided, but 19 short, sharp shocks of raucous proto-salsa recorded during the interregnum between Riverside and Fania.

Ray Barretto *The Essential* (Fania, 2007)

Probably the best overview of his Fania career, this double compilation also features "El Watusi" and three other tasty morsels from the Tico and UA recordings.

LIKE RAY BARRETTO? THEN TRY... PONCHO SANCHEZ

Poncho Sanchez *Chile Con Soul* (Concord Picante, 1990)

The big bearded Cuban's combo delivers less jazz and more salsa than New World Spirit, and never disappoints. This fine starter features Tito Puente and culminates in a great 'Cold Sweat/Funky Broadway' medley.