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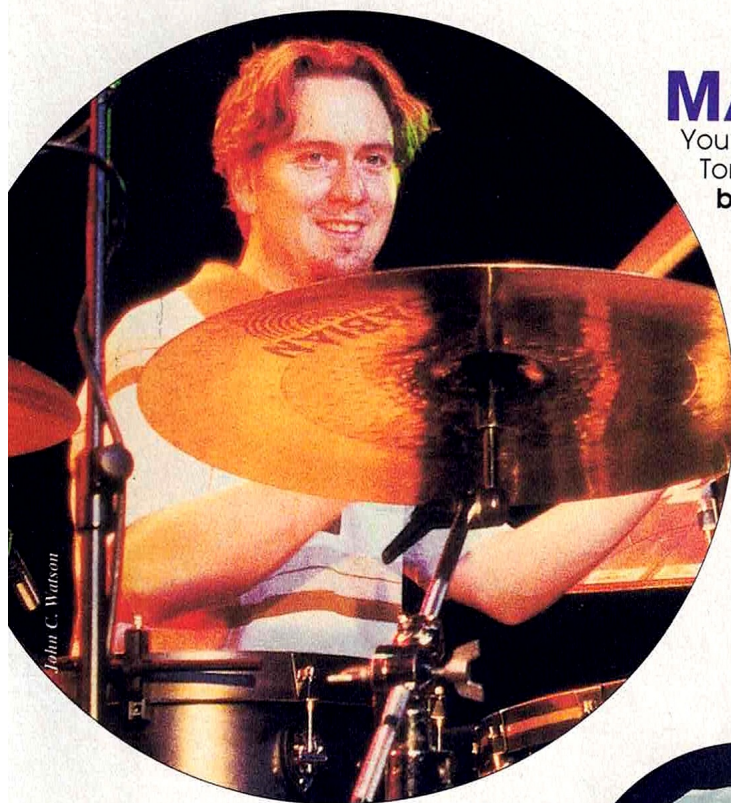
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## The Righteous Rhythm Of

# Armando Peraza



by Robin Tolleson

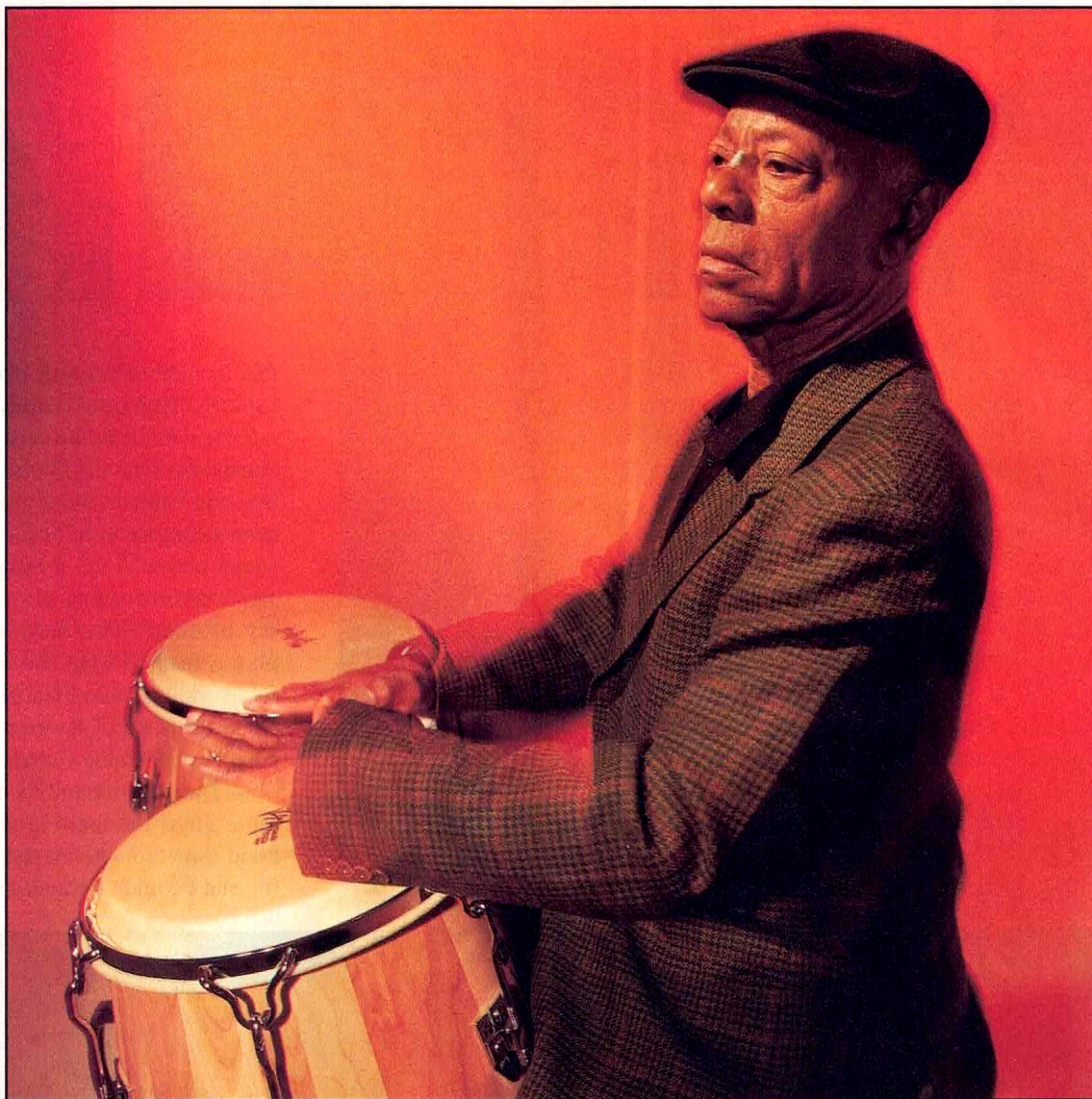
In a musical sense, Armando Peraza has been at ground zero of some historical mergers. The percussionist's remarkable career will be remembered for several long and fruitful associations—eleven years with pianist George Shearing, seven years with vibist Cal Tjader, and eighteen years with Carlos Santana. Peraza still does occasional gigs with Santana, and no doubt would be doing a lot more except for a diabetes condition that keeps him from being able to tour with the band any longer.

An orphan in Cuba at the age of seven, Peraza was living on the streets of Havana at fourteen, supporting himself as vegetable vendor, semi-pro baseball player, and loan shark. At nineteen, desperate for money, he

lied to a Havana bandleader to get a gig on congas. It happened to be one of the best bands in Cuba, and after buying a conga and practicing all afternoon on it, Peraza happened to be pretty good. And so a fifty-five-year career was born. He played with the top bands in Cuba from 1943 to 1949, including Chano Pozo's Conjunto Azul, Perez Prado, Beny More, and a music and dance revue called *Mulattas Del Fuego*, featuring singer Celia Cruz.

After moving to the United States with Mongo Santamaria's Cuban Black Diamonds revue in 1950, Peraza toured for two years with guitarist Slim Gaillard. He was then part of the fusion of jazz and Afro-Cuban music with the George Shearing Latin Jazz Quintet, and





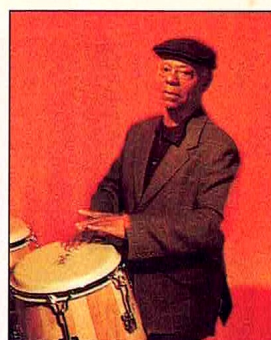
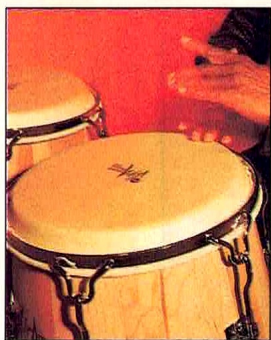
Photos by Jay Blakesberg

with Tjader. In 1968, Armando recorded his only solo album, *Wild Thing* (Skye Records), featuring Chick Corea, Sadao Watanabe, and other notables. In 1971 he toured with bassist Jaco Pastorius in Florida and performed in the Bay Area with Jerry Garcia and Merl Saunders. The next year he joined Santana's brew of Latin, rock, and jazz elements, and composed and performed with Carlos on band albums and side projects like *Caravanserai*, *Love Devotion Surrender*, *Welcome*, *Illuminations*, *Lotus*, *Amigos*, *Oneness*, *Marathon*, *The Swing Of Delight*, *Zebop*, and his swan song with the band—1991's impressive *Spirits Dancing In The Flesh*. Armando performed all of the percussion parts on that album with Walfredo Reyes Jr., reminiscent of the way

he and Ndugu Chanler recorded the *Amigos* album. Armando recorded (uncredited) on some of Tito Puente's early cha-cha albums, and also recorded with Linda Ronstadt for the soundtrack to the movie *The Mambo Kings*.

Wiry and very strong at the age of seventy-four, Peraza ushers me into his Sunset District house in San Francisco and displays a succession of congas, from a sixty-five-year-old Cuban drum to the early Latin Percussion models to the modern-day Peraza model that LP is now touting. He arranges four drums in front of him and becomes an instant groove, rising up off his seat, his hands and fingers a blur of righteous rhythm.





**RT:** I hear that you were a baseball player before you were a percussionist.

**AP:** I was a natural baseball player. You see, I didn't want to be a musician, because the other musicians, they played after-hours. Most of them got sick with tuberculosis. I didn't want to be a musician.

**RT:** You saw a lot of that?

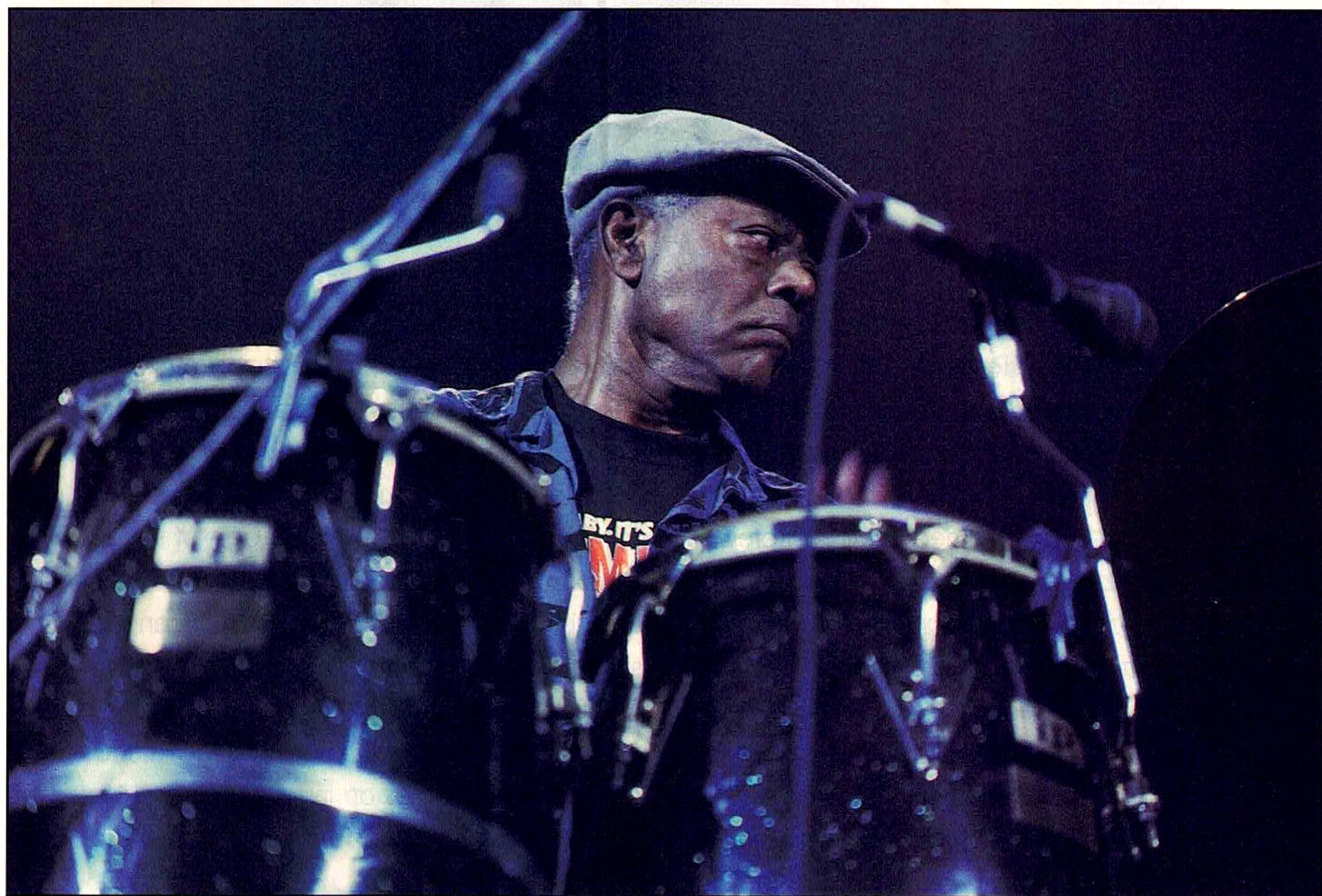
**AP:** I did. You see, I was mostly moving myself into a sport. Baseball was my love; I know baseball as much as anybody you can mention. But physically I was at a disadvantage because the people I was playing with were bigger than me. But baseball is your mind. To be able to play with all these guys you have to have a psychology.

My neighborhood in Havana was incredible in baseball. We produced a lot of good athletes, people who play for different teams in the United States. The shortstop that plays for the Mets [Rey Ordonez] is from my neighborhood. I remember one guy I used to play with,

**"Santana offered something to the world. I opened a lot of things with that group—and that gig made life secure for me."**

this incredible baseball player they used to call "El Loco" Ruiz. His brother Alberto used to have a band called Kubavana. One day I was waiting for a bus, and Alberto said to me, "Armando, I need a conga player." I said, "You need a conga player? I am a conga player." He said, "No man, you play baseball with my brother." I said, "I am the conga player, man." I went and bought a conga for six dollars, and I learned to play with Kubavana, one of the best groups in my country concerning Cuban music.

As I was learning my way to play with these guys, the main thing was to keep good time. Sometimes the riff was coming and I couldn't play it, but I was keep-





ing good time. They saw that I was responsible, that I didn't drink, that I didn't smoke, and they kept me in the band. Then the bongo player wanted to leave the band, and Alberto said, "Armando, we need a bongo player," and I said, "I am the bongo player." So Patato Valdez was brought into the band [on congas] and we made a good combination.

I met Mongo [Santamaria], and he introduced me to playing on the radio. Then I started to replace Mongo in Chano Pozo's group Conjunto Azul, and we got to be very good friends.

**RT:** Did you first come to the United States with Mongo?

**AP:** Mongo was playing with a review called The Cuban Black Diamonds, and Mongo and I came to New York with that review. We played at a club called the Havana Madrid, at 51 Broadway, and at the Spanish Theatre. We did not all get along together in that revue, and everybody went their different ways.

An artist named Slim Gaillard hired Mongo and me to play with him at the Apollo Theatre. At that time Mongo had to go to Cuba to get his residency papers. I didn't have residency papers myself because at that time I didn't have anybody to sponsor me. I played with Slim Gaillard all over the United States and Canada, and went to San Francisco in 1949. I played with these two guys Manuel Duran and Carlos Durant. At this

**"The main thing with George Shearing and with Santana was we had to move the people. See, you no move the people, you no sell nothing. Am I right?"**

time it was very disappointing—there were two unions, a black union and a white union. I didn't have a chance to play because when they saw the name Armando Peraza, they thought I was



what you call "white Latin." When I wanted to play a job, the union didn't want to give it to me because they thought I was white. But out of all this struggle I had the privilege to play with Cal Tjader. Then they opened Jimbo's Back City, an after-hour club in Japan Town. Slim Gaillard opened the club and then Jimbo hired me to play after hours at his club, and I had the privilege to play with everybody—Ray Charles, Charlie Parker, Chet Baker, Frank Foster. I

played with Art Tatum on Fillmore Street at a place called the Lone Bar. I played with all these guys.

**RT:** Had you been listening to jazz before in Cuba?

**AP:** A little bit, but I was relating to it here more. I was playing with Dizzy Gillespie, but I didn't continue playing with him because I was playing with Slim Gaillard. Afterwards I left that for Chano Pozo's group because he started the integration of this instrument [con-



gas] in jazz. Then I came to San Francisco and created a group called the Afro-Cubans, and we performed at The Cable Car Village across the street from the train station. When that group played, I remember Rita Hayworth used to come over there—Ricardo Montalban, Errol Flynn, Marlon Brando. Then I played with a keyboard and xylophone player named Tony Martina who traveled all over California. With him I played with Art Blakey and a lot of other people. In LA I played with Stan Kenton, and in San Francisco I played with Jerry Garcia and Sly & The Family Stone, and I played gospel music with Merl Saunders. I played and recorded with a guy here named Vernon Alley, who featured Jerome Richardson. I made an album with Cal Tjader called *Ritmos Calientes* for the Fantasy label. And then Mongo [Santamaria] and Willie [Bobo] were coming, because Mongo and Willie used to play with Tito Puente.

**RT:** I heard that your first record date in this country was with Machito's band, with Charlie Parker, Chico O'Farrill, and Buddy Rich. What was that like, going right to a



Peraza (left) with the George Shearing Quintet, circa 1957

record date like that?

**AP:** That was incredible. Buddy Rich was a man who believed that he was the best. No bullshit. [laughs] No kidding. The only person that I can say that could play next to Buddy Rich was Papa Jo Jones. Jo played easy, relaxed, and he was also a warrior. He reached out to the people. He was an artist, and Buddy Rich was like a lion—a hungry lion.

I never went to any conservatory to learn music. I was a natural. And then I played with George Shearing for twelve years. I used to whistle to George Shearing's music and that's the way I wrote my compositions. I made an album with George Shearing called *Latin Escapade*. We were one of the exponents of Latin jazz, or Afro-Cuban jazz.

**RT:** That was one of the first Latin jazz

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Armando (center) with Santana in 1974

groups.

**AP:** Then Machito, George Shearing with Candido, and then myself. And then Cal Tjader. San Francisco created great evolutions of music. Sly & The Family Stone, Santana, The Grateful Dead, The Jefferson Airplane. And the new generation—Santana revolutionized the world. He knew it was a fusion too—Afro-fusion—but he created something of his own. And I had the privilege to participate with all these guys. These guys revolutionized the world.

**RT:** You were in at the beginning of Afro-Cuban jazz and Afro-Cuban rock too.

**AP:** That's right, because before Santana I played with Harvey Mandel. This was the beginning of conga drums in rock 'n' roll music.

Eventually I was a pioneer and traveled all over the world. I saw all the racism that

this country had and I had to face it. George Shearing had to face it too, because he had an integrated group. As soon as we reached Pennsylvania they gave us a ticket all the way to California, because they didn't want to see white musicians and black musicians together. We used to go to Chicago, and the white musicians had to go over to the West Side to get the food for us. That was not a great experience in America. But it's like the first blacks in America to play baseball or basketball—it was another evolution. Today it's easy compared to then. I don't regret anything. Because the injustice, the racial problems we faced, is just stupidity. I believe that good is good and bad is bad. You find good people who are white and black. But I'm sorry that we live in this imbalanced society. Today you see the problem; every-

thing is nationality and color. But music is music, and it doesn't have a color. Music is constant.

**RT:** I saw you jamming at the LP booth at the NAMM show in LA last year with Giovanni Hidalgo.

**AP:** Mother nature made me a survivor, and nobody can stop me. But right now, I don't play much. Not because I can't play. I know I can play. I haven't played for a long time because I have diabetes.

Giovanni is the new generation. But to be Giovanni you have to listen to all the people, and then he's Giovanni. On that day you saw us I didn't play what I can play, because I don't have to prove anything. I'm seventy-four years old. You have to face the reality that the new generation is coming, and I've had the chance that I need.

**RT:** After you started learning congas and bongos, did you ever go back and learn any rudiments?

**AP:** No. I created my own style. I made albums with Carlos Santana, *Caravanserai* and *Welcome*, and everybody bought these albums. I played bongo, I played conga, and people gave me great respect. The good musicians who participated with me have great respect for me. Sometimes you find musicians who feel insecure, feel intimidated by me. I was creating this. And this band of the world, Santana, created music between African and European. It's our music. It's part English, part New Orleans—a mixed society. This is America, am I right? The rhythm is coming

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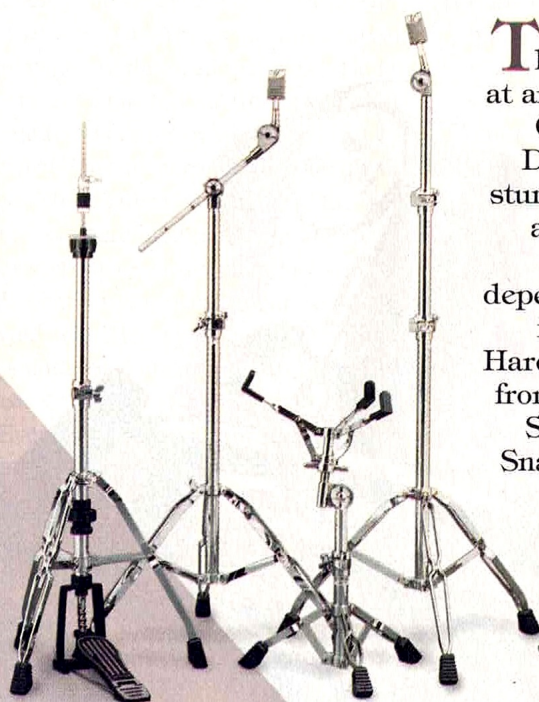
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from Africa, but with the immigration into this part of the world, they created a lot of things. We're all Americans. That's all.

Many musicians criticize Santana, but he offered something to the world. I played with Santana for twenty years. I had some problems that I created, but I don't have any regrets with Santana. I opened a lot of things with that group. And that gig made life secure for me, because of all the touring and the records. I don't have to work, I don't have to be on my knees to anybody.

**RT:** What are your thoughts about playing congas?

**AP:** It's about improvising with me. Sometimes when I sit down I can play things—you can put a drum in a different position and get a different sound. I'm an individual. I like to be me, I don't like to be somebody else. I was one of the first to play four or five congas. I have the articulation, and a lot of variation. I can still play.

**RT:** It's amazing how many tones you can get out of one drum, using fingers and different parts of the drum.

**AP:** I created my own style of playing. I didn't learn from watching someone else. But the first thing you have to do if you want to learn to play is you must begin with one drum. Learn to get all of the different sounds from one drum. You have to really learn to get that high slap sound.

**RT:** Is the high slap a product of where you hit the drum or how hard your fingers are?

**AP:** It's about how hard your fingers are and learning how to apply that touch to the drums. See, this kind of thing is like anything—you have to play with it. You know you lose it. [*Peraza obviously still has it, rattling off a magnificent finger roll.*] You know where this comes from? From the tabla. See, if you incorporate all these elements, you know.... [*Armando rattles off some more.*] Just tell them you heard it from me. [laughs]

I played on a session once with Mickey Hart, Zakir Hussain, and Giovanni. Zakir is a genius. He's the tip-top of drumming. He has influenced me too, because when I played bongo, the characteristic of bongo is fingers, and when you hear these tabla masters use their fingers—forget it. So through association you learn something. But it was a gift that I had a rhythmic sense



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with my fingers, because the bongo was like that. Then I integrated it to another level.

**RT:** You were with George Shearing for a long time, and did a lot of writing while with him.

**AP:** If there was ever a musician, George Shearing was it. Classical. Harmonically incredible. I'm serious. George Shearing gave me all the opportunities to express myself.

The main thing with George Shearing and with Santana was we had to move the people. See, you no move the people, you no sell nothing. Am I right? You no sell nothing if you no move anybody. This is the reason I played with George Shearing for so many years, because I respected what he did. He pushed me, and he let me express myself and create things. He showed me where this music came from. There's an album I made with George called *Latin Escapade*. It's incredible—Latin, classical, everything.

**RT:** Have you heard the young drummers coming out of Cuba playing the left-foot clave?

**AP:** That's incredible man, that's another thing, another avenue. Sometimes these young players are good at this kind of thing, but they can't make the music happen. For instance, you can play that with Santana, but you better learn to play the grooves and swing too. But it's beautiful what these young drummers are doing.

**RT:** Your solo record, *Wild Thing*, is very good, with Chick Corea, Sadao Watanabe, and others. How did that record come about?

**AP:** You know how long it took us to make that record? Four hours. I didn't sign anything with that company, they just gave me and the musicians some money. It's available here as an import on CD.

**RT:** It almost has a bit of an acid jazz feel to it too.

**AP:** That's right! I probably could have made more records, but I was never a person who was capable of being a leader. That's not me. No, man. Why would I want to be the leader of all those guys and Chick Corea? We're *all* the leader.

