

# ¡Aye que Rico! I Love It! I Gotta Play It! But How Do I Do It? Building a Salsa/Latin Jazz Ensemble

By Kenyon Williams

If you've got salsa in your *sangre*, you remember your first time—the screaming brass riffs, the electrifying piano montunos, the unbelievable energy that flowed into the audience, and the *timbalero*, who seemed to ride on top of it all with a smile as bright as the stage lights. “The Latin Tinge,” as Jelly Roll Morton called it, has been a part of jazz ever since its inception, but it took the genius of such artists as Mario Bauza and Dizzy Gillespie in the early 1940s to truly wed the rhythms of the Caribbean with the jazz harmonies and instrumentation of American popular music styles. They created a hybrid musical genre that would, in turn, give birth to new musical revolutions around the world.

Today, the “tinge” is alive and well in the Latin jazz stylings of Paquito D’Rivera or the latest salsa hit by Victor Manuelle. Luis Moreno writes: “In effect, ‘Latin jazz’ has become the *lingua franca* of jazz enthusiasts the world over. In the United States the idiom has for decades vacillated between a more commercial and accessible salsa-jazz (for the dancers) and something closer to the cubop ideal (for the after-hours musicians and the initiated).”

Whatever your first experience, many musicians undergo a mixture of emotions the first time they encounter a live performance steeped in the roots of Afro-Caribbean culture: exhilaration, awe, and often a sense of bewilderment. Then you wonder: “How can I play music like *that*?” Nashville-based Latin percussionist Lalo Davila gives this advice: “The first thing is, don’t be afraid to start. Just do it! Like somebody who doesn’t know how to swim but wants to learn, just jump in!”

The last two decades have seen an explosion in published materials designed to give even the most isolated student a thorough grounding in the foundations of a variety of Latin jazz styles and instrument-specific performance techniques. From published method books, DVDs, YouTube clips, and even high-resolu-

tion streaming video lessons on the Web, information that was once only available to a lucky few can now be found with ease (see list at end of article for suggested educational resources).

“You can’t lead any band in any style of music unless you *know* that style of music!” admonishes Latin percussion great Michael Spiro. “People end up, in essence, failing because they don’t learn the style! The clave, bass, piano, and even horns, have to play a certain way within the structure—just like the percussion. If you don’t understand that, you will fail!”

For an experienced jazz artist wanting to learn or teach a new style of music for the first time, this fear of failure can be crippling. How do players, after many years of study and performance in a genre they’re already comfortable with, go back to the top and learn a new style as a beginner? The first step is simply to give yourself permission to *be* a beginner. Use the published resources alone in the woodshed, try to locate an experienced mentor/educator who understands the style, and allow yourself to explore without the psychological baggage of having to perform at the same level you may be used to. Don’t allow yourself to be overwhelmed with learning all of the folkloric nuances and dozens of Afro-Caribbean styles in your first few months or even your first few years! Although he is considered by many to be one of the premier Afro-Cuban folkloric percussionists and historians, Spiro reminds us, “It’s not important to know the folkloric side to get a band up and running, but in the long run, it will make for a better band. You don’t have to know Dixieland to play bebop, but it definitely helps!”

An important step in the quest to learn any new musical style is to approach other musicians you know who might have an interest in learning and performing side-by-side with you. An occasional jam session that leads to a small gig will fuel your fire to learn more and push you to be your best. “My best resource was



Lalo Davila

playing in my own band,” recalls percussionist Jim Dreier, jazz educator and director of the University of Iowa Latin Jazz Ensemble. “Playing it rather than just reading about it or studying it means so much more. I got together with the university jazz band director and a local guy from Panama who could sing and already knew the music. Our first gigs were probably awful, but people *loved* the music. It was the first band I’ve ever played in where we had to try to keep up with our own popularity! *We had* to practice because it took on its own life!”

But what if you’re not near other artists who are steeped in the Latin culture? As Jim points out, “I often tell people that if I had stayed in Boston, I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to play Latin music like I did in Iowa! In Boston, you have players who know and play the music, even rely on the music for income. It raises a

lot of issues about race, identity, and ownership of the music. It's not in my 'heritage,' but the whole idea of learning a music that is not necessarily a part of your culture is an interesting thing! Actually, I hate to say, as a non-Hispanic, it's not in 'our' culture, because it is in our culture. A lot of it is American music, developed and evolved by musicians living in America. So I try not to think of it as a foreign musical style but something that is a part of my own background."

As Texas Latin jazz educator Jesus Diaz states, "One of the biggest names in salsa history and the Fania All Stars is a white Jewish guy named Larry Harlow! All you have to have is a love for the music!" Or, as famed Latin percussionist and educator Memo Acevedo put it at the 2009 PASIC World Percussion Committee panel discussion, "Music doesn't recognize skin color or flags!"

As with any musical art form, your real education begins and ends with your ears. Texas music educator and salsa ensemble director Juan Cavazos states a simple fact that many jazz musicians forget when it comes to playing Latin music well: "Your best teachers are your ears. If you're in doubt as to how something goes, listen to it. How did Basie sound? Listen to Basie! How does Willie Colon sound? Listen to Colon!"

The aural history of Afro-Caribbean/Latin music is a broad mixture of musical styles, each of which reflects its country of origin and the time period in which it originated. From the waltz-like Afro-Cuban *danzón*, which evolved in the late 19th century, to the hip-hop influenced *timba*; from the raucous Brazilian *samba batucada* to the Puerto Rican *bomba*, and everything in between—it can be a daunting task simply figuring out where to start.

First, decide which style of band you want to build: a Latin jazz group (little to no lyrics with a focus upon instrumental improvisation), or a full-fledged salsa band that caters to dancers and has a vocalist out front. When you're first beginning, it might also be wise to consider focusing on a specific cultural genre within that style. There may be a strong Dominican presence in your community, in which case you need to gain a familiarity with popular *merengue* artists. A member of your band might have Puerto Rican roots, so some listening to historical and modern takes on the traditional *plena* might be in order. Or, if you lean towards the salsa side and have a female vocalist, it would be a good idea to focus your attention on the music of Celia Cruz. Eventually, your ensemble will need to have a variety of styles at its fingertips.

From traditional Perez Prado mambos to Marc Anthony, it's important to build a diverse knowledge of styles as quickly as you can to cater to your potential audiences; however, starting simple can be a good thing, as John Lopez, director of the salsa ensemble at Texas

State University, advises: "When I first started, I picked a group to use as a model for my own band, so I located music arrangements from Pancho Sanchez. We had ten of his tunes that first year, and have since branched out from there."

Percussionist Marc Jacoby, who has founded a variety of Latin jazz ensembles in Chicago and beyond, points out, "You have to do your homework, buy the recordings, play that Internet radio in the background—whatever it takes to find and absorb the music you want to play!"

This brings us to perhaps the greatest issue facing potential ensembles: locating good charts. Although music described as "Latin jazz" has been sold for decades, only recently have publishers begun to emerge who specialize in the idiom and consistently sell music that is stylistically accurate. Latin jazz educator Jesus Diaz remarks, "I do a lot of my own arrangements, but I've also used 3-2 Publishing [a publishing house highly recommended by many of the artists interviewed for this article]. I listen to the classics and go from there for my own arrangements. I write my own material as well. Sometimes, I'll do a tune that is published but change the rhythm section to make it more authentic. So many times you get a chart with the percussion in 3-2 clave but the horns are in 2-3 and the bass is doing who-knows-what."

If you're going to explore creating your own arrangements, a good place to start is *The Salsa Guidebook* by Rebecca Mauleon, which gives detailed explanations of the instruments, form, and stylistic idiosyncrasies of Latin music. Another excellent resource is the *Latin Real Book* by Sher Music, which contains dozens of "head" charts in a variety of styles that can be quickly interpreted and performed by experienced musicians. For those with a beginning background, nothing replaces a well-written composition by an experienced arranger. Michael Spiro says, "In this day and age when everybody has their own website and contact info on their CD, if you like a piece by a particular



Students rehearse with the Latin Jazz Ensemble at the University of Iowa.

guy, contact him and buy it! I think most guys would be flattered and excited to help you out."

One of the most important elements for a successful ensemble is a cohesive rhythm section that understands each style being performed. "The percussionists must understand Latin percussion, how it functions, who is responsible for what. It's almost like the percussion section is a band within the band. If the percussionists don't have the skills, technique, and knowledge to make things happen, the band won't swing," states Spiro. Jim Drier adds, "The bass part is always a huge problem. That might be the hardest chair in the ensemble. Getting a traditional jazz bass player to play the classic salsa *tumbao* part comfortably, with no downbeat, can be a real challenge."

Even published arrangements will often only have a minimal lead sheet that hints at bass, piano, and percussion interpretation; so finding players who are willing and able to put the time into listening to the recordings, doing their own research and learning the styles is a must. What should be your percussion section instrumentation? Many ensembles try to keep



West Chester University Latin Jazz students Gabriel Staznik and Bryan Graber.

it “traditional” by using only congas, timbales, bongos, and perhaps a few small percussion parts typically played by the vocalists (guiro and/or maracas), but more modern styles, especially smaller Latin jazz groups, demand a drumset. Nashville artist Lalo Davila states, “Today, we’re just so used to hearing a drumset, it sounds awkward when it’s not there. *But*, drumset players have to be trained to not get in the way of the other percussionists.”

What if you’re envisioning not working with professionals, but building a salsa ensemble literally from the ground up via the public schools or a community youth ensemble? In the world of music education, the establishment of Latin jazz ensembles at the secondary and university levels is beginning to gain momentum. Although such a concept might be expected in areas where there is a high Hispanic population, ethnicity is no guarantee for success.

“When I first inherited my high school’s jazz band,” recalls jazz educator Jesus Diaz, “I had a huge percentage of Hispanics, so I thought, ‘I should be able to do a lot of Latin here!’ Man, that did not exist! I realized that they had no cultural connection to it. It wasn’t the music the kids were listening to. The whole culture was rock music. So we had to start from the beginning, from scratch. You can’t assume that they have an understanding of what the music is. Now I start at the ground level and talk about the rhythm and how it is all related. Just because kids look like the kind of people who would ‘know’ didn’t mean that they necessarily knew! I had to start a plan for developing a culture, which I had to do for jazz, too. The average kid doesn’t turn on the radio and look for a jazz or salsa station.”

Why do directors go to the trouble of creating a Latin jazz ensemble at their school when there are plenty of challenges simply teaching in a traditional “big band” setting? Over the past two decades, the call for multicultural education, especially multicultural education for students who might not be attracted to



Student performers from San Marcos High School (TX) at the Texas State University Jazz Festival

traditional music settings, has created a need for ensemble directors who are willing to try something new. It has also opened the doors for the funding to do it. When Juan Cavazos received his position at San Marcos High School, he had inherited a mariachi program that was dying. “There were only four kids in it, even though it had been in place for years; but when I announced that I wanted to start a salsa ensemble, I had the full ensemble step forward in 20 minutes!”

John Lopez says, “Plenty of schools have great bands, orchestras, or jazz bands. We needed to offer something at my university they couldn’t get everywhere else. We needed to be unique.”

Many directors start each school year by having everyone in the ensemble learn the basics of clave and the percussion instruments that are such a vital part of the “Latin” sound. “In salsa, they’re all percussionists; they’re just playing notes on a horn!” states Juan Cavazos. “I spend half an hour each week at the beginning of the year working on things like soloing in clave, teaching cascara, discussing reference recordings, and working on written-down riffs

so that the students have a vocabulary for the music.”

Jim Drier adds, “I want them to know the difference between Brazilian and Afro-Cuban feel, to understand clave theory, and to develop an *honest respect* for the music.”

Don’t feel your Latin percussion chops are “up to snuff” when it comes to teaching these concepts? Many directors lean heavily on local professionals and/or university students to help get the ball rolling. “It’s been a great collaborative experience between our school and the university,” states Juan Cavazos. Bringing in special guest artists for performances can be a fantastic way to both attract an audience and teach your students skills that might be beyond your own reach. Jesus Diaz says, “I try to use people who are amazing musicians and who are very understanding of what a young kid might be going through in terms of learning to play. We’ve had such a positive experience with every artist we’ve had. We’ve been very fortunate.”

Michael Spiro adds, “Look for somebody who really inspires the students. Get someone who plays *really* well. Bring in someone who is happy to teach, who likes to teach, is willing to take the time to explain why that mistake *was* a mistake. You have a much broader responsibility to use the guest artist and the performance as a vehicle to teach your students. Get an artist who enjoys that process.”

Many of these public schools and university directors have created routines and programming concepts that apply equally well to both professional and educational ensembles. John Lopez begins each rehearsal by having the entire ensemble read portions of Ted Reed’s classic text, *Syncopation*. “Everyone reads straight through a page, then we do it in sections with the horns trading fours with the percussion. This music is so syncopated, and it’s felt differently than in jazz—not as laid-back. They have to feel that.”

Other directors will have the rhythm section



Vocalists Rachel Kapphahn, Laura Odden, and Nicole Bernier with “Fuego Tropical,” the Minnesota State University Moorhead Salsa Ensemble

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warmup by performing a rhythmic vamp/tumbao in the style they will be focusing on that day. “We’ll do a mambo, an Afro, a guaguanco, whatever the chart calls for,” states Jesus Diaz. Once the feel is solid, rhythm section members and horns alike can take turns soloing and exploring the feel before diving head-first into the written music. “Mix it up,” advises John Lopez. “Cha-cha-chas, son montunos that are from multiple decades, salsa dura from the 1960s and ’70s, salsa romantica from the ’80s, then a stock Tito Puente style mambo, or a change of pace like a bolero or merengue.”

Jesus Diaz adds, “Start with simple things. Find music that rhythmically is not very challenging so that your students can understand the groove. If you play things that are too busy in terms of notes and syncopation, they can get lost.”

Creating a Latin jazz or salsa ensemble, either at the professional or at the public school level, can be an exhilarating yet frightening prospect. “Don’t be afraid to ask questions,” says John Lopez. “Every person I’ve met who does this is happy to answer questions. Everyone who has ever started learning this music has at some time thought, ‘Man, I don’t know enough to do what I want to do.’”

The rewards for your patience and hard work can create an excitement that is undeniable. “You get that moment when the band is hittin’ on all six cylinders, when you feel that pride and know that you’re doing something special that honors the music. You *know* you’re doing it right because you’re playing it both authentically and with life—with your own expression and not as a museum piece,” states John Drier. “Don’t be intimidated by the fact that it might be musically outside the experience of yourself or your students. Anybody can learn! It’s music that belongs to everybody. We tend to give music identities that create boundaries that don’t really exist. It’s music! At the end of the day, it can *all* be learned!”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Moreno, Luis. “A Brief History of Latin Jazz.” First Annual Brownsville Latin Jazz Festival Brochure, 1997.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Books

*The Latin Real Book*, Sher Music

*The Salsa Guidebook for Piano and Ensemble* by Rebecca Mauleon, Sher Music

*The Latin Bass Book* by Oscar Stagnaro, Sher Music

*101 Montunos* by Rebecca Mauleon, Sher Music

*The Essence of Afro-Cuban Percussion and Drumset* by Ed Uribe, Alfred Publishing

*The Essence of Brazilian Percussion and Drumset* by Ed Uribe, Alfred Publishing

### Videos

*The Rhythmic Construction of a Salsa Tune, Vol. I and II* Pablo “Chino” Nuñez, Alfred Publishing

## Websites

[3-2music.com](http://3-2music.com)

[Tatianamusic.com](http://Tatianamusic.com)

[Hacemosmusica.com](http://Hacemosmusica.com)

[LP.com](http://LP.com)

[PAS.org](http://PAS.org)

[Congamasterclass.com](http://Congamasterclass.com)

**Dr. Kenyon Williams** has worked throughout the United States as a professional performer, educator, arranger, and clinician. A graduate of Abilene Christian University, the Hartt School of Music, and the University of Kentucky, he has performed as a guest soloist and section member for numerous orchestras throughout

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