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Gabriel Alegria and his Afro-Peruvian Jazz Sextet at the 35th Annual IAJE (International Association for Jazz Education) Conference

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It's a New Jazz World

Report and photos by Lee Haas

The 35th Annual IAJE Conference, held in and around the Metro Toronto Conference Centre, was the largest annual gathering of the global jazz community. For four long days there were clinics and concerts, workshops and expos, lectures, interviews and awards, even tributes to legendary master musicians, and various programs suited for jazz artists, educators, trainers, students and music lovers. The sheer talent walking around was overwhelming (how humble and gracious they all were) and the entire event was a tremendous and illuminating experience.

On the night of the very last day, at The Fairmont Royal York, was listed a performance with the note "Afro-Peruvian Jazz". This was enough for me to be interested in attending the show, even though I wasn't familiar with the artist or the band. It proved to be a remarkable opportunity to gain knowledge of who they were, and how they incorporated the international talents of fascinating and renowned musicians.

The promotional tour for Gabriel Alegria's *Nuevo Mundo* CD started with a knockout performance at the IAJE conference. This unique Afro-Peruvian jazz project fuses American jazz with Alegria's passion for the music of black coastal Peru, combining the roots of both styles, contemporary and historical. This album is inspired by locations along the coastline of Peru, where Alegria was born (in Lima). His family includes some creative individuals, both a famous novelist and a playwright plus his equally talented wife, Laurandrea Leguía, who plays in his band. As a trumpet player, composer and conductor, Alegria takes the legacy of his rich folkloric culture and brings it jointly and adeptly, with groove and swing and 'all that jazz' to a musical crossing with lively and contemporary results. He has even created an entire Peruvian Jazz movement, with special concentration on Jazz Perú Internacional, an organization he founded to enable arts education and cultural exchanges within Peru.

Alegria has also just become the Assistant Director of Jazz Studies at New York University, where he met up with his new bass player, Ramon de Bruyn, who is there doing his Master's Degree in Jazz Performance. As a recent expat from Cape Town, South Africa, de Bruyn is the only one who is not from Peru; however this does not stop him from grooving with the right sound and feel for the project. This tour is his first as part of the group, and though he may need to learn some Spanish, or they more English, nonetheless and regardless of this challenging situation, music is a concept that needs no words.



Gabriel Alegria

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Their sound was very melodic and soulful and they achieved their wide-open resonance by playing so very well and tightly on tempo. They all really enjoy what they do and it's quite evident in their performance. But that's the point of work, de Bruyn asks me, isn't it? We should all be so lucky to be able to follow that bliss. And most interestingly, half of them still live in Lima, Peru, while the rest are in New York, so I wondered how they could practice. Seems it's all meant to be, as they are just able to get together and make it happen.



Laura Andrea Leguia

This IAJE performance was outstanding and a wonderful introduction to these musical stylings. Especially appreciated was Tierney Sutton, who made a special guest appearance at the show. Sutton is featured collaborating and doing vocals on Alegria's recording of "El Norte", and she sang along with the notes in a long, lean, harmonious and melodic fashion that was interesting to hear, completely in synch with and understanding of the music.

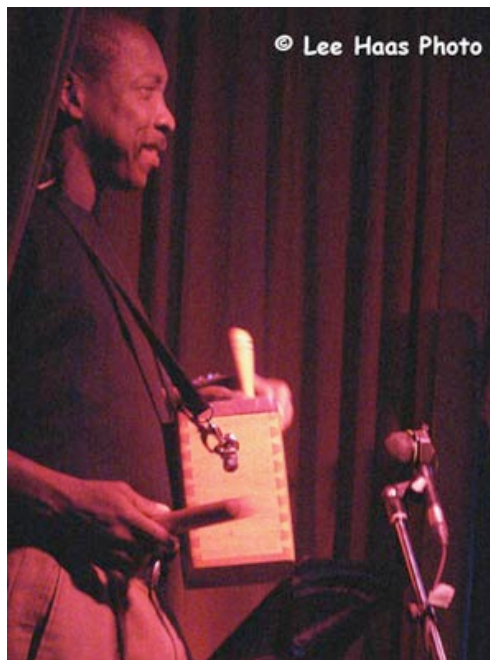
All the percussion we heard was beyond fantastic display. Hugo Alcázar was seated on his cajón, not only playing the box, but also still keeping time on his drumset. It was impressive watching and even more super to hear; his speed and accuracy were verging on astounding. Master percussionist Freddy 'Huevito' Lobatón plays all of the traditional Afro-Peruvian instruments including the cajón, which is a wooden box or crate, which one sits on and bends down to strike with both hands, to create the intricate rhythms that form the foundation of most Afro-Peruvian tunes; the cajita, which is a small church donation collection box that hangs from one's neck, and is played by opening and closing its lid with one hand, while the other is striking its side with a stick; and the quijada de burro, which is a dried-out and weathered donkey jawbone, used as a shaker by rattling the molars and by striking the sides with a stick, or beating the bone with one's palm. I was quite delighted at this find, and I even decided to see them again the very next night.

The show at The Drake was a different show, in a different context. Alegria and his band had a residency at The Drake Hotel, down in The Underground, which worked out pretty well for them since that was where they were staying. The promotion was sizzling and dynamic jazz kicked up with the intoxicating rhythms of coastal Peru as a distinctive and unique musical experience. Again, approaching this rich Afro-Peruvian heritage, with a jazz combo of this immensity, the expectation was high for a repeat of the performance seen the day previous. It was not quite as impressive. Perhaps due to the smaller stage, or the fact that it was their fifth night in a row doing the gig, but the talent was not lacking. The soul was there, smoldering, just perchance needing more space to come out.

Alegria informs us that he writes all about his Peru and its places, and the full house, many of whom were Peruvian as well, seemed approving. He actually checked on us to see if everyone spoke Spanish to which the replies were half NO and half SI, so he explained in both when talking about the music. Like for "Buscando a Huevito" which seems to be the running comedy of always having to look for their percussionist. He's always running around, and the song follows such that you feel you are running after him in a fun way that builds into a fierce frenzy.

"El Norte" on this night carried a really nice percussive beginning, and good thumping bass line, with de Bruyn singing along with the horns, well matched to the sound.

"Summertime" was nice and upbeat, with a more traditional feeling and a really lovely twist with nice heavy basslines too. "El Sur" was so good with lots of nice horns blaring and good percussion. Alegria on trumpet and Laura Andrea Leguía on sax are a marvellously proficient combo, and in conjunction with their technical professionalism, and that of the rest of the group, great things are growing deep roots here. It's not 'just jazz', its music, and all the more expansive for the take on the Afro and the Peruvian. "Piano de Patio (y bongo)" has a slow spirit with a nice twist of funk and yet more mind-numbing percussion. There was a moment where all were captivated by 'Huevito' tapping the zapateo dance, keeping a non-stop percussive build up, that was immensely impressive the night previous at the Royal York Hotel on its large and high stage, and intimate in this instance on his board on the floor with us. The thunder of the cajón, and the high echo of the cajita were inspirational on this night too. The versatility of 'Huevito' and Alcázar attracts our support and our enthralment.



Freddy "Huevito" Lobatón

Gabriel Alegria is a skilled composer, and an absorbing player, who ensures each part of the group gets to have their moment. I look forward to hearing from them again.

Afro-Peruvian jazz Sextet

Gabriel Alegria – composition, trumpet and flugel horn
 Freddy "Huevito" Lobatón – percussion (cajón, quijada, cajita) and zapateo dancing
 Hugo Alcázar – drums and percussion
 Laura Andrea Leguía – tenor saxophone
 Yuri Juárez – acoustic guitar
 Ramon de Bruyn – bass and vocals

We welcome your comments and feedback

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