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IN CONVERSATION WITH GABRIEL ALEGRIA

By [Tomas Peña](#)

You grew up in a literary environment. Your grandfather, Ciro was Peru's most famous novelist and your father, Alonso is Peru's most acclaimed playwright.

Sadly, my grandfather died before I was born. He is certainly one person I wish I could have met. Growing up, one of the phrases I often heard was, "are you Ciro's grandson?" On my first semi-professional gig with a big band, when I was seventeen, the bandleader announced ... "and the youngest member of the band is Gabriel Alegria, the grandson of the renowned writer, Ciro." So it was par for the course.



Gabriel Alegria

I am happy to say that it has always given me a sense of pride. My dad is so humble that I never knew he was famous when I was a kid. I thought it was normal to fly to New York to see plays like "Crossing Niagara," a beautiful and inspirational piece. I think there is definitely an influence there. My father's work is always positive ... and so is mine. It's all about making people happy.

What prompted you to become a musician and where did you study your craft?

My dad's house rule was "everyone has to play an instrument"... though I am the first person in the family to go professional. My grandmother and my aunt were accomplished pianists. What drew me to the trumpet was the fact that it was the loudest instrument. I started playing when I was twelve. Mostly I played in school bands, then the National Conservatory in Lima, followed by Kenyon College (Ohio), City College (New York) and the University of Southern California (Los Angeles). Looking back, I think that most of my learning took place on the streets in Lima and playing with other musicians outside of a school setting in the United States.

I did some research on the history of Afro-Peruvian music and was surprised to learn that one of the towering figures in the development of Afro-Peruvian music was Nicomedes Santa Cruz, a poet, musician, musicologist and journalist. Seeing as he was part of the literary world, I was wondering if there is a connection between your family and Santa Cruz. Also, what led to your connection with the music of Black Peru?

My father is a great friend of Victoria Santa Cruz and our love for the music has always been evident. My grandmother's nickname was "La Negra" (a reference to a black female). I came to black music, paradoxically, through jazz. *Los Hijos del Sol* did an album during the 80s with Alex Acuña, Wayne Shorter and other musicians playing some of the music from the coast. I went to a concert and saw Eva Ayllón sing. It was mesmerizing how the saxophone and her voice and the grooves all laid together. Of course, that was not Afro-Peruvian jazz as I conceive it today, but it was a huge inspiration for me and led me to this path.

What sparked your interest in American jazz and who were some of the musicians who influenced



you within that context?

I learned the tune "Round Midnight" through a really bad arrangement made for a high school band. Then someone suggested that I check out Miles Davis, so I bought the album. I was completely confused about what he was doing because I had never heard real jazz before. In fact, at first I didn't like it... but then I decided to buy more recordings by Miles and pretty soon I became hooked on his electronic albums. I learned Miles' history by working backwards. I also admire Wayne Shorter's music and I am a big fan of Maria Schneider.

Is there a "jazz scene" in Peru?

That's a loaded question because the scene is small and everyone knows everyone. The good side: The level of creativity in Lima is beyond anything I have seen anywhere else in the world. There is something about the syncretism in our society, the blending of races into this incredibly witty, idiosyncratic and extremely creative scene. Afro-Peruvian jazz music is according to many, "the next big thing" in the world of jazz. I'm not sure if that will pan out or not, but certainly the marriage between our music and jazz is the most organic of any traditional music anywhere. In many ways I think there is a true relationship to the emotional roots of jazz and the technical aspects that bind the two together. That coupled with sounds and grooves that bring tears to your eyes ...it is a pretty potent mix and I am proud to be a part of this scene. So in Lima you will see many performances of jazz inflected music (Flamenco jazz, Latin jazz, Afro-Peruvian jazz, funk, fusion, etc.) Some traditional jazz is practiced but not as much.

The down side: Peruvians have very low self-esteem. Most musicians don't realize what a special gift they have and what a tremendous opportunity there is to share with the world. Entrepreneurship is very weak, with a few notable exceptions, like the work of the Jazz House Peru, a school dedicated to jazz music.

You have explored the common roots of Afro Peruvian music and jazz. Could you elaborate on the commonalities between the two?

Technically, they are both triplet based. They come from the same place in a macro rhythmic sense (the triplet based grooves of Africa). More important, I believe that there is an emotional connection as well. In jazz music, as well as Afro-Peruvian music, there is space for dialogue. Musicians listen and react to the nuances ...the music "breathes" and takes different directions based upon the sensibility of the performers. This is very different from Afro-Cuban or even Brazilian music. In those genres, the soloists play "on top" of a rhythmic matrix set up by various instruments that revolve around the concept of a clave. In Afro-Peruvian music, as in jazz music, there is no clave. This is the key to the give-and-take that we see in a compelling jazz performance. It is the same dynamic that gets to people's hearts in Afro-Peruvian music. This is why the combination of the two is so mesmerizing and beautiful. There is a technical aspect, but the most important aspect is emotional.

According to what I read, The *Un Rezo Jazz Sextet* was the first Afro Peruvian band to successfully merge Afro Peruvian concepts with mainstream jazz. Tell me about the group and how it came to be.

In all honesty that statement has gotten us into some hot water. There are artists such as Richie Zellon and Alex Acuña that have been doing this "Afro-Peruvian jazz" for years. They re-harmonized traditional songs, or perhaps played them using jazz instruments or composed with this in mind. They've done a lot of work with non-Peruvian luminaries from the Latin jazz school as well. Richie and Alex started doing this in the 80s. In fact, when I was a kid I was inspired by their experiments. They were the true pioneers, so if titles must be given I would not say I am "the first." However, what we are doing is actually bringing together the concepts into a language that has it's own dynamic and discourse. I do think our sound is the first true result where there is a seamless combination of the two art forms. Peruvians say we sound very Peruvian and Americans feel that our music is jazz. In many ways the art lies in the fact that we fooled them all! Actually, it is a language that lies somewhere in the delicate space between the two. Although *Un Rezo* has some good examples, I would say *Nuevo Mundos* where it all came together.

Our style is a product of chasing the music for more than a decade. Drummer Hugo Alcazar has single handedly expanded and studied all of the canon to come up with a drum set language that is unique to Afro-Peruvian music. He is by far the world's leading authority on the subject. Huevito Lobatón is the first

percussionist to take the *cajón*, *quijzada*, *cajita* and *zapateo* and use them in a jazz context beyond that of world music and fusion. In other words, musicians playing the *cajón* in a jazz context abound... but he's actually developed a vocabulary that bridges the two cultures. Sometimes I find it difficult to believe that I am associated with this man.

Guitarist Yuri Juarez is a dedicated exponent of the Afro-Peruvian tradition but has always loved jazz music. He's comfortable with the language and brings a soul and spirit to the music that you immediately hear as coming from a very deep place. Laurandrea Leguia's writing will be featured on the next album. She has written some gems in the *valse/lando* style. Melodically, we are studying constantly to find new ways to phrase over these rhythms and extended bar lengths. Finally, as of late we have added Ramon de Bruyn, a virtuoso South African bassists who has taken to our music like a fish to water. His knowledge of African music has been inspiring as he finds ways to interpret our music and take it to higher place without losing our strong roots.

Let's talk about *Nuevo Mundo*. Judging by the first track, "Buscando Huevito", you combine *festejo*: a festive form of Afro Peruvian music and *lando*: a mix of both Spanish and African rhythms with American swing ... correct?

Well, yes, roughly put, this is true. However, the reason that I believe it is compelling and powerful is because of the emotional and historical connections that exist between the genres you've mentioned. As you know, one can't simply put ingredients in a pot and come up with a gourmet dish. This is an art form that that is much like cooking (and it just so happens that food is one of the most important things in Peruvian society). I like to think of "Buscando a Huevito" as a description of my life experiences with Huevito. I always tell our audiences the story of that piece because it informs the listener. We don't want people to dismantle the music into discernable technical components. Rather, we are producing a sound that is emotional and these elements happen to be the right ones to express what we want to say.

There's also an interesting take on Dave Brubeck's "Take Five," a concert for trumpet and bongo, a song that is dedicated to the arid region of Peru and another that is dedicated to the native women of Peru who were sacrificed to the Gods. That is quite a panorama!

In many ways the recording is about various locations. "El Norte" is based on Brubeck's chord changes and a depiction in sound of Peruvian Paso horses, which is very common in Northern Peru. The groove spans ten beats instead of five and is adapted from a *festejo*. A Peruvian woman from Trujillo came to me in tears after a concert in San Antonio. She said that she missed the horses back home. Many Peruvians miss home and the music is about home.

"Las Hijas del Sol" - This was a very particular ritual and the piece is about Pachacamac, the place where the temple still stands today. The idea of a young woman sacrificed to the Sun God because of her beauty is perverse ...and the piece goes from blissful to dark using rhythmic interpolations of *landó* and $\frac{3}{4}$ swing. Again, the musical elements are in service of the emotional content, not the other way around. There is just a lot to work with when the starting point is a completely original polyrhythmic groove like the *landó*.

I read somewhere that vocalist, Susana Baca ran into some resistance when she began exploring the music of Black Peru. How is your approach to Afro Peruvian music being received?

We're going to find out in a very big way at the Festival Jazz Peru in March. We will be presenting Eva Ayllón as the headliner. Mind you, the festival has never had a Peruvian headliner. Eva's fans (and there are thousands) will come expecting to hear her songs. We will be performing her music but it will be through our language. We will also present original material that was composed especially for Eva. It will be a test. Generally speaking, Peru's eclectic radio waves can stand just about anything. Our society, made up the way it is, brings together a more varied and diverse cultural base than anywhere else in the world. At the same time, this cultural base cannot be separated into races or genres ... it all melds together. The jazz fans in Peru love what we do and we are very proud of it. The real test is to see if Afro-Peruvian jazz will be widely accepted at home and abroad.

In addition to diplomatic missions you are involved with [Jazz Peru](#) whose mission is the advancement of jazz. I understand there is also a yearly festival ...

Yes, Festival Jazz Peru. This is one of my personal projects and I work very hard to support it each year. The festival is unique in that it brings artists in as residents so that the cross-pollination and cultural exchange is immediate. All of the artists stay for the duration of the week and participate in newly created ensembles. The energy, and the Peruvian food, always generates a most intense atmosphere. Maria Schneider stood in front of a sold out house and said, "This is the best jazz festival in the world." There is a lot of love at the festival, and everyone feels it.

You are also organize a ten-day tour where visitors get to travel with the band, attend clinics and see the sights. It sounds fascinating.

This is our newest project and we are hoping the tour will sell out. The response thus far, has been great. We will be taking somewhere between thirty and sixty people on the road with us on a ten day tour of Peru. We want our fans to be able to see how our music comes to be and to feel the energy that is unique to Peru. We will have workshops and drum circles, so that by the end of the tour everyone will be participating in our concerts from their seats.

The last time you performed in New York I tried to make a reservation and it (Joe's Pub) was sold-out. Good for you, bad for me! Do you have any plans to perform in New York anytime soon?

We have plans to return to New York in 2009. The Joe's Pub engagement was a sell out and a great night. We are currently in the process of evaluating that venue and considering others for the 2009 tour. It also looks like the group will be going into the studio in late April to record a new album... and that is likely to happen in New York along with a jazz Fest commitment in Greensboro and a Blues Alley gig in Washington, D.C.

What's does the future hold for Gabriel Alegria?

Chasing the music, always chasing the music!

Do you have any final thoughts?

Thank you for the opportunity to do this interview. I appreciate your sincere interest and thoughtful questions. The message I would like to get across is that we would like Afro-Peruvian music to touch their hearts and souls and, ultimately, bring them to Perú to get to know the source of our inspiration, laughter and joy. I would like to leave you with a piece that was written by a young fan in san Antonio Texas. Her reaction to our music is what I have always hoped for in a new listener.

It's very moving. Here it is in its entirety ...

Find Me Someone to Dance With: Why Afro-Peruvian Music is One Reason to Welcome Change

Written by Caitlin Phelps, a student at North West Vista College in San Antonio, TX

Fact: The human race as a whole, generally speaking, is afraid of change. Fact: Although some humans recognize that they have an aversion to change, they are still unwilling to face their fears and conform. Fact: I am perfectly OK with admitting that I am one of those people. That is, until last Thursday I was. The visitation of what is now my favorite band forever changed the way I view my life experiences.

You see, my Speech teacher, who did not attend her own class last Thursday, had all of us in for a surprise. We were led to believe that we were to be writing a paper on a speaker coming to the college, which is obviously every student's favorite thing to do! Little did we know, the joke was on us! As I am sitting there in the student lounge, conversing with an ex-classmate, low and behold, in wheels a drum set, an upright bass, and many other instruments. A trumpet, a saxophone, an electric guitar, and wooden percussion-type instruments (which I assumed were not of the American origin by the way they looked) being hauled in by their respective players completed the sextet.

¿Que? I questioned. But what is this?

It was Gabriel Alegria and his Afro-Peruvian band. He then proceeded to introduce the rest of the band members and make funny jokes about why they were late to create a level of comfort with his audience.

Then, amidst his witty banter, comes the plucking of strings, a low staccato of notes that created a sense of suspense and relaxation simultaneously. Then a pitter-patter from this odd percussion instrument, like an erratic heartbeat. Then suddenly, a high-pitched, guttural sound that resonated from this trumpet and his player echoed furiously throughout the student lounge and it sent shockwaves of excitement through my entire being. It was as if I were suddenly transported to Havana, Cuba pre-Castro, where everything was about having a fun night out listening to a live band and dancing the night away. It was like stepping into a salsa club for the first time. It was feverish and emotionally driven, empowering and consuming all at once; a sensory overload. I closed my eyes and let the music course through my veins, the sporadic beat of the drums and the percussion instruments and the bass making my insides quiver.

The bass player's head bobbed and weaved to-and-fro to the sound of his instrument. The drummer's arms and wrists moved fluidly as if the very laziness of the beat were controlling his every movement. The percussion player's eyes were glued shut, his lips pursed, letting his hands do all the talking. The trumpet player's fingers were quick and precise, lending credence to professional training, but his body arched backwards and rose into the sound that he was creating, an immediate and natural response only shown by a true musician.

The moment was extraordinary. I was enveloped by the urge to celebrate and dance until the day turned to evening, when the warmth of the sun was replaced by the crisp, cool night air. I have never felt more alive than now. To have the pleasure of this moment temporarily cease was like having the oxygen removed from my lungs. If that drum was to ever stop beating or if that percussionist ever halted the movement of his hands, my very heart would stop pumping blood through my veins, as if my heart and those instruments were one in the same.

An hour later, the sounds of "Summertime," originally a Gershwin piece played to an Afro-Peruvian beat, found their way into my home, through my speakers, and out into the four walls that incase the haven of my bedroom. Just as their music controlled their movements, the same music controlled mine now as I danced nearly naked in my bedroom, letting go of all inhibition. I refuse to ever let go of Thursday. It was one of those unimaginably perfect days that replay in my mind over and over; one of those days you would trade your soul to have back. Yet now, because of these people and their gift and their passion to create something genuine and true, I finally embrace change! I embrace uniqueness in all senses, I embrace the willingness to not only go with the flow but to seek out new alternatives and my own desires and pleasures in such a stick-straight little world.

The power of music strikes again. What better way to close? Thank You Gabriel!

Tags:

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1 RESPONSE SO FAR

[1 ashlea](#) // Mar 19, 2008 at 12:20 AM

Even though I am only a 15 coming in June 22 of this year, I love music so much!! play a trumpet when I was 14 playing in various concerts. I wonder when will you come here in Little Rock, Arkansas.

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