Elio Villafranca Interview 11 14 17

[Eugene]
It seems to me that your music comes with a message. You've had a lot of different projects, and each one has a different message. I've been very intrigued by the message of Caribbean Tinge and the Jazz Syncopators, and I was hoping that you could tell us a little bit about the concept behind the group.

[Elio Villafranca]
All of my music has a message, and that message started long ago when I first came to this country and realized that we are all one big family, that we share so many common themes in terms of the roots of the music and and, you know, the roots and the richness of our cultures.

When I came here to the United States, I started from the very beginning to reflect the things that we have in common, trying to write music that somehow brings those elements together. Basically, the elements that I'm talking about are the roots of North American jazz and my roots in Afro-Cuban or Afro-Caribbean music. This particular project, Caribbean Tinge, is the culmination of all of those things that I've been working on through the years.

In this particular project, I was looking at what the early jazz forms had in common with my roots in the Caribbean. I started reading a lot of materials. I started reading and listening a lot to Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, and other early musicians in jazz, and then looked for the common things that I found in my music.

Like, for example, in terms of Duke Ellington, the way he plays the piano is totally with the drums in mind. Jelly Roll Morton, you know, Jelly Roll's whole Spanish tinge was based on the habaneras from Cuba - using those syncopated patterns that define that particular rhythm. So, the entire project of Caribbean Tinge was about that. It was about finding those things that tie us, that make us, you know, unified, that unify us as a big cultural family.

[Eugene Uman]
Jelly Roll Morton called it the Spanish tinge and you call it the Caribbean tinge. Can you tell us, was he wrong? Why do you call it the Caribbean tinge and he called it the Spanish tinge?

[Elio Villafranca]
Okay, that's a very interesting question. Jelly Roll's Spanish tinge is based on the Cuban habanera, right? But at the time, I believe that he really didn't really know that it was a Cuban habanera. Right? What I mean by this is he was introduced to the habanera, to the patterns of habanera, by a Spanish musician, who was also a composer, who had been living in Cuba, who had learned the habanera from Cuban musicians and later traveled to New Orleans. He [Jelly Roll] then wrote his own habanera, his own piece based on the style of habanera, which was basically also known as the danza, but in the style of Havana. Jelly Roll Morton was introduced to this kind of music by this Spanish composer who happens to go to New Orleans who exposed him to this form of music.

At that time the concept of Cuban nationality wasn't necessarily fully formed in the minds of people. Remember, at that time many of the people who were born in Cuba were Spanish descendents, maybe mixed Creole people. They were starting to see themselves as Cuban because they were born in Cuba, even though they were descendents of Spain, maybe sometimes mixed with some African blood. They started seeing themselves as Cuban, I want to consider myself a Cuban because I'm not Spanish. I mean, I'm from an island. [Back in Jelly Roll's time] they had just started seeing themselves as such.

And then they start writing music. That's how the danzas, the Cuban danza, the danza creole was born. Because they will use the same structure of the European dance, but they added the syncopations to it to make it feel like, okay, this is our own version of a danza.

So, in other words, Jelly Roll Morton was introduced to this form of danza or, you know, habanera, by this Spanish composer. And I think he couldn't call it Cuban because at that time, Cuba was basically, you know [not fully formed]. Nobody knew what to call the music or the people, they would probably have called them Spanish or African, you know, one of those two.

So, basically, I think Jelly Roll called it, you know, the Spanish thing because that was what was all around him at this time.

[Eugene Uman]
Right. Well, of course, Spain had attempted to colonize both Cuba and New Orleans (where Jelly Roll Morton was living). So, maybe he had that impression that anything that came through Cuba was still Spanish.

[Elio Villafranca]
Exactly. Yeah.

Because at that time the [Cuban] nationality wasn't fully formed. It was starting to take shape, but still Spain was dominating, you know, the society. And either you were Spanish, you were African or you were French, you know, it was like that.

It wasn't like, oh, you're Cuban or you're Haitian or you're, you know, it was like you're either black or, you know, it was very specific like that.

[Eugene Uman]
Yeah. Another thing that you delve into that I find fascinating is the whole connection between the slave rhythms and jazz. You have one piece which is dedicated to Congo Square, "Sunday Stomp at Congo Square." I'm hoping you could illuminate us about the origin of that song and the relationship between Congo Square and the beginning of jazz.

[Elio Villafranca]
Congo Square was real. At that time it was the only place in New Orleans where people were allowed to gather and basically play their music. For any descendant of Africa, you know, especially if you were enslaved, having the opportunity to play the drums was the closest thing to freedom. So that was what Congo Square represented to them.

Sometimes we talk about Congo Square as one thing, a place where the enslaved people would go and play music and all that. But there was actually more to it because, there was more than a generation of enslaved people who would go there and play. It was a way for them to remember Africa, remember their homeland, to honor that nostalgia, to remember the separation that happened, because they were brought by force to this new land. And then they had to readjust and relearn things. And they were enslaved and treated badly. So that moment [the opportunity to play music at Congo Square] was very special to them.

But as time went by, there were other generations of people of African descent who had [more distant] relationships with Africa - like those who had been born in New Orleans or Louisiana or Cuba or Haiti. So then the music changed at Congo Square [it now included newer influences]. Congo Square gave the people the opportunity to relearn the rhythms. It was a different take on the music than the first blood African who came and played the music exactly as it was back then [when they arrived from Africa]. Now it was in the hands of the new generation, so the music started to change a little bit.

I basically find it fascinating. Congo Square is a very special place, especially because of what it represented to the enslaved people at the time, you know. It was a place of freedom of expression, of remembering and honoring their ancestors. The rhythm that I use in this particular piece, "Sunday Stomp at Congo Square," is the bomba, you know, from Puerto Rico:, boom, ta-ta, boom, ta-ta, boom.

I was envisioning people stomping on the ground like that, because a lot of African dance has to do with stomping on the ground. Especially in Congolese music, because their deities, their gods are in the ground. That's different from Yoruba, because the Yoruban gods are in the sky. That's why in their dance, their gestures are towards the sky. In Congolese music, like palo and things like that. In Bomba the force is from their feet.

So I picked that rhythm[bomba] to represent that. It's very similar to makuta, another Congo form of rhythm that comes from Cuba. I liked that idea of having those two rhythms, to represent Congo Square at that particular time.

[Eugene Uman]
And if I remember correctly, makuta is a rhythm that was often played around the village where you grew up. Is that correct?

[Elio Villafranca]
No, where I grew up, the rhythm that they play is palo. I'm sorry, yuka, which is another form of Congolese music. It's very well known, very popular. It is believed that tambor yuka was the first form of drumming that was performed in Cuba during the time of slavery. The reason why is because tambor yuka wasn't necessarily always connected to religious ceremonies. So it was a festive type of drumming for gatherings. Sometimes it was played in sacred religious ceremonies, but mainly it was for festive occasions. And they often would play tambor yuca before a religious ceremony.

Yuka drums are very low maintenance, they're not very sophisticated in terms of their construction. It's less sophisticated than the bata, for example, which usually has double skins, one on each side.

And then the shape of the bata - you have to kind of carve the wood and give it that shape, and then put on the skin. And then, the tuning system in the bata is very complicated, using ropes. And the same thing is true with the arará drums - the tuning system is very complicated. They're bigger drums, they also carve the wood and make faces on the wood. I mean, all the other systems of drumming are very complicated. The yuka drum is very simple.

It's not simple, but it's more simple in comparison to the other ones. They use an avocado tree, because an avocado tree has a peculiarity - when the trunk gets dry, it gets hollow inside automatically. So what they do is, they put fire inside and then they kind of smooth out the inside part carefully, because obviously the fire will, if you don't pay attention, will burn through everything.

For the yuka drums, they just put one animal skin on top, they nail it, and then they tune it with fire. They wet the skin, they nail it in the drums, and whenever they need to tune it, they just put it around the fire, and then the skin stretches. So that's why it's believed that the yuka drums were among the first drums ever heard on the island of Cuba.

[Eugene Uman]
And you're saying that those drums might also have been played at Congo Square?

[Elio Villafranca]
No, those drums were not used. Honestly, I don't know what type of drums they were playing at Congo Square. I think even the name Congo Square is confusing. I think they called it Congo Square because that was almost like a trade name, I think, that the name [Congo Square] was given by the colonizers. I'm sure they played some Congo music, I'm sure they play a lot of West African music as well, from the Yoruban tradition. And remember, also in the U.S., the enslaved people weren't allowed to play the drums.

[Eugene Uman]
In the eastern U.S.?

[Elio Villafranca]
In Cuba or Haiti they were more allowed to play the drums, especially after the Haitian Revolution. Congo Square was the only location in the US where they were allowed to play the drums. They thought - if we let them [the enslaved people] play the drums, maybe they will be a little happier. I'm sure they played a variety of drums [and styles] at Congo Square.

[Eugene Uman]
One of the things that I find fascinating is that you consider the Caribbean as one big region from which the music derives, rather than specific places like Cuba or Haiti or Puerto Rico. So you see the Caribbean as one big resource.Is that correct?

[Elio Villafranca]
Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I travel a lot.

I've been to Haiti. I've been to Puerto Rico. And yeah, the drums and the rhythms, they create. There are differences and they have their own peculiarities.

But the principle, it's exactly the same thing. Last time I went to Haiti, I was fascinated when I went to the LaCosse region. That's the area where they practice some Congolese religious ceremonies. When I heard those rhythms, I was like, okay, this is Congo music. I can see everything. I can hear everything. I can find so many similarities with what I know of Congo music that's played in Cuba.

Like, for example, Haitian rara [music] uses similar instruments to those of the arará music of Matanzas.

I had the opportunity to go to a Voodoo ceremony. It's like their Voodoo is their version of Santeria, literally. And that is so similar, even though the drums are different. But the rhythms they play are very similar.

I see them all as a really big, big family. Nice. And at the time, in the 1800s, 1700s, there was no definition about, oh, this is North America, this is Cuba, Puerto Rico.

There was a big region where everything was circulated. Everything was about trading, I call it the Caribbean ring. If you make a big circle, you're getting Louisiana,Florida, Cuba, Haiti, , Santo Domingo, which at the same time was the same thing, you know.

And everything was circulating then. There was no definition in terms of like, region. There was like one big region - everything functioned as a Caribbean region. So I consider Louisiana as part of the Caribbean. You know, it's a part of North America, but it's the whole thing, the culture, the food, it's all a big Caribbean region. That's why people normally, when they talk about New Orleans, it's so similar to Cuba. Of course, it's like the Caribbean.

[Eugene Uman]
You use the barril, which is a drum that you were telling me has its roots with the bomba in Puerto Rico. It interests me that you as a Cuban musician would use a Puerto Rican drum in your performance. But that seems to be one of the essences of your music.

[Elio Villafranca]
I have to say, when I first came to America, there was a huge division between Cuban musicians and Puerto Rican musicians.

There was - I don't think there is that much anymore. There was a very big divide between those two cultures which are so similar. And the divide was basically a dispute over who created salsa.

That was the thing. Some people believe that salsa is something created here [in the United States] by Puerto Ricans. And some others believe that salsa basically is a free name [used by] the people who created and developed it, like Tito Puente, Johnny Pacheco, all of these generations.

They all, if you talk to them personally, they say like, no, that's Cuban music, that's guaracha, son, danzón, you know, mambo, you know, it's very specific. But there was a very strong divide among musicians. And I didn't want to get into that.

I wanted to just look at the many things that their regions have shared in terms of rhythms and traditions and cultures.

For example, right now, I'm just finishing another project called *Cinque*, which is based on the story of Joseph Cinque, the enslaved man who was born in Sierra Leone and then was brought to Cuba by force and then revolted over the ship *La Amistad.*

That story was fascinating. It's fascinating to me. And I wrote an entire suite called *Cinque*.

And in that suite, I talk about Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Jamaica, and Santo Domingo, all of those five islands. And then I use things from the islands, like social events that happen on those islands that are similar including the music and the rhythms. That's how I like to see it. Everything is a big family.

[Eugene Uman]
Yeah, well, that's the way we started our conversation.

In a previous interview you talked about going to the conservatory in Havana. You said you would spend a good portion of the money that you had saved for food on cassette tapes of North American jazz. I was hoping you could elaborate on that story.

[Elio Villafranca]
Oh, yeah. That was roughly in the early 90s when I first was introduced to jazz. I wasn't a jazz guy.I was training in classical music. And I was pretty much into rock and roll. I would listen to a lot of Led Zeppelin, ACDC, Rush, you know, all of that heavy rock - KISS, all of those heavy rock and roll groups.

A friend of mine bought me a ticket to go to the Havana Jazz Festival when I first got to Havana to study, to further my education in classical music. And I didn't want to go, but he got me a ticket. And then I went on and I saw Richie Cole's performance.

Richie Cole's saxophone -when he performed, all he did was, you know, he just played the blues.

And I found it so fascinating that from that point on, I decided that I wanted to play that style of music. I really want to play jazz. But jazz wasn't a style of music that was promoted in Cuba because, as you know, there were a lot of political issues at the time, and the music that was coming from the U.S. was banned.

So all of the music in jazz that we can find had to be purchased on the black market. I talked to the musicians who had the opportunity to travel, and asked them to bring me recordings. In Cuba, there weren't any stores where you could buy cassettes or CDs at the time.

They were all on the black market. And the only way to have access to those was to buy blank tapes and then ask my friends,"hey, would you record something for me so I can mix it?" Those tapes were so expensive, now that I'm thinking of it. It was really expensive.

Like my mom and my father, to send me to Havana, they would put together [money for me to live]. My mom would take some money from her salary, my father would take some money from his salary, and they would give me something like 35 pesos to send me to Havana so I could be there for a month. And that money was supposed to last me for a month because the food at the school wasn't really enough to survive on. But every time I went home and then came back to school, I found people selling tapes and I had so much interest in listening to jazz that I used the money my parents gave me, just to buy tapes.

And then I would be starving for the rest of the month. But then I would go to Chucho Valdez's home and I would say something like," hey, would you please record something?" And then he would be generous enough to record something for me that could be like, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea - those are the people who we would get to listen to the most. We didn't get a lot of the roots music in jazz like Duke and Armstrong. So I started learning about that [older musical styles] here in America because in Cuba, we would only get like, you know, Wayne Shorter or Herbie Hancock or John Coltrane or Miles Davis.

But I realized once I came to America, like, oh my God, I've been learning this music not from the roots up. I felt hollow inside. So then, when I came here, I started researching and studying the music from the roots up.

[Eugene Uman]
Right. When I was living in Colombia, I would be playing with musicians and ask them what they were listening to, especially drummers. I was interested to find out that drummers most had kind of started out listening to Dave Weckl. And I was like, what do you mean? What about Philly Joe Jones and Max Roach?

[Elio Villafranca]
Exactly. Yeah.

Yeah. No, and that happens to me too. That really happens to me too.

And so I had to relearn how to play jazz. You know a funny thing that shocked me was my piano tuner. 'Cause I remember when I first came into this country, I, you know, I rented a piano, like an upright piano. And then I, you know, I hired a piano tuner to come and tune it. It was great. And I would let him tune it while I was in the room, just waiting for him to finish.

And I remember every time after he finished tuning the piano, he would play it, to know that the piano was in tune. And I was like, what are you playing? And that kind of intrigued me and bothered me at the same time. Because I'm thinking like I studied music for a long time. I should be able to know what he's playing, but I could not figure it out.

And I would ask him, are you a professional pianist? And he would be like, no, I'm just a piano tuner. And then in my mind I thought, "why are you playing this? That's something

that I can't play and I studied music for 10 years now, 14 years." And then I realized, oh, okay, this is what's happening.

He's playing something that is pretty much rooted [basic]. That was [the same as] **me** feeling the rumba or feeling the guaracha or the son montuno, things that have been rooted in me. I don't need to study it because I've been living it for many years. So then I realized he's playing the root of jazz. And I said, well, this is what I need to do - I need to learn about the roots of jazz.

[Eugene Uman]
So was he playing like Ellington or blues or what kind of things was he playing?

[Elio Villafranca]
He was playing some chords, chord progressions, more related to the blues, right? Like chord progressions, maybe shell voicings - playing some bluesy things. And I'm like, oh my God, that feels so good.

I was like, what is that? You know? And then I realized that I didn't know anything, but I could play the piano or consider myself a pianist and I could play fast. And I was thinking that I knew what jazz was, but I realized right there, right then, that I didn't.

[Eugene Uman]
Is that why you're going back to New Orleans, studying that music and then getting into the whole evolution of jazz, so that you can then have a strong foundation now?

[Elio Villafranca]
Yeah. I mean, in a way, in a way, yes.

[After moving to the States] I really started to appreciate that [older style of] music a lot more than when I was in Cuba., I really started to see how important it is. I could be at home listening to that music [early jazz] or I could be at home listening to a rumba by Munequitos de Matanzas, or this really great collection of Yoruba music. They all feel rooted, I always felt attracted to rooted music.

I now feel like I have the freedom to do anything. I do many different projects. And when I play music from my recording, *The Source in Between*, I use more contemporary language, with more developed harmonic approaches.

But every once in a while I go back [to the more basic sounds]. Like the *Cinque* project, this last recording that I'm doing, it's almost like I wanted to put in everything that I know about Afro-Cuban music or Afro-Caribbean music. In [*Cinque]* there's bata, there's palo, there's tambor yuka, there is a bomba, there are rhythms from the Congolese traditions, and from Santo Domingos called salve, there is comparsa, there is cha-cha-cha., I just wanted to put in everything. And I wanted to put it in a way that gives access to people to this music so they understand it well.

What I mean by this is, as a composer, normally I will write the music and then tell people, okay, this piece is based on a chant from this particular tradition. People listen to it and then they say “oh yeah, that's great, that's awesome.” But if they don't know what that chant [or source] is, then the connection with the music and that particular tradition is missing.

I mean, they [the listeners] could like the music, but they really have to establish a connection with tradition. So what I did in *Cinque*t is [include references to] all the music that inspired me in order to create a specific tune.

A few years ago I was talking to the Smithsonian about releasing some of the research projects that I've done over the years. About the music of my hometown, the tambor yuka. Some of the research that I did in my time was about the arará music, the gagá music from Haiti, all of those things. They [Smithsonian] found it fascinating and they wanted to do it. But then, you know, time went by and nothing happened.

And then I realized, you know, why don't I just give people access to the real thing. For example, if I said, this music is based on this song from my tambor yuka tradition. I give that song to them so they hear it, they know what it is. I then give them an original pieces that is related it so that they can establish a much more direct bridge to the traditional music.

It's like almost going to the Picasso Museum in France. You go there and you see the sketches and then you see the final product. That way you can witness the process of the creation. If you go to a museum and you just see the final product, you enjoy that final product, but you can't establish a connection because you don't know what the process was.

[Eugene Uman]
I agree with you, and I think that, of course, it's true and it's a fascinating thing to witness, to have the inspirational source and then to have the final result in the same composition.

But it's a hard intellectual jump for many people to make, so I think that it's also important that people like the Smithsonian have those original sources documented, and I don't know how you could do all of that on one album.

[Elio Villafranca]
Yeah, I didn’t do all of that in one album. The Smithsonian, many years ago released field recordings, that I have here in front of me, by two musicologists, Lydia Cabrera and Josefina Tarafa. They basically traveled the country [Cuba] and then they documented the music [from around the country in the late ‘50s and ‘60s].

So, my CD is not, it's not that different from that [But] I don't give that much information. I give just the information that is related to my music.

I give the listeners a little bit of the information - for example, there is a piece that's called "La Burla de los Congos,” and I said, well, the Congolese people have a really great sense of humor. But if I said this, people won’t really know what that humor is. So what I'm doing is giving them a little bit of the story, told by someone whose family was originally from the African Congo, but who is from my hometown [in Cuba]. This is a direct connection to Africa.

The man tells how his great grandfather in Africa used to tell him funny stories and this context gives the musical piece enhanced meaning.

[Eugene Uman]
The history becomes pertinent and real to the listener, because it's directly related to a human being rather than just some kind of intellectual pursuit.

[Elio Villafranca]
Exactly, exactly.

Like, it's almost like, put it up front, so they don't have to imagine. But imagining is beautiful, too, like giving just enough information to let them experience the music, whichever way they want to.. I can see the value there is in that too. But I think I see myself a lot more this year, as a person with the eye of an educator. I think people need to know about this music beyond just the artistic statement, beyond my artistic statement. I think people need to know a little bit about the roots of my heritage, the roots of Caribbean music.

[Eugene Uman]
Do you teach that at Juilliard?

[Elio Villafranca]
I do. I teach more at MSM, Manhattan School of Music. At Juilliard, I coach ensembles, and I do several different things. But I incorporate these teachings everywhere I go.

This January, Juilliard will be doing a tribute to my music. They are presenting something to do with Afro composers who work on the Afro diaspora, with people who are still alive. [I will work with the] Juilliard Big Band. The one thing that I want to do, that they probably haven't done in the past, is to incorporate drumming and a dance. I want them to understand that music, dance and drums have always been together. In jazz, we tend to just see the music as something separate from the drumming and the African concept and all of that. I want them to bring those aspects all together. I want them to understand that music and dance and rhythms are unified. In this show, I'm going to have a dancer. I'm going to have two drummers, one from Santo Domingo and one from Puerto Rico to play all these Congolese things.

[Eugene Uman]
Nice. I'm still intrigued by the idea of the dance and the percussion being inseparable.It seems kind of brave of you to bring a dancer into a jazz setting. Tell us a little bit more about that inseparability of the rhythms that you're playing and the dances themselves.

[Elio Villafranca]

Like what I mentioned to you, my mission at the beginning, is basically to represent the music in the most authentic way. And the most authentic way to represent the music is by having all the elements in there.

I'm trying to give them all the elements so they can establish a better bridge between the roots of the music and the music itself.

I remember when I first presented this story at Jazz at Lincoln Center, I told them, oh, I'm going to have a dancer, they were like, whoa, whoa, wait, wait, wait, how, wait, wait, no, wait, but there's no space, there is no space. How are you going to do that? And I was like, no worries. She's a great dancer, she knows how to work the floor.

And then ever since I did it, people were like, wow, because they haven't really experienced that. Because I mean, for me, it's common in Cuba. We dance to everything. Everything has a dance involved. Every little form of music that you can think of is dance related.

And then here [in the US] for people to experience that, the only places for them to experience rooted music are in theaters. And then when you go to theaters, they only experience half of it because they don't have the dance aspect of it. And a lot of times, they don't even have a drummer. In some Latin jazz things there is rhythm, and the piano and the bass are syncopated and the trap drums kind of mimics the roles of the hand drums. But it's not the same as giving people the full-on context of what this music is about.

[Eugene Uman]
I think I understand it better. Thank you.

[Elio Villafranca]
Oh, one more thing. I'm going to be bringing my *huaca*, which is like an instrument that I normally bring to all my performances. A *huaca* is the name for a metal hoe, like the thing that slaves used to work on the field. But this one is not like the, you know, it's like the original hoe. It’s really good metal and it has like a beautiful sound that always reminds me of Congolese music.