



# PAQUITO D'RIVERA

*70+ Years of Music*

BY ADAM DAVIDSON

"I cannot put seventy years into an hour and a half, but I will try!" asserts soon-to-be 77-year-old Paquito D'Rivera on the phone from his home in New Jersey. That's quite the understatement. The legendary saxophonist-clarinetist has had a ground-breaking career that has seen him travel the world performing, winning a combined sixteen GRAMMY awards and becoming a leading figure in Latin jazz. After all these years, D'Rivera still has a packed schedule with performances across the country and still has the same excitement performing in front of an audience in a genre that never stands still and is constantly evolving. "(Jazz) is like riding a rollercoaster," he says. "You're never quite sure what is going to happen, especially in the jazz language. Every time you go onstage and play a tune, it's never going to be the same thing that you played before, even with the same composition. It's always a surprise!"

This month D'Rivera will perform two evenings at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater to celebrate his seventy years in music, taking the audience on a journey through his career, from his first performance at six years old in Havana, Cuba, to the band Irakere, to paying tribute to Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington and Brazilian jazz. He celebrates the occasion by inviting friends and collaborators to perform, including legendary Cuban pianist-bandleader, Chucho Valdés. The two ripped up the Latin jazz rulebook in 1973 when they formed the hugely influential group, Irakere, the GRAMMY-winning band that launched them and fellow members onto the international stage with their experimental and genre-defying take on Afro-Cuban jazz. They first met when D'Rivera was 12-years-old—and he still has a vivid memory of that fateful encounter in Cuba that would change both of their lives and careers for the better: "A friend of my father's took me to a jam session in Havana and when we arrived I saw this lanky, young, 19-year-old guy playing the piano and I thought, 'This is not possible!' I was so astonished, and I have been impressed ever since." The pair reunited two years later when they performed together at the now defunct Teatro Musical de La Habana, and they have been close friends and music collaborators to this day. D'Rivera remarks that he cannot explain why their musical and personal connection is so strong and has stood the test of time, but he joked that it must be "magic." He muses, "It's like a marriage that lasts forever and you cannot explain why... like a musical marriage. For me, it's very easy to play with him because I don't know what he is going to play but I know that when I play, he is going to match it!"

It may sound cliché, but D'Rivera seemed destined to pursue a career in jazz almost from the beginning. Born Francisco de Jesús Rivera Figueras in Havana in 1948, to parents Maura D'Rivera and classical saxophonist Tito Rivera, one of his first memories is of hearing his father playing the saxophone around the house "26 hours a day!" The senior Rivera was a hugely influential figure in his son's jazz career, exposing him to the music of Goodman and Ellington from an early age. The first LP that his father ever brought home for

his son was Goodman's *The Famous 1938 Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert* (Columbia). So impressed was he that he transcribed all of the solos from that recording, not only falling in love with Goodman himself, but of the whole orchestra, especially pianist Teddy Wilson, trumpeter Harry James, vibraphonist Lionel Hampton and drummer Gene Krupa. From that moment on, jazz became an obsession for the young D'Rivera as he dreamt of following in Goodman's footsteps by living and performing in New York. After his own father, Goodman is still D'Rivera's biggest inspiration in jazz—and it was a thrilling, full-circle moment when he had the opportunity to play Goodman's iconic clarinet from the Carnegie Hall archives. "I wanted to take the (clarinet) home with me! It felt like it was an instrument made especially for Benny Goodman, for someone very special." Another significant Carnegie Hall-related moment in D'Rivera's prolific career happened in 1991, three years after D'Rivera became a founding member of Dizzy Gillespie's United Nation Orchestra, when he received a Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to Latin music.

D'Rivera's father, who was also an importer of classical instruments into Cuba, fortunately saw early on how passionate his son was for jazz and so ordered a soprano saxophone as a gift for his young child. When he was given the instrument, his father asked if he would like to perform at a music festival in Cuba later in the year, to which Paquito agreed and learned to play saxophone. "He taught me how to play the instrument and presented me (to the crowd) nine months later. It was like giving birth. Ever since (that moment) I fell in love with being onstage. I feel at home on the stage," he elates. Obsessed from then on with the music, D'Rivera was labeled a child prodigy. But his journey to jazz stardom wasn't always such smooth sailing; first there was the Cuban Revolution and then (when he was ten years old) the installation of Fidel Castro. Now a communist country, jazz was frowned upon (although not banned) as "decadent Imperialist music." Under this pall, when Irakere was formed in 1973, D'Rivera relates "When we created Irakere, the point was to keep playing jazz music but hide it. It was an exercise in lying and expressing ourselves." He craved freedom as he became increasingly disillusioned with the country he was born and raised in, and was tired of performing in secrecy. On tour in Spain in 1980, D'Rivera defected to the U.S. and achieved a lifetime goal of living and performing in New York. "I have always dreamed of living in New York, but I will be a refugee all of my life... People ask me, 'Do you miss anything from Cuba?' Yes, I miss what (the communist regime) has destroyed. I miss my grandfather but if I go to his grave, what is inside the grave is not him anymore, it is something different. They have destroyed everything in that country except the talent of the musicians and artists. It is a very artistic country."

D'Rivera thinks it is a "joke" that Cuba now hosts the Havana International Jazz Festival after the genre was censored and discouraged for so many years. Some people might see Cuba's embrace of jazz as a

positive step forward, but D'Rivera is wary and calls it a "contradiction"—that the government is using jazz events to make money—and warns against any jazz artist thinking about performing in the country. "I will never understand why well-paid musicians from the U.S. and in other parts of the world will go there to perform for free," he strongly states. "I don't get it. Every single dollar that you make for Cuba is supporting the dictatorship. People say that they go there for the music, but they are contributing to the well-being of the dictatorship to make hotels and jails." After defecting, D'Rivera quickly immersed himself in the New York jazz scene and found himself at home within the large Latin jazz community in the city—described by many of the musicians as "like the Caribbean but with snow." For D'Rivera, despite the heights he has achieved over the years, he remains humble and grounded. The praise and kind words he receives from collaborators and other musicians in the Latin jazz community and beyond are a testament to his character and dedication to his craft, which he's been instrumental in elevating over the entirety of his career. Pianist Michel Camilo (who first played with D'Rivera over 40 years ago) described him as "a virtuoso artist and composer. Paquito is gifted with his own unique sound and stylings, which consistently reflect a deep knowledge and absolute command of the jazz tradition, classical music and Afro-Cuban jazz heritage."

After seventy years in music, D'Rivera has learned a thing or two about the industry and has words of wisdom for the next generation of jazz musicians. He believes that jazz artists can be particular about what music they consume but to truly see the full picture they need to take inspiration from every genre and style and widen their horizons: "It's very natural for humans to make divisions and I am against that. Duke Ellington said, 'There are only two kinds of music, good music and the other kind.' I encourage the young person to listen to all different types of music and you will immediately become a better musician." Like Ellington, he balks at categorization. "Many people say to me, 'You are a Latin jazz musician.' No, I am a musician," he says. "Of course, I am from Latin America, but I am a Latin American who loves music. I mix Latin jazz with classical and European music. Music is a marvelous activity!"

For more info visit [paquitodrivera.com](http://paquitodrivera.com). D'Rivera's "Celebrating 70+ Years in Music" (featuring guests Chucho Valdés, Edmar Castañeda, Roberta Gambarini and others) is at Rose Theater Apr. 18-19. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Irakere—*Irakere* (Columbia, 1978)
- Paquito D'Rivera—*Paquito Blowin'* (Columbia, 1981)
- Dizzy Gillespie and the United Nation Orchestra—*Live at the Royal Festival Hall* (Enja, 1989)
- Paquito D'Rivera—*Portraits of Cuba* (Chesky, 1996)
- Paquito D'Rivera Quintet—*Funk Tango* (Sunnyside, 2006)
- Chucho Valdés & Paquito D'Rivera Reunion Sextet—*I Missed You Too!* (Sunnyside, 2022)