



DAFNIS PRIETO

LIVING INSIDE THE MUSIC

BY ADAM DAVIDSON

The 50-year-old Cuba-born drummer-percussionist Dafnis Prieto has played and recorded with an impressive array of bandleaders over the course of 30+ years, including Carlos Barbosa-Lima, Jane Bunnett, Michel Camilo, Steve Coleman, Hilario Durán, D.D. Jackson, Arturo O’Farrill, Hilton Ruiz, Eddie Palmieri, Henry Threadgill, Papo Vázquez and many others. In addition, his own projects have ranged from trio to sextet to big band. Though he is concerned that places to hear authentic and individual music are shrinking across the city, Prieto is happy to be performing this month at the iconic Manhattan jazz club The Jazz Gallery, which he has had a long and fruitful relationship with ever since he first came to New York 25+ years ago. As part of the venue’s 30th anniversary concerts, Prieto reunites for two nights with alto saxophonist-flute player and former employer and collaborator Henry Threadgill, as well as pianist Vijay Iyer, a power trio that has performed together on-and-off for over a decade.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: You have an upcoming show at The Jazz Gallery with Henry Threadgill and Vijay Iyer. What is the significance this venue has had on your career?

PRIETO: My relationship with The Jazz Gallery started in the early 2000s, as I just arrived in New York City. They were really supportive of me and my music. There I had the opportunity to present many of my projects, and from then on we cultivated a great relationship and continue [to do so].

TNYCJR: Do you remember the first time you met Henry Threadgill? What drew you to his music?

PRIETO: I heard his music with a friend of mine in Toronto, Canada before I met him. I told my friend that I wanted to hear something different and not the regular kind of thing and he showed me Threadgill’s *Makin’ A Move* (Columbia, 1995) record. I still have the record with me, that was about 30 years ago. I heard his music and I thought it was interesting because I thought it was the music I could possibly hear in my dreams, but when I wake up it disappears. It was very surrealistic and dreamlike; it had a different state—it wasn’t the music that you can just spell out when you first hear it. It brings you a different kind of sensitivity and a different way of absorbing the vocabulary that was there.

I was very interested by that. Then, I talked to [alto saxophonist] Steve Coleman about this when we played together. I think he told Henry because I went to New York to perform at the Zinc Bar in 1997 and all of a sudden I finished the set and there he was, Henry. He introduced himself to me and said that Steve Coleman told him about me. We had a few conversations and then I went to Spain—as I lived there for some time—and when I came back to New York in 1999, I gave him a call and then I joined two bands of his around a year later and did a record with each band for Pi Recordings [Henry Threadgill & Make A Move—*Everybody’s Mouth’s*

a Book and Henry Threadgill’s *Zooid—Up Popped The Two Lips*]. We started working since then and I started to get busy with other things, including my own music, so he got a different drummer but we kept a good relationship. This opportunity came to do this trio [with Threadgill and Iyer] that started as a fundraising thing. It worked and we had fun and from that moment we’ve been working on and off for 10 years.

TNYCJR: It’s interesting that you said Henry’s music is what you expect to hear in your dreams. It must have made the collaborations so natural and fluid?

PRIETO: You’re inside the music when you’re making it and then you figure it out and so on and so forth. But the sound is the same sound that you’re hearing. It’s just suggestive and subjective and just a different vocabulary and meaning and a different way of constructing the music and values overall.

TNYCJR: One of your recent, self-released albums, Dafnis Prieto Sí o Sí Quartet’s *3 Sides of The Coin* (Dafnison Music), reflects that dreamlike state too, because it’s inspired by your psychology studies. How do you process your studies in music?

PRIETO: We have been told to experience life in a binary way. Which means right or wrong, black or white, this or that so you always have these two big choices but many times I don’t agree with that. Those are the extremes but that doesn’t mean those are the unique things. Life is full of different colors between the black and the white. The most beautiful part of the day is not when it’s fully day or fully night, it’s actually in the transition because that’s when you get the sunrise. It’s from the point of view of an observer. It’s a relative point of everything in life and it’s a relative point of observation of reality or anything; even thoughts can be processed in different dimensions so it can have different sides.

TNYCJR: With social media, everything is made to look so black and white but it’s true, there are three sides to every story.

PRIETO: It’s our personality and the way we are. We progress in life and we develop as even ourselves. If I go individually and speak for myself, I don’t see the world and life itself the same way I did when I was 10 years old. And I don’t see it the same way as I did when I was 20, and now I don’t see it that way either. There you go about different sides of the same coin.

TNYCJR: You’ve previously talked about the pressures of being a jazz musician amid corporate radio algorithms. How has the landscape changed over the years?

PRIETO: The music business is shit and it doesn’t seem to be getting better.

TNYCJR: Is there a fear in the jazz community? Or is there a hope that authenticity will prevail?

PRIETO: No, I don’t think so.

TNYCJR: What do you do in that instance? How do you come back from that?

PRIETO: I just keep doing what I like. I’m not doing music for a scene or any kind of thing, I do music because it’s a necessity for me and it’s a way for me to cultivate who I am as a person, spiritually, emotionally

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 30)

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(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

Armstrong's career. Riccardi says that, "Lil earned her place in the pantheon by being the architect of Louis Armstrong's stardom." It was Hardin who gave Armstrong the push to leave Oliver, and later, to leave Fletcher Henderson, and go out on his own. Riccardi notes: "Louis might have remained a very talented sideman for much of his career. For that alone, Lil's role in Louis' story—and the story of jazz history in general—is secure." Cracks in the relationship began to appear in 1925. The couple separated in 1931 over Armstrong's affair with dancer Alpha Smith, and finally divorced in 1938.

Hardin was prolific in the '30s, including accompanying and recording with blues vocalist Alberta Hunter in a group with trumpeter Charlie Shavers, clarinetist Buster Bailey and bassist Wellman Braud. But by the late '40s, she worked mostly as a piano-vocalist soloist. She remained in music, based in Chicago, and by the '50s, her activities were measured. In 1961 she recorded a volume for Riverside's *Chicago: The Living Legends* series (with bassist Pops Foster, clarinetists Darnell Howard and Franz Jackson, et al.), which led to an NBC network special, *Chicago and All That Jazz*—and a follow-up album in 1962 on Verve. In the '60s, Hardin appeared in several Broadway shows and made a series of vocal sides for Decca. A month after Armstrong died in July 1971, at a televised memorial concert for him, Hardin suffered a heart attack, collapsed onstage and died on the way to the hospital.

Says Riccardi, "Personally, I've been thrilled to see younger musicians in the 21st century, such as pianist Caili O'Doherty, paying more attention to Lil as a complete person, studying her background, studying her solos, digging up lesser-known compositions and giving them a modern spin. Lil was much more than just the woman behind Louis Armstrong. She was a pioneer in her own right and it's about time that she's being treated that way."

For more info visit louisarmstronghouse.org

Recommended Listening:

- King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band—*Centennial* (Archeophone, 1923)
- Louis Armstrong—*The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* (Columbia-Legacy, 1925-30)
- Johnny Dodds—*Definitive Dodds* (Retrieval, 1926-27)
- Lil Hardin Armstrong and Her Swing Orchestra—*The Chronological* (Classics, 1936-40)
- Sidney Bechet Trio—*New Orleans In Paris* (Vogue, 1952)
- Lil Hardin Armstrong and Her Orchestra—*Chicago: The Living Legends* (Riverside, 1961)

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

and psychologically. But if you're asking me about the scene, the scene has nothing to do with me. The scene is created by other people, many of them who have the power to make decisions that I might not agree with, so I have nothing to do with that.

TNYCJR: Have you always avoided the music scene and carved your own path?

PRIETO: You better stay clear or you become what people [expect from you.] I do music because this is what I do and have been doing all my life. I don't know what's happening in the music industry but I am able to see it's not getting better. People have an optimistic [view] of things but I don't see that. I see that the music business has become more entertainment than music. It has become more fake and hollow. I'll keep doing the music that I like doing until I get tired and retire.

TNYCJR: Has it always been like that?

PRIETO: No, I don't think so. There was a sense of culture and people in the music business had a sense of what music is and what direction it should be going, respecting individuality. Now everyone has to be the same. The people that have become successful all sound the same. Before, there were people with culture, now it's all about business and money. It has little to nothing to do with music...I just think it's a hollow state in the music business, or whatever it's called. I wouldn't even call it a music business anymore: where's the music and where's the business?

TNYCJR: That loss of culture reminds me of a quote of yours from a *DownBeat* interview, "The only reason we have a Charlie Parker is because there is one Charlie Parker. If we had a thousand, it wouldn't be Charlie Parker." Everyone is trying to fit the mold of what they expect the general public will like rather than creating their own art.

PRIETO: We live in a fake society and this has increased big time. This affects the culture of people, attention span, the level of intelligence and the behavior. Music cannot escape that because it is made by humans. If humans are affected by those things, then the music is going to be affected as well.

TNYCJR: Is this the general consensus within the jazz community and people will pretend to put a different optimistic spin on the future of the genre?

PRIETO: I don't know. I've lived [through] a few things in my life already and I don't understand how positive it can be if it keeps going in that direction. People are just pretending to give each other calm and relief and optimism to avoid the pain of confronting reality. I'm not that kind of person, I cannot deal with this because when you know, you know. After your eyes have been opened then it's hard to close them and ignore that reality.

For more info visit dafnisonmusic.com. Prieto is at Birdland May 6 (with Shelly Berg Trio) and The Jazz Gallery May 30-31 (with Henry Threadgill and Vijay Iyer). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Henry Threadgill & Make A Move—*Everybody's Mouth's A Book* (Pi Recordings, 2001)
- Arturo O'Farrill—*Live in Brooklyn* (ZOHO, 2003)
- Dafnis Prieto—*About the Monks* (ZOHO, 2005)
- Michel Camilo—*Spirit of the Moment* (Telarc Jazz, 2006)
- Dafnis Prieto Si o Si Quartet—*Live at Jazz Standard NYC* (Dafnison Music, 2009)
- Dafnis Prieto Sextet—*Transparency* (Dafnison Music, 2020)

(BIG EARS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

they tend to do), meaning that at points Georgia Hubley was the Arkestra's drummer and Ira Kaplan their vocalist and guitarist. The set varied widely, with such familiar Ra fare as "Space Is the Place", "Rocket Number 9" and "We Travel the Spaceways", trading off with Yo La Tengo tunes that included Kaplan and Hubley harmonizing on their gentle ballad "Dreaming". There was a sublime musical rapport—these rockers like noise as much as the jazzers do, and their set opener featured delightful cacophony.

The current edition of **Fieldwork** is a 20-year partnership between Vijay Iyer (piano, keyboards), Steve Lehman (alto) and Tyshawn Sorey (drums). The group was both loud and intense, with bursts of melody and amped-up collective improvisation. Lehman's solo

spot proceeded in squeaks, squawks and short staccato bursts before the trio's explosive entrance. Sorey played like a man possessed, making Iyer's contributions not always audible—but certainly *felt* in any case. Drummer **Barry Altschul** led Axiom 5, an all-star unit with Jon Irabagon (saxophone), Uri Caine (piano) and Mark Helias (bass). The octogenarian leader showed he remains as explosive on the skins now as he was in bands with Chick Corea, Anthony Braxton, Dave Holland, Paul Bley and others. Pianist **Kris Davis**, in a tight trio with regular collaborators Robert Hurst (bass) and Johnathan Blake (drums), proved worthy of all the accolades. They played music from the leader's latest, *Run the Gauntlet* ("Little Footsteps" and the title track) as well as some older songs plus the new and as-yet unrecorded "Congestion Pricing". As played, the pieces tend to be expansive (averaging 10-15 minutes each), shifting tone and tempo abruptly with wonderful dramatic effect.

Does British saxophonist **Alabaster DePlume** play jazz? I'm not sure, but does it matter? Not at Big Ears. Heard in a trio with Jeremiah Chiu (piano, ambient electronics) and Gregory Uhlmann (guitar), the leader's extremely breathy tenor playing is like none other, yet perhaps like Ben Webster's if taken to an extreme. He whispers into the instrument, and the result is strikingly original. Big Ears' emphasis is on musicians who are not only on the cutting-edge, but those who are making their mark now, which includes veteran musicians and young turks alike. A few acts that were missed (because you simply can't catch everybody at Big Ears) were esperanza spalding, Wadada Leo Smith (in various configurations), Joe Lovano's Paramount Quartet, Nels Cline's Consentrik Quartet and violinist Jenny Scheinman's All Species Parade with three guitarists—Frisell, Cline and Julian Lage. Sadly there was a cancellation from the highly anticipated Asha Puthli, the Indian-American singer who appeared on Ornette Coleman's *Science Fiction* (Columbia, 1972).

Other groups, which played jazz-adjacent music, included **Rich Ruth**, a thrilling group of improvisers and close listeners that also has its prog rock roots. Guitarist-keyboard explorer **Michael Rother**, the German rock pioneer—who played with Kraftwerk, Neu! and Harmonia—revisited his high-energy back pages with wife Vittoria Maccabruni (electronics), Franz Bargmann (guitar) and the wholly impressive powerhouse Hans Lampe (drums). It was a rare chance to hear this kind of music in the U.S. Immersion, the duo of former Wire songwriter and vocalist **Colin Newman** and his partner, singer-sound artist Malka Spigel, performed ecstatic trance music in darkness in front of a screen, which featured rapidly moving videos reminiscent of the light shows during the heyday of the Fillmore East and was just one of many shows that required "we're at capacity" announcements. There was the young **Magic Tuber String Band**, from Durham, NC, which played music based in old-time country but used it as a template for some striking original compositions that had both jazz and classical allusions. Courtney Werner proved to be an outstanding fiddle player, while Evan Morgan performed captivating drone-type sonics on pump organ.

At Big Ears, it is wholly possible to go from explosive jazz to quiet folk in venues along Gay Street, which are all within walking distance, from the historic, opulent Tennessee Theater to the Civic Auditorium, the most accommodating of the venues. As the festival site description aptly states of its mission in music and the overall experience since its inaugural 2009 edition, Big Ears presents "...joyful, meaningful, and transcendent cultural experiences that defy boundaries, fuel curiosity, ignite the spirit, and nourish the soul." Here's to more of the same with 2026's programming, which of course will prove to be anything but the same in open- and big-ear sounds.

For more info visit bigearsfestival.org