



## Interview with Miguel 'Angá' Díaz

INTERVIEW WITH ANGA LIVINGSTON STUDIOS. 2004

### **WHAT DOES YOUR NAME, ANGA, MEAN? WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?**

It comes from my father! My real name is Miguel Aurelio Díaz Salgas, but they call me Angá. It's like a family dynasty. He is Angá the First, I am Angá the Second and my brother could have been Angá the Third. But there are only two Angás. My grandmother told me that as a child, my father used to say 'Angá' 'Angá' when he cried. This is how Angá came to exist in the family. And when I was born, I inherited the name.

### **TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR FAMILY BACKGROUND, GROWING UP IN CUBA. DID YOU COME FROM A MUSICAL FAMILY? HOW DID YOU FIRST GET INTO MUSIC?**

I am from Pinar del Rio. I was born in a village called San Juan y Martinez into a musical family. There was always a musical atmosphere at home. From a very young age, I spent my time being creative, playing on anything and everything in the house. My mum used to throw cooking pots at me because there weren't any pans left in the kitchen without holes in them and she could not cook. Music was always around during my childhood, my dad played saxophone and the whole family was into music... it was like that.

I started playing when I was very young. I began studying percussion aged ten. I already knew about harmonies because my mother played the piano, but for me, it was percussion right from the start, drums and percussion.

### **WHAT KIND OF MUSIC DID YOU GROW UP WITH? DOES THE PINAR DEL RIO REGION HAVE ANY PARTICULAR TRADITIONAL STYLES?**

San Juan y Martinez is a village of tobacco farmers, and a place where they play rumba. The style of rumba played in Pinar del Rio is slightly different because of the way you beat the congas which is softer and quieter. On Sundays the whole village gathered in the square from 2pm to 6pm to throw a rumba. Everyone joined in. All my friends have grown up in this rumbero atmosphere. The person who first taught me how to play the congas still lives in San Juan. He used to take me to ritual ceremonies and to rumbas in people's houses. I have always lived in this type of environment, I was born breathing these things and this has been really good for me.

### **SO, ARE YOU SELF-TAUGHT OR DID YOU HAVE FORMAL MUSIC EDUCATION AS WELL? IF SO, WHAT FORM DID IT TAKE?**

I began my studies in a provincial school in Pinar del Rio. Things change as soon as you go to school! You have to learn subjects like harmony and music theory, as well as an instrument. This is very demanding, you must take on board what's been taught, and you have to adapt to the changes. You can't carry on as freely as before. I believe attending

school helped me. Cuban education is one of the best in the world in so many ways. It develops your potential and opens up your possibilities. You learn how to mix different styles of music, how to create and interpret sounds, and how to play your instrument. You are trained in how to structure your solos, where to put the silences, when to use or not to use certain techniques, you are given hundreds of different options. I really valued going to a Cuban Art School because I received an excellent and complete education.

**SO YOU MOVED TO HAVANA FOR YOUR HIGHER EDUCATION. HOW WAS THAT - COMING FROM A VERY SMALL TOWN TO THE BIG CAPITAL?**

As soon as I got to Havana something incredible happened. I am not sure if it was luck or destiny but on my first day at college, I rehearsed with my first ever group 'Opus 13' who were then called Treceto de la ENA. They were at the vanguard of all the Cuban art school bands and everyone wanted to be a member. I arrived the day they needed someone to play congas. They thought, look a new guy! He is from Pinar Del Rio! Everyone was shouting 'Angá Angá!'... Let me tell you, I did not want to play! I had just arrived and I was scared. The group broke up after four years and reformed under the name of Opus 13. This was the start of my professional career. I stayed with them for nine years before leaving. When I got to Havana, I felt I had reached paradise, everything was falling into place so quickly. I shared many great moments with my mentor Tata Güines, with Guillermo Barreto and with Cachaíto.... They are the musicians who impressed me the most when I arrived, they helped me realise that there were other avenues and other methods to creating and discovering music.

**SO YOU MOVED STRAIGHT IN WITH SOME SERIOUSLY GOOD, ESTABLISHED MUSICIANS! IS THAT WHEN YOU MET THE PERCUSSIONIST TATA GUINES, WHO YOU HAVE SPOKEN ABOUT SO OFTEN?**

When I arrived in Havana, The Vitier brothers were recording numerous television and film soundtracks and they called me in. But how could I record and study at the same time? I used to finish at the studio at one o' clock in the morning and the next day I got up and went to school. This is when I met Tata. We started to play together and share many recordings. Tata, Guillermo Barreto and myself were the three main percussionists who played on all the recordings organised by Jose Maria and Sergio Vitier. This is when I realised I had met my spiritual master. Tata was the first percussionist that my father made me listen to. In my house, there was a fantastic record called " Descargas Cubanas", with Yeyito, Negro Vivar, Cachao, Gustavo Tamayo and Guillermo Barreto... six or seven people in all.. and Tata Güines. I found my path there and then! This is the first record that really sealed my life! When I met them both, I used it as a reference.... It felt like being with my family and collaborating with both maestros was a gift.

**WHAT WAS IT IN PARTICULAR THAT INSPIRED YOU SO MUCH ABOUT TATA'S PLAYING?**

Tata Güines is the best, he is my idol! As well as learning his style, understanding his way of talking and the way he expressed himself, I also understood him on a deeper level, how his mind worked spiritually. If he changed the music at the last minute, I tuned into it straight away. He used to be a bass player. You notice that when he plays bongos because it's very melodic. He taught himself how to write melodies and how to use different techniques. He is not professionally trained but he knows what he is doing and he has soul. Everything about Tata Güines; his way of thinking, his way of making music, his way of mixing the beats, his way of playing Latin and other forms of jazz , his way of

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playing traditional music, he can play anything because he is open. This is basically what inspired me.

**YOUR NEXT BIG BREAK WAS JOINING IRAKERE, WHO WERE ALREADY AN INTERNATIONAL TOURING BAND. CAN YOU TELL US HOW THAT HAPPENED, AND WHAT IT MEANT TO YOU?**

Everyone knows Chucho Valdés as soon as he enters a room. I met Chucho soon after moving to Habana and seeing Irakere. They were THE group at the time and, like everyone else, I had to go and see them. Everyone was saying: "this is the truth, this is the way forward, this is the style of music we need to play!" I met Chucho when I was still in 'Opus 13'. It is such a long time ago I forgot the exact year, 1987? I think it was around '87 or '88. Following a performance I did, I was invited to play a solo whilst Irakere were getting ready. This is how my relationship with Chucho began. It started well but I never thought that years later I would join Irakere. This is how it all began, and we kept a musical friendship until I joined the band.

**WAS IT EASY TO JOIN A BAND LIKE IRAKERE, WHICH HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED FOR MANY YEARS, AND WHICH HAD A VERY PARTICULAR STYLE OF PLAYING, AND A COHESION AMONGST THE MUSICIANS? WAS IT EASY TO REPLACE SOMEONE AS RESPECTED AS THE CONGA DRUMMER, 'EL NINO' ALFONSO?**

No, I think that joining Irakere to replace 'el Nino' Alfonso, who was also one of my idols, was very difficult. I came from Opus 13, and although our way of working was similar, we played a different type of music and style of percussion, as I said, it was very difficult at first. Following in el Nino's footsteps and keeping the same driven pace and strength he provided for so many years was very hard. It was difficult for me to feel part of the group until I could do the same. I had to ask for a video to examine el Nino's techniques closer, how he moved his hands, how he beat the drums, so I could understand better. I did not feel connected at first. Although I was playing the same style, I did not feel I was in the right gear, until I understood the mechanism, then everything fell into place.

**YOUR TRADEMARK IS PLAYING A SET OF FIVE DIFFERENTLY TUNED CONGA DRUMS. OF COURSE, EL NINO DID THAT TOO, BUT IT'S UNUSUAL. CAN YOU TELL US HOW IT CAME ABOUT - AND WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OR BENEFITS FROM SUCH A LARGE NUMBER OF DRUM SURFACES?**

Well knowing how to play with five congas comes in stages. When I started, I used three or four and when I joined Irakere I used five like El Nino. Oscar Valdés told me, "you are playing with four, try playing with five!" I think that the most important aspect in having five congas is the tuning of the instruments. Your congas must be always well tuned, in fourths or according to whatever you are going to play; Latin, pop, or jazz. It varies according to the style of music. Eventually you will be able to hear and adjust the tuning to what you are playing. What is most important for me with the five congas is to be able to play and create melodies on the basis of what's happening around me. I believe you can mix or combine congas with any other instruments. With five congas, you can easily interact with the bass player or with the pianist. Together you can create numerous melodies which can include specific musical details, sound elements or whatever you want. I think that's most important in having five congas. I see them like a piano. I can make any kind of modulations, follow any chords and harmonic sequences possible. That's why I love playing with 5 congas!

**CAN YOU ELABORATE MORE ON YOUR MOVE FROM OPUS 13, YOUR FIRST IMPORTANT BAND, TO IRAKERE - WHICH ESTABLISHED ABROAD, OUTSIDE OF CUBA.**

Before joining Irakere I was in Opus 13 nine years. Being finally able to work with these maestros was incredible for me. When I joined I was 28 years old, I stayed with them for around for almost nine years. It was my biggest experience inside and outside of Cuba. I started touring and doing international jazz festivals. Slowly Angá started to make a name for himself, like the other musicians in the band. Before I decided to leave and join Chucho and the guys, I had wanted to collaborate with other musicians, with international ones, to open up my options an artist and as a solo percussionist. At some point as a musician you get anxious to see more, you need to find other sources of inspiration so you can continue creating. This is the reason why I felt I had to leave the band.

**YOU WERE OBVIOUSLY VERY LUCKY TO BE WORKING WITH SUCH PEOPLE, SO SOON. DO YOU HAVE ANY SPECIAL MEMORIES OF THOSE DAYS?**

We were touring at least twice a year with Irakere and taking part in all the major international festivals in Europe and other places in the world like Japan. Out of all the festivals we went to, the biggest number of people I met was in Sardinia, my first international festival. We shared the bill one night with Al Di Meola and he wanted to play with me. Being invited to perform on stage as soon as I got to the festival was one of the best moments of my life. Playing duo with only guitar and percussion was a very beautiful experience. That night, Irakere shared the bill with Billy Cobham, Chick Corea and Al Di Meola and it all ended up in a big party on stage, everybody playing together, it was a significant event for me. I have met lots of people at festivals who have impressed me but the only person who really had an impact on me when I saw him was Miles Davis. I have been impressed by many musicians, but I think Miles Davis was the one who had the strongest impact on me.

**WHY DID MILES DAVIS MEAN SO MUCH TO YOU?**

Miles and John Coltrane are my idols, both intellectually and musically. When I say idols I am not talking about percussionists, I am talking about idols outside the percussion world. The way they spiritually transcended the music and expressed themselves was phenomenal. What inspires me most is the spiritual dimension to their music. This is the type of music I want to make everyday and in every concert, fulfilling people's needs. This context is higher than any others. The music is spiritual because it comes from within. At the same time you have to transcend this energy to another level, find a way to give it meaning. They are the best examples of what spiritual music is and can do. That's why they are here, they are here with me. This energy will reach the people it is meant for.

**IS THERE ANY PIECE OF MUSIC WHICH - ABOVE ALL OTHERS - REFLECTS THAT IMPACT ON YOU? AND WHY?**

Love Supreme is a national hymn to spirituality, a musical hymn that demonstrates how to create and play music with simple things that will take you away, as Coltrane could do. I decided to pay homage to Coltrane in my record with a version of Love Supreme, bringing in congas, mixing in the DJ's special effects and a chant to Babalu, I don't know but during that recording I felt everything had to do with Coltrane, everything depended on him, I was doing this track for him and I felt that there were elements still missing. I spoke to people who knew him. His last project was about Africa. He had planned to include percussion in the harmony and in his compositions but he never got to do it. I wanted to do the song and dedicate it to him. Love Supreme will live on for centuries to come.

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**YOU HAVE ALSO MADE NEW VERSIONS OF OTHER JAZZ STANDARDS, CAN YOU TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT THEM.**

I mentioned earlier that I listened to a lot of pianists and one of my favorite players is Monk. I thought of recording Round Midnight, with the congas playing the melody instead of the piano. Later on we added strings to give a symphonic feel to the percussion and to take them to another level. That means not just playing conventional solos but bringing them to a classical jazz level and interpreting them in that vein. The melody was played out on the congas. This was a challenge and I am pleased with the results. When I embarked on the idea I had not really thought about the outcome, I just went for it and let it happen.

**LET'S GO BACK AGAIN TO THE TIME WHEN YOU LEFT IRAKERE AND MADE ANOTHER GIANT LEAP WHEN YOU JOINED THE AMERICAN 'NEW JAZZ' MUSICIANS, STEVE COLEMAN AND ROY HARGROVE. HOW DID THAT COME ABOUT? AND WHY DID YOU CHOSE TO WORK WITH THEM RATHER THAN OTHER YOUNG JAZZ STARS - OR OTHER LATINO MUSICIANS? AND - WAS IT DIFFICULT TO ADAPT TO THEIR STYLE?**

After leaving Irakere, I went to Europe, and lived mainly in Paris. I started to work with Steve Coleman. I first met Steve then Roy Hargrove. Working with Steve opened up a new avenue for me. I was playing this type of music for the first time and I had difficulties understanding the framework. I was familiar with an approach basic to all Cuban groups, one that I had always relied on, that was always the same, a formula that I understood perfectly. When I started with Steve I thought:

“Where do I play? Where do I put my hands”? He would tell me to put them where it felt right! I had problems until I realised what I should let go of all the preconceptions in my head, all my habits, and reach deep within myself and play the way I felt. Working with Steve was very important because it opened up new doors, showed me the other side of the musical coin, and introduced me to music I was not used to playing or listening to. This expanded my mind musically and enabled me to take on more projects. The same thing happened with Roy, although it was more basic jazz work, it was also very important for me. Collaborating with them opened up new avenues and helped me to continue my journey.

**YOUR CHOICE OF PARIS AS A NEW BASE SEEMS TO HAVE INTRODUCED YOU TO A LOT OF NEW MUSIC AND CULTURES. WAS IT EXCITING AND SIGNIFICANT?**

Yes, Paris was very important, firstly because of the number of different musicians living there and secondly because it is a place where the possibilities of mixing and merging sounds are endless. I don't think it changed the way I played but it changed my way of thinking about how I could interact with an African drummer, with a Hindu or with an Arab percussionist and it didn't make me change the way I played. On the contrary, I learned more about how to collaborate and work daily with all sorts of musicians. This is very enriching. Paris is a powerful international musical melting pot, a truly heterogenous city. Myself and the other musicians living there were bouncing off each other, creating a new fusion everyday. This changes the way in which you say things and I believe it was very important.

**I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU VISITED SENEGAL AND INDIA WITH STEVE, DID THE TRIP AFFECT YOUR PLAYING?**

Even though I do all these types of investigations, the music I like to play has never stopped being Cuban. For example, I feel that all my experimental mixing and fusing projects are always done the 'Cuban way'. The Cuban factor has to be there. Juan de Marcos called me for 'A Toda Cuba Le Gusta', the first Afro-Cuban All Stars record, I was happy to go back to my roots, to my rhythms, to be with my people. I really felt at ease on this record and had a good time. I met Nick Gold and World Circuit, I met Rubén Gonzáles, Guajiro Mirabal, and Cachaíto. I already knew them but I had spent little time with them. I think 'A Toda Cuba Le Gusta' is a brilliant record. Juan de Marcos was the one to take the first step, the first big step that made Cuban traditional music such a huge phenomenon. Yes it was a great experience for me.

**THROUGH THOSE CONNECTIONS, YOU WERE ABLE TO PLAY WITH THE GREAT RUBEN GONZALEZ - HOW WAS THAT?**

Well playing with Rubén was an honour and a great pleasure. He was a great pianist - God rest his soul - he was brilliant as a pianist and as a person. I think he left us with many fine memories both as a person and as a pianist. He was extraordinary. Before he died, 'El Señor' Rubén González was where he should've been a long time ago.

**THROUGH THAT EXPERIENCE, YOU WORKED WITH THE BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB MUSICIANS - IS THAT HOW YOU CAME TO KNOW CACHAITO AND WORK ON HIS GRAMMY-WINNING 'CACHAITO' ALBUM? WAS THAT AN INTERESTING, PLEASURABLE EXPERIENCE?**

One of the records I made and one I felt most happy with. Working with Cachaíto is delightful. He agrees to anything, he plays everything and he is one of these musicians who always keeps an open mind. Cachaíto's record was like a laboratory, we called it a laboratory because so many ideas were floating around in the studio. It was Cachaíto's music but we wanted the music to closely correspond to Cachaíto's personality. We knew that he was an open-minded musician who had played jazz all his life. He knew all types of music and we wanted to project a genuine image of Cachaíto, and reflect his true personality. Nick and I decided to incorporate ambient sound effects and various other styles. We added a touch of hip-hop without losing the concept of the record. We used Cuban traditional music and other styles of music as well. The sound formula was a big success I think. At the same time, underlying the record was this spiritual energy we both have in common. He is playing his music whilst I am also relaxed, in a spiritual and peaceful frame of mind. He relates to his bass the same way as he lives his life. So everything was spiritual and peaceful, that was the aim and we achieved it. Yes, I have always thought that my record was a continuation of Cachaíto's record in relation to the sound. His record is about experimenting with a new sound. I went a little further on mine, but it's the continuation and the development of that sound.

**WHAT DID YOU TAKE FROM WORKING ON CACHAITO'S ALBUM, WHEN YOU CAME TO PRODUCE YOUR OWN?**

I think Cachaíto's record included specific sounds like Amadito Valdés' timbales, like Carlos González's bongos... I don't know... It was like in Cuba.... To lay down what is the basis of Cuban music and add in the flavour in another way. These sounds were distinct but familiar to us. It's the same Afro-Cuban style of percussion. I used it in my group, aside from the other percussionists, because I knew that this type of percussion was going to give me the exact sound I was looking for. It's the basic Cuban formula with

additional violins and brass and my way of playing that will change a little within this. It is clear that when we recorded both Cachaíto's and my record, there was a party atmosphere in the studio, and it was a great party.

**TELL US ABOUT PREPARING FOR THE ALBUM: WHAT IS THE TITLE AND WHERE DID THE IDEA COME FROM?**

Once I finished Cachaíto's recording I started to work on my own record, called Echu Mingua. Echu Mingua is my saint's name in the Yoruba religion. The 'Echu' is Eleggua, the God of crossroads, and the owner of all the roads in the world. I wanted to give it this title because it's the realisation of all my ideas, what I have been organising and have had in my head for years to be able to make a record. For ages I kept dropping and adding ideas, thinking yes, no, until it was time to go into the studio. As I just said, it is a continuation of Cachaíto's record. The sound on Cachaíto's record is experimental and it was successful. Now, I think it is broader, more elaborate... This record is like a musical religious service. In case you don't know, spiritual music is when you invoke the spirits to come to earth, inviting them to a party or to talk with them. This is the entire concept of the record. I did not think of it as a record, but as a performance because I am going to use painting and visual arts, and link it to music. I believe pictures absorb sounds as they get painted ... the majority of artists paint whilst listening to music and it must work both ways. I believe sound resonates in the brush strokes at a level where you can see it. That's why I want to link painting with percussion. When a painter is painting, it is possible for me to play what he is painting and for him to paint what I am playing! I am hoping to convert this record into something bigger, into a performance, or a live show to illustrate this concept, featuring visual art and involving a Cuban painter named Manuel Mendive.

On the whole, the record has been a spiritual experience, with many great and happy moments. I felt good, and glad, to have been able to realise this project.

Edited by Dave McGuire, from Angá Díaz interview with Sue Steward.