



A DAY WITH ROGER SQUITERO

By Alex Pertout

Recently I had the good fortune to spend some time with renowned New York-based percussionist, Roger Squitero. He has nurtured an eclectic career as a first-rate studio and touring musician, which has resulted in performances in an array of genres with artists such as Angela Bofil, Dave Grusin, Dave Valentin, Michael Franks, Irene Cara, Whitney Houston, Ashford & Simpson, Michael McDonald, Donna Summer, Christopher Cross, Yma Sumac, Marcus Miller, Herbie Hancock, Gloria Gaynor, James Moody, Andrea Bocelli, John Legend, Willie Nelson, Stevie Wonder, Jennifer Lopez, Steve Winwood, Tania Maria, Gregory Hines, Vanessa Williams, Phil Collins, Luther Vandross, Al Di Meola, Boca Livre, Anita Baker, Smokey Robinson, Cyndi Lauper, Grover Washington Jr, Blondie, The Rolling Stones, Spyro Gyra, Chaka Khan, The O'Jays, Marc Anthony, Dave Samuels, Mike Mainieri, Sadao Watanabe and Ron Carter just to name a few.

He has taken part in many Broadway and off-Broadway productions including The Big Deal, The Civil War, Wildhorns, Brooklyn The Musical, Burn The Floor, Priscilla Queen of the Desert, Motown, Tarzan and Chronicle of a Death Foretold in which production he met his wife, actress and singer Sandra Santiago. He is soon also to take part in Ain't Too Proud, the story of The Temptations. Roger created the project Tribal Sage with fellow percussionist Javier Diaz, which released the album 'Behind The Mask'. He has also worked as a product development consultant for percussion makers Latin Percussion, a company with whom he has had a long association as an endorsee and also helped in the development of the LP Shekere and the LP Percussion Table. I met Roger while he was in Australia performing with The Dizzy Gillespie Afro-Latin Experience led by bassist John Lee. Here is the result of our encounter.

I believe you were born in Washington, D.C. - what inspired you to start playing?

Yes, I was born in Washington, D.C. and was really influenced to start playing conga drums by local drummers playing in parks in D.C. You know, I was super-into music from the time I was a little kid, but I just never got started until high school. Around the mid-1960s, is when I started hanging out in these parks; this was during the hippie era.

So congas were your first instrument?

Yes, I started with congas. There was one particular public park where conga players would gather and play. So that caught my attention and grabbed me. It was the beginning of my journey.

Was the drumming in the park folkloric style?

Yes, but I would describe it as non-professional versions of *rumba*. I am sure if I went back now and listened to it, I wouldn't be able to last more than five minutes. But at the time it was the sound of the drum and it grabbed me. You know, you can look at your life in many different ways: the way I look at mine is that period, was basically me recognising my destiny, my path; that this was what I came here to do, in large part.

Did you grow up in a family with a strong musical background?

No, I am a total outsider. Neither did I have Latin American influence, nor was anybody in my family musically inclined. Although my father managed a jukebox company, so I had unlimited access to 45 rpm records. So a huge musical influence in the house that way.

And what type of styles featuring conga drums were you inclined to listen to in those days?

Well, my first influence, in terms of conga drums, was R&B music, Motown and artists such as Curtis Mayfield, who was a big influence on me.

That was prior to the Santana's entry into popular music worldwide.

Yes. I actually saw Santana at Woodstock. And you know the interesting thing about that is, on the 10-year anniversary of Woodstock, I was doing a gig in New York City with Michael Shrieve that very night, and I was like, "Wow! This is heavy!"

As you commenced your career what types of playing opportunities developed for you?

Well, from Washington, D.C. I actually joined a commune that lived in New Hampshire. I was there with Bonnie Raitt's brother, who played guitar and sang - very much influenced by Bonnie - and there was another guy in the commune who played bass, so we had a trio. My first professional work was in the New England area playing colleges and coffee houses. Then that whole commune moved to Northern California. When the commune moved to California, I wanted to get more serious about the music, so that's when I decided, "Well, I want to move to San Francisco and study." I moved to San Francisco around 1973, lived there five years



and then moved to New York City.

Who did you get to study with in San Francisco?

I studied with Richard Adelman who gave me the basis of conga technique. When I got my proficiency up to a certain level I started playing gigs in the Bay Area, I also started to meet guys that really influenced my playing like Bill Summers, John Santos, the Escovedo family, Pete and his daughter Sheila and Pete's brother Coke Escovedo. There was still a very flourishing Latin-rock scene at the time, Malo, Azteca, Santana. So that became a huge influence on me.

So that would have been right at the peak of the Latin-rock scene there?

Yes, it was. It was a great a time in the Bay Area for that music. Bill Summers was also a huge influence on me. At the time Bill was part of Herbie Hancock's Headhunters. He really had the biggest influence on me as a percussionist. What I liked were the choices that he made as a percussionist. I would say that probably influenced more than anything, more than any kind of drum technique. I was examining the choices that Bill made in a musical context.

With whom were you playing during that time?

I joined a band called Night Flyte. It was a fusion band, influence greatly by Return To Forever, the first version of that band with Airtio and Flora Purim. Then later, in September 1977, we moved to New York and have been there ever since. When I moved to New York, the one friend I had was percussionist Carol Steele. I met Carol through Raul Rekow and John (Santos). She was working at this shop, the Professional Percussion Centre. After a year or so she left to go on tour with Diana Ross and then she gave me her job at the

shop, which was a great place to work. I worked there for about a year and a half, and that's where I met so many great drummers. You know, Jo Jones would come and just hang out all day long, sit on a little stool and tell stories. Drummers would come to that shop and hang out just a listen to Jo talk all day. When I moved to New York I also became friends with Sammy Figueroa and Manolo Badrena. Sammy and Manolo were old friends from Puerto Rico and I would say for about a good five years we hung out non-stop and played all the time. So Manolo was another really big one influence on me, again, because of his musical choices. Both Manolo and Bill (Summers) besides being heavily Afro-Cuban influenced were Afro-Brazilian influenced. Using lots of colour percussion, the way the Brazilians do: textures, colours and sounds.

One of my first recollections of your touch was your beautiful ability to incorporate sounds and textures on the live record you did with Dave Grusin in Japan.

Oh yes, that's the GRP All Stars 'Live in Japan' album. You know, what happened is, shortly after I moved to New York with the band Night Flyte, we were playing locally and vocalist Angela Bofil came and heard us. She just loved the band and she just started hiring me to do gigs in New York. She had just signed a record deal with GRP Records; they had only one artist at that time, Dave Valentin. Angela got me on her record, and that's where I met Dave Grusin. That was my first New York recording session, it was 'Under the Moon, Over the Sky', a tune that Angela wrote and Dave Grusin arranged. And that became my working time for GRP Records. Then they started hiring me for all of their other recording projects. Then Dave Valentin hired me to play in his band, along with the bass player that I moved to New York with, Lincoln Goines.

It sounds like a great period for the development of your career in New York.

Yes, it was a great period in New York. I was very lucky in terms of timing. My time in San Francisco was really the end of that wonderful Latin-inspired period. By the time I left, the whole San Francisco music scene, by the late 1970s, was really starting to die out, but New York was flourishing still - it was super-flourishing. There was music everywhere. It was a much more dangerous city, but creatively it was just amazing. And I was lucky to move to New York City with the band. I could be seen and heard without trying to break in.

GRP Records was extremely successful, what eventually happened to the label?

They eventually sold the label to Arista Records, I believe in the mid-1980s, so they owned the label for quite sometime. Dave Grusin and Larry Rosen did exceedingly well with that label. I believe it was one of the first companies to release CDs. They kind of introduced the concept and the marketing of CDs, rather than long-play records.

So your studio work with GRP artists would have opened many doors in the New York studio scene for you?

Yes, during that period of the New York Studio scene, people saw you at recording sessions, saw your name on records and started calling you.

In that era of the session scene, were you in touch with percussionists such as Ralph MacDonald and Jimmy Maelen?

Yes, absolutely. Sometimes I would sub for Ralph or Jimmy. You know, when I got to New York, it was: Ralph, Jimmy and Sammy Figueroa - those were the guys. I met Sammy the first week I was in New York. I saw him playing in a club, I introduced myself and we become friends. We spent a lot of time together; he also introduced me to the New York studio scene, at times had me subbing for him if he couldn't make a date. In those days there were plenty of times when you would get double-booked.

Over the years the studio scene all around the world has changed drastically, how did you experience those changes in New York?

I started seeing the writing on the wall in the mid-1980s when drum machines came in. I mean, I used to get calls to come in and do a backbeat on a tambourine, so that all disappeared. You know, the first thing that happened for percussionists and drummers was there were like two or three drum programmers in New York City that were just getting all the work, drums and percussion. I started seeing that the jingle work was disappearing, I wasn't getting shaker calls - light stuff that I used to get - this work was suddenly going to drum programmers. I remember I had this conversation with a friend and he was talking about another musician, telling me, "Well he is retiring, he is just going to collect his pension now." And I asked, "What do you mean, 'pension'?" And he said, "Well, you know we have a pension in our union?" And I am like, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, every time you do a session, you get a contribution, and you build up your pension." And this particular musician was making quite a bit from his pension, and I said, "Wow, I didn't know he was doing that many sessions." And my friend said, "No it wasn't the sessions, it was his work on Broadway." So then my radar went up towards Broadway. Up to that point, Broadway was kind of looked down on by session musicians.

Even here, theatre work at the time of the session scene had the same characterization. It was a step down; it was for guys that couldn't get the recording session work.

Now, it has become 'the' gig!

Now, it's the *only* gig! So through my many years of doing Broadway shows I was able to build up my pension, which I am now collecting. Fortunately for me, I did my first show in the mid-1980s and I have done 9 and I have a new one coming out in February. It's the story of The Temptations, it's called



Ain't Too Proud and I'm hoping for a long run.

On Broadway nobody ever knows anything about how long a show is going to run. It often surprises and it just blows people away, like, "Didn't see that coming!" And then the big show is like, "This is going to be a major hit!" And it falls on its face! So nobody really knows. I know this new show is fantastic because I did the workshop, and then it's been touring the United States for a year. Everywhere it has gone, it has sold out, it has received great reviews. It's a really good story. I mean there is a lot of drama in the life of The Temptations.

I believe you did *Tarzan*? Were you instrumental in the development of the percussion parts for the show as well?

Yes, I took part in the development of the percussion parts for that show. That was a great collaboration. First of all, we were playing along to a lot of Phil Collins' tracks as he had made drum tracks for us. There were loops that we were playing along to and Gary Seligson, who was on drum set, was playing and triggering the loops. Basically, when I got to rehearsal, the percussion parts in my book were in the main just rhythmic slashes. Phil came out to Javier and I, - that's percussionist Javier Díaz, who was brought in on my recommendation - on the first day, and said, "Look, play what you hear, and if I don't like it I'll let you know, otherwise you are on your own to come up with parts that work." He said, "I know your work, I trust that this will be fine." So they became the parts for the percussion book.

Interesting approach. I believe a similar approach was conducted when the parts were developed for *The Lion King*, which I had the opportunity to play here in a couple of long seasons. I must say the percussion book is great.

Yes, those parts were developed for *The Lion*

King by percussionist Rolando Morales-Matos.

Is *Tarzan* still running on Broadway?

No, it only ran on Broadway for a year and a half, but I think it's still running in Europe. It was running in Germany and Holland for almost ten years. I think they just did a better job of producing it, to be honest. I think on Broadway they never really made it exciting enough. When they took it to Europe, I think they had gorillas flying all over the theatre and it was really exciting.

So you've had some outstanding experiences on Broadway.

Yes, and there are a couple of great things about Broadway, like, that you can sub up to 50% and you can also take leave of absence. So, if I wanted to go on tour for a year, I can take a leave of absence, and somebody else would take over my chair, and when I come back, it's still mine. That's a great thing about it. That, plus again, the pension contribution and healthcare is a big plus. You know, playing exactly the same show, you really hope that the music is good enough to sustain it. The bad part about working in shows is that the part of New York were the theatres are, is exactly the part of New York City that I try to avoid with every possible movement. Is just so crowded, the sidewalks packed with people. Over time, that can wear you out, especially at my age.

How did your connection with Luther Vandross develop?

That was a great experience. I was with him for about 5 or 6 years. We did a live record, it was mainly touring, I was part of his touring band. That was a big learning experience because he was such an amazing vocal arranger, so I got to watch him with five background singers - all his arrangements, all the rehearsals - and learned so much about where he placed the voices, it was really cool.

Among your many musical experiences I believe you also spent some special time in Brazil, and actually during the Rio de Janeiro carnival time?

Oh, yes I did. I toured with Al Di Meola and we had Zé Renato from the group Boca Livre. Zé and I became really good friends, he invited me to stay in Rio, this was during the carnival season. He took me to hear Gal Costa one night and Armando Marçal was playing percussion. After the show, which ended around midnight, he invited me to check out the rehearsal by Escola de Samba Vila Isabel. The rehearsal was until six in the morning. That night at the rehearsal I got to play with that particular Escola de Samba.

That's amazing, what parts did you get to play?

I played pandeiro, agogô bells, we were switching around - it was one of the most fun things I have ever done in my life. And then we went to carnival and watched the procession, it was amazing. I learned a lot, watching how all the parts worked together in the *batucada* rehearsals. Also hanging around with Marçal while in Rio, going to a few of his gigs. I ended up spending a month in Rio with Zé and his wife Patricia Pillar, who is also a great actress. They were so generous with me, they let me stay for a month in their home, they introduced me to so many musicians, I had such a good time.

What would you say are your favourite percussion instruments?

I love playing conga drums: the feel of it, right? The feel of your hand hitting skin, the tone. But I also really love playing hand percussion. I think my forte as a player, like I said earlier based on the influence of Bill Summers, is to add the right colour, the right groove that supports the music. I think that is where I am very successful and why I get hired. I am probably not getting hired to take those monster conga solos; I am getting hired to make the band sound better.

How do you see the new technical advances of conga technique? It has experienced a remarkable development technique-wise.

Yes, it has been an amazing development. Personally, the way I practise is with five drums: one in the middle, while the others make a semi-circle around me. In my mind I have developed a technique of using triangular vectors. So you are sitting with the drum in front of you, and then you've got to the left and right two drums, which is one triangle. And then another two drums there, so you have a second triangle. So I noticed in terms of movement, that if I visualise those vectors, my hands and arms move more efficiently. In terms of tuning, I tuned them to F, G, A, C, D. That's basically, to me, the range of congas. You have a tumba low enough to go to the F, then you've got some really nice melodic choices. With that concept also, I tried to - and this totally comes from Giovanni Hildalgo - to be ambidextrous. Play strong with my weak

hand, as I do with my right hand, be able to go back and forth and switch like a basketball, you know, crossover dribble: you can go either way. So that's what I'm working on. And you know Carlos 'Patato' Valdés was a big influence on me, he was such a melodic conga drummer. On congas my first influence was Mongo Santamaría. That led me to Armando Peraza. So when I was living in the Bay Area, Armando was living there and he would come down to the band I was playing in and sit in. I got really friendly with Armando and Raul as well, and then when Santana would go on tour and would come to New York, I'd go and hang out with those guys. So I would say Mongo turned me on to Armando and Francisco Aguabella who was also in the Bay Area. So Mongo, Armando and Francisco were big influences, as well as Ray Barretto, Jerry González and then Giovanni, obviously, and Miguel 'Angá' Díaz, I just loved Angá, man. In terms of the younger generation of Cuban conga players, John Lee, who leads the band I am touring with has a studio in his house and this past summer Chucho Valdés hired the studio to do his new record, and John said to me, "I could really use some help on this, can I hire you as an assistant?" It was so great! I was able to be at those sessions and got to know Yaroldi Abreu. What an amazing conga player he is. You know, man, I am sure you realise - I never stop practising. You know, like I'm really not satisfied with where I'm at, as a player.

That is music, right? One is never going to get there.

Yes, like there is no end. It's like, how long are you willing to keep working at it? I still don't feel comfortable with my double stroke rolls (laughs). So I am not using double strokes when I solo. I mean, I practice them, but I still don't feel comfortable enough, and I've been working on them for a couple years. For me, the hard thing I didn't realise about the double stroke, is the fact that when you play regular open tones and slaps, the hand is



going forward into the drum. With the double stroke, the hand has to come back. It's a backward motion where you get the balance. So all the years of practising, before working on the double stroke, didn't help a whole lot.

What other recent projects have you been involved in?

Actually I just did a film. I am in the new 'Joker' movie starring Joaquin Phoenix and Robert De Niro. I am playing a musician in the house band in a type of tonight show, like the Dave Letterman show. I did the recordings for the movie. I have this great connection with bandleader Richard Baratta, who also happens to be a movie producer.

So are you following in the footsteps of your wife, Sandra Santiago? (Laughing)

(Laughs) She is so jealous! She is a great actress.

I loved her role on 'The Sopranos'. She is also a beautiful singer, do you get to work with her?

She did a cabaret show for a while. She was doing a soap opera in New York and she has a bunch of fans, and twice a year fans would come to New York for a convention. She would do a show for them and I would be her bandleader. As a matter of fact, we recorded an album produced by John Lee. She has done many Broadway shows, she has a great voice.

You have a recording project with percussionist Javier Diaz and I believe also have a project with guitarist Richie Sambora?

Yes, Javier is just an amazing percussionist, one of my favourites. After working on *Tarzan* for a couple of years, we developed such a great musical collaboration we decided to make a record together, so we put together Tribal Sage and released the album 'Behind The Mask'. Actually Javier will also be playing with me on this new Broadway show, he is the second percussionist on that. You know how it is with percussionists, sometimes two people speak the same language, they can communicate easily, understand their roles. It's like, "I know that if you pick that instrument up, that a good complement would be if I use this particular instrument!" And that is sort of understood between him and I. With Richie Sambora, I have been playing in a quartet setting, just guitar, bass, keyboard and percussion, using cajon and other percussion, blues-rock type of repertoire. I hope to expand on that; Richie is such a great guy to work with.

Can you tell me about your current band tour?

I am currently playing with The Dizzy Gillespie Afro-Cuban Experience, which is led by bassist John Lee. He was Dizzy's bass player for the last ten years of his life and took over the legacy of Dizzy's music. He leads the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band, he also leads The Dizzy Gillespie All-Stars which plays the be-bop side of Dizzy's music and then this band which performs Dizzy's Latin influenced side.

www.rogersquitero.com