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The competition may be fierce but Ray Barretto is arguably the conguero king, as Mark Sampson discovers

In hip-hop circles, handles or nicknames are generally self-bestowed. Ray Barretto had to earn the honorary 'Mr Hard Hands' from fans and peers. The hands presumably got ever harder during a career beating *conga* drums that spanned more than 50 years. The conga is an instrument of African origin played in a set of two to four drums and central to Cuban music. Congas have lent their name to a whole genre of music known simply as conga. From modest beginnings with Eddie Bonnemere's Latin Jazz group in the early 50s, Barretto went on to play with everyone from Charlie Parker to the Bee Gees.

He made the conga a staple of late 50s-early 60s post-bebop jazz; his was the first Latin record to make the national *Billboard* charts; he altered the instrumental format of traditional *charangas* by incorporating brass and helped to create the template for what we now label 'salsa'; and he won a Grammy for his 1990 *Ritmo en el Corazón* with Celia Cruz. Later he was granted a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters award and inducted into the International Latin Music Hall of Fame. All this while garnering the respect and affection of just about everyone who knew him. A big man whose big glasses lent him a professorial air, Barretto was described by flautist, Dave Valentin, as 'the most intelligent man I have ever known... One of the greatest musicians of his time'.

To lead a band – many different bands in fact – over a 40-year period demands durability and self-reliance. In a dedication to his mother in the sleeve notes of his final album, *Time Was – Time Is*, Barretto sketches his childhood in the Hispanic communities of New York: 'It seems that we were always on the run, from Brooklyn, to Harlem and finally to the Bronx. It was in the Bronx that my father left [to return to Puerto Rico], and... my mother and her three kids were to meet life head on'.

Born in 1929, Barretto soon grew to love music: that of his Puerto Rican heritage via his mother's treasured collection of 78s and jazz via the radio when she went out to night school to learn English: 'While they [his brother and sister] slept, I listened to our little table radio until I heard her key at the door'. He would listen to broadcasts of Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and other great swing bands of the time. When he was older, his dance-mad mother would take him out to local clubs. One memorable night he saw the legendary Machito Orchestra: his favourite of all Latin bands and 'the direct

Top to bottom – the changing faces of 'Hard Hands': conga superman on *Indestructible*; in his New World Spirit days; a young, clean-cut Barretto



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link between Cuba and New York'.

At 17, young Barretto thought he'd give his mother one less mouth to feed by joining the US Army. Jim Crow [segregation laws] still operated in the forces, but the time he spent in the company of his 'colored' colleagues helped cement his love of jazz. At the Orlando Club in downtown Munich, he would sit in on jam sessions organised by black soldiers using the back of a banjo head as rudimentary percussion.

Here he first heard Chano Pozo, the legendary Cuban *conguero*, with the Dizzy Gillespie big band. Demobbed and back in New York, he bought some second-hand *tumbadors* and served his apprenticeship in clubs like the Bucket of Blood. Barretto was now a man with a purpose.

In 1990, he would appear in an honorary concert at the University of Puerto Rico billed as 'The Two Lives of Ray Barretto'. There were always two Ray Barrettos. Ever

the pragmatic family man, he recognised that his first love, jazz, wouldn't pay the bills. So, while forging a reputation as house conguero for the three big jazz labels of the time – Blue Note, Prestige and Riverside – he held down the conga spot (vacated in 1957 by his perennial rival, Mongo Santamaria) with Tito Puente for four years. During this time, he recorded with jazzmen great and small: from Gillespie himself and Wes Montgomery to Oliver Nelson and Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis.

Riverside recruited Barretto for two albums as leader: *Pachanga with Barretto* and 1962's *Latino*. Typically, that same year he released a brass-enriched *Charanga Moderna* on the Tico label. It spawned the boogaloo hit, 'El Watusi', which went gold the following year. Though it helped support the family, the record became something of an albatross: 'It was all the kids wanted to hear. And the label always wanted another one'.

When he signed with Fania Records in 1967, Barretto felt he could start afresh. That year he brought out *Acid*, the first of a rich seam of classic recordings, followed by *Hard Hands*, *Que Viva La Música* and *Indestructible*. It was tight, brassy dance music to complement his role as percussionist and later musical director of the Fania All Stars.

Mr Hard Hands ruled a period of transition when 'Latin' became 'salsa'. While suggesting that salsa was nothing new, Barretto once acknowledged that 'there was something different... than in the eras before, about the force in the charts that drove the brass, about the sheer drive pushing the rhythm section'.

Ray Barretto finished his illustrious career with different permutations of his Latin jazz septet, New World Spirit. He died, of heart failure, in February 2006. Trombonist Jimmy Bosch said he hoped 'the legacy of this Afro-Caribbean musical giant never fades away'. Two musical giants in fact. There were always two Ray Barrettos. ●

Ray Barretto features on the I Like It Like That compilation reviewed in this issue

BEST...

...ALBUMS



Fania All Stars, *Live at Yankee Stadium Vols 1 & 2* (Fania, 1976)

Ray Barretto and Mongo Santamaria go head-to-head among a galaxy of Latin stars, propelling some of the most pulsating live music of any genre you will ever hear.



Ray Barretto and New World Spirit, *Ancestral Messages* (Concord Picante, 1993)

The best of the uniformly classy New World Spirit releases – if only for the fine versions of 'Killer Joe' and tenorman Eddie Harris' 'Freedom Jazz Dance'.



...COMPILATIONS



Ray Barretto (Warner Jazz, 1996)

A lovely varied compilation of best moments from the Prestige and Riverside days, including an extended version of 'Manteca' with pianist Red Garland, who performed with the Miles Davis quintet.



The Essential (Fania, 2007)

Probably the best overview of his Fania career, this double compilation also features 'El Watusi' and three other tasty morsels from the Tico and UA recordings.



Latin Soul Man (Fania, reissued 2007)

Another great compilation from Fania, reissued last year and selected as a Top of the

World album in #44.

LIKE RAY BARRETTO? THEN TRY... PONCHO SANCHEZ

Chile Con Soul (Concord Picante, 1990)



The big-bearded Cuban's combo delivers less jazz and more salsa than New World Spirit, and never disappoints. This fine starter features Tito Puente and culminates in a great 'Cold Sweat/Funky Broadway' medley.



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