



October 1997

..It's one of the first rehearsals for Santana with their new drummer, the monstrous Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez. The band is working through one of its classic tunes, and as the deep groove intensifies, Hernandez seems to grow two extra arms and legs, playing a dizzying combination of cowbells, toms, and splashes on top of the central drumset foundation. Nodding his head in approval is Carlos Santana, as he rips the feedback from his guitar and then points heavenward. Feeling the syncopated beat offered up by the new drummer, percussionist Raul Recow smiles broadly as he pounds his massive hands on the congas. The band is reaching a new level of rhythmic intensity, thanks to "El Negro".

Hernandez is in California rehearsing with Santana, having arrived from New York City ... by way of Rome... by way of Havana. Horacio's globe-trotting recent past is certainly fitting: his worldly beats signify an important fusion of the Afro-Cuban drumset/percussion tradition that was begun half a century ago in Havana by Candido and Walfredo Reyes, Sr. with steamy brew of jazz, funk, rock, and fusion that was sent into Cuba via Miami radio stations.

"In Santana you do not have to play," smiles Hernandez, whose newly died bright-red hair is a symbol of the freedom he feels with the band. Actually, El Negro is doing a lot of plying in the group, alongside veteran percussionists Raul Rekow and Karl Perazzo. "Raul has a power that I've never heard anybody play with. And he Karl have it down as to how to integrate Afro-Cuban music with rock. I'm in heaven listening to all these sounds. And nobody has to say anything to me about what to play. It's in the air, obvious. What is great is that everybody is into it. Everything is growing at the same time. It's like a rocket: All of a sudden - bang! - it goes straight to the moon."

Carlos Santana's attraction to Horacio's playing was just as immediate. In 1995 the drummer performed a concert with the band Irakere West at San

Francisco's Great American Music Hall, and Carlos was the guest star. The guitarist was so impressed with Horacio that when the time came to form a band for his 1997 world tour, Santana knew who he wanted. Besides doing an extensive tour with Santana and recording a new album (due out soon), Horacio hopes to complete a method book for drummers on independence. He also has an educational video in the works with bassist John Patitucci that will be released by DCI.

It's hard for many of us to imagine being detained for two weeks by the authorities at the age of thirteen for playing "the music of the enemy", or attending a school where congas and timbales are banned for political reasons. Nor is it likely many of us have been refused food for being of the wrong political party, followed by a government agent whenever we stepped over the border, or denied entrance to the country we wanted to visit. But these situations were all a part of the musical journey of Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez. His name may be new to many, but that says more about the sorry nature of international politics than does about the music track record of this thirty-three-year-old marvel of independence.

"Set-drum playing in Cuba, with the marriage of jazz and Cuban music, began in the pre-Castro days, and one of the guys who really knows about that is Horacio," says Walfredo Reyes Sr., the "left foot clave" pioneer who was mixing drumkit and percussion in Havana in the early 1950s. "I saw Horacio play with Gonzalo Rubalcaba's first group, and I was amazed. The evolution of music in Cuba has really picked up. I think Horacio is one of the finest young drummers in the business right now."

Three of the recordings that clearly showcase Horacio's growing talent and versatility are with Cuban pianist Rubalcaba and his group Proyecto. (Previously available only as imports, all are now distributed in US by Rounder Records.) Live In Havana (1986) began to establish Rubalcaba's group internationally as a Cuban version of Weather Report. Mi Gran Pasion (1987) is an inventive session imbued with the Cuban musical traditions. And Giraldilla (1989) is full of remarkable world-fusion tracks, recorded in Germany one year before Hernandez defected to Italy.

Hernandez had hoped to move to New York quickly, but legal hassles persisted for three years. The US embassy told him there were enough musicians in the United States already, and that he was free enough in Italy. The drummer found plenty of work in Rome, though, with the likes of Pino Daniele, Gary Bartz, and Steve Turre, and he formed his own band, Tercer Mundo. He also taught at the Universita Della Musica and chaired the Latin drums department of the Centro di Percussion Timba.

After seizing an opportunity to move to the US in early 1993, Hernandez was offered jobs by Paquito D'Rivera, Dave Valentin, and Michel Camilo, but didn't have papers to travel and had to turn the gigs down. He became a club musician in NY, and found work on album projects with Ed Simon, Victor Mendoza, and David Sanchez. He played on Paquito D'Rivera Presents 40 Years Of Cuban Jam Sessions for TropiJazz, and became a favorite drummer for that label. He jams with some of the giants on TropiJazz All Stars, swings gracefully with Tito Puente's Latin Jazz Ensemble and vocalist India on Jazzin', and displays his astounding percussion/kit ideas- with his amazing left-foot clave technique ? on pianist Michel Camilo's new Through My Eyes. "Important" is the word that comes to mind when hearing "El Negro".