



DANILO PÉREZ *PANAMA 500*

In 1513, Spanish explorer Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama, becoming the first European to reach the Pacific Ocean and founding the first permanent European settlement in the Americas. Those events continue to resonate five centuries later as Panama celebrates the landmark anniversary. On his new Mack Avenue release ***Panama 500***, favorite son **Daniilo Pérez** adds his voice to the tributes with a stunning portrait of his native land, its storied history, rich culture and fierce struggles.

Panama 500 is Pérez' most ambitious project to date, the furthest evolution yet of what the pianist/composer calls "three-dimensional music." His blend of influences makes him the ideal musical chronicler of his country's history: already a land bridge between the Americas with a vibrant indigenous culture, Panama also began to absorb European culture into its own following Balboa's arrival. Pérez similarly weaves together jazz and Pan-American folkloric traditions with influences from European classical music.

"I have been working for years to make music that has an identity very similar to the role that Panama plays in the world," Pérez says. "It's a place where a lot of influences from all over the world come together."

Pérez refers to Balboa's arrival as a "rediscovery," a word that succinctly encapsulates both the importance of his accomplishment and the controversy inherent in European colonization. As he traces Panama's evolution over the 12 tracks on ***Panama 500***, he gives literal voice to the indigenous Guna Indians of Panama, who provide intermittent narration to lend their own perspective on that history.

As Harvard professor David Carrasco writes in his liner notes, "The magical performances in this album emerge from the encounters of indigenous shamans, Spanish migrants of desire, the human agony of African slaves, multicultural love, and transcendent improvisations on agony and love."

To realize his expansive vision for this music, Pérez pulled together a host of musicians from his various endeavors. The album features both of his longest-running rhythm sections—trio mates Ben Street and Adam Cruz; as well as bassist John Patitucci and drummer Brian Blade, with whom Pérez works in the acclaimed Wayne Shorter Quartet. "There's a specific spectrum of language that I've developed with both trios," Pérez says. "With Ben and Adam, we use Latin American vocabularies to connect closer with jazz and to expand on the idea of *clave*. And with John and Brian, it's that language that we've developed playing with Wayne over the years that is indescribable. There's a zero-gravity component to it, where things come out of nowhere."

The rhythmic density is compounded throughout ***Panama 500*** by percussionists from three different countries: Roman Díaz from Cuba, Rogério Boccato from Brazil; and Milagros Blades and Ricaurte Villarreal from Panama. The classical influence, as well as evidence of Pérez' commitment to education, arrives in the form of violinist Alex Hargreaves, a former student of the Berklee Global Jazz Institute, the globally-minded program for which Pérez serves as artistic director.

Pérez explains that he composed the music for ***Panama 500*** almost as the score for an imaginary film about the country's past and present. It opens with "Rediscovery Of The South Sea," which serves as an overture to the suite and loosely describes the Spaniards' journey through the jungle. Díaz' percussion and chanting are meant to invoke the indigenous people contrasted against the more classically influenced melody; Hargreaves later plays an Asian-inflected melody, hinting at the connection with the East that the opening of the Pacific would facilitate. A dense, freely improvised passage with Street and Cruz was added, Pérez laughingly says, because "I'm sure the Spaniards got lost many times. So we went into the studio and I told Ben and Adam to play in that section as if they were lost in the jungle."

The track ends with the first of the Guna narrations, adding the insight of someone who was there to witness this portentous arrival. It briefly credits the “Great Father” and “Great Mother” with the creation of the Earth and claims that “this immense continent was granted to us as a loan so that we take care of it.”

The title track builds upon the rhythm of *La Denesa*, a traditional Panamanian folkloric dance, and builds into a celebration of how far the nation has come. And as with any celebration, by the end of the festivities things have loosened up a bit. “When the piano brings the melody back,” Pérez says, “I’m trying to play like it’s two o’clock in the morning and the left hand is drunk.”

“Reflections On The South Sea” opens with an elegant contrapuntal dance between the piano and Sachi Patitucci’s cello. After the robust spirit of the previous track, Pérez intended this piece to lend a more somber remembrance from the perspective of the ocean itself. “It hasn’t been completely easy,” he says of the isthmus’ history. “It’s been full of struggles as well as victories. I always feel like the sea is the main witness to what happened. I wish we could understand what it has to say.”

Named for the Guna term for the Americas, “Abia Yala” begins with a duet between the piano and the native pan flute before segueing into a trio piece with Patitucci and Blade. Both the old world/new world collaboration and the multi-cultural aspect of the trio, Pérez says, “are striving to send a message of hope, acceptance, respect and peace.” The music, he continues, is an extension of his work as a UNESCO Artist for Peace. “I’m working every second to make examples of how music can become a tool for the commonality of humanity.”

“Gratitude” is an example of the expanded *clave* approach developed with Street and Cruz, and simply expresses the titular sentiment to so many of the mentors and loved ones in Pérez’ life. “I started thinking about everyone from my father and mother to my teachers, Dizzy Gillespie to Steve Lacy to Jack DeJohnette and Roy Haynes, all the way to Wayne Shorter, my wife, my kids. I felt so much gratitude while I was making this record. If you look at the world there’s a lot of people not eating or living in warzones. I have the opportunity to be here and do this, and I listen to this piece with tears coming out of my eyes.”

2014 marks the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Panama Canal, an occasion which Pérez marks in his three-part “Canal Suite.” Largely improvised in the studio, the piece further highlights Pérez’ educational endeavors by featuring percussionist Milagros Blades, a young student of the Panama City-based Fundación Danilo Pérez. Another Patitucci/Blade trio exploration follows, aptly titled “The Expedition.”

A pair of Guna narrations frames the final track, “Panama Viejo,” a standard penned by Ricardo Fábrega, whose lyrics serenade old Panama, left in now-beautiful ruins by brutal pirate attacks. These final pieces end the suite on a combination of reflection, reminiscence, hope and respect.

“More than focusing on rediscovery we should focus on celebrating our histories, our stories, our music, our culture,” Pérez concludes. “My vision is to create music that serves as a cultural passport, hopefully with Panama as the bridge of the world.”

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