

L.A.'S ONLY JAZZ PAPER

L.A.

JAZZ
SCENE

FEBRUARY 2004

Issue No. 198



Photo by Gilberto Marcellino

AÍRTO MOREIRA



Airto's Life After That



by Patricia Albela

After Airto Moreira, the role of percussion in music will never be limited to rhythms. Moreira plays colors, sounds, and images. With small *caxixi* shakers, or a bundle of shells that sound like water running over stones, a *cuica* that grunts or sighs, and a thousand-and-one more sounds, he tinges music with new textures.

Downbeat magazine added the category of percussion to its readers and critics' polls because of Moreira. And throughout the '70s and '80s, he remained among the most sought-after percussionists, first choice for Quincy Jones, Herbie Hancock, George Duke, and Paul Simon.

Moreira moved to New York in the late '60s with his wife, singer Flora Purim, and attracted immediate attention by sitting in on jam sessions. His experimental approach and free style of playing got Joe Zawinul to refer him to Miles Davis, when he asked him if he knew of any "unusual" percussionists. Moreira stayed with Davis for two years, and performed on *Bitches Brew*, *Live-Evil*, *Live at the Fillmore*, and *On the Corner*.

"Once Miles came to me and said, 'you listen and you play,'" Moreira says. "And I thought, 'Well, I must not be listening.' So then I stopped playing and only listened... listened. So he came back a few days later, and he repeated, 'You listen and you play.' And then he said again, 'You listen and you play.' Then I understood he was not complaining. He was just telling me to play naturally whatever I heard in the music: To react to what I heard and play my sounds.

"Usually, we, musicians, think we are listening because we are. We are playing and listening, but there is a way of listening. When we are listening to music at home, we pay attention to the music, and

we relax, and we can see, almost like a picture, the piano player playing, and the drummer... And we can focus our attention on the music as a whole, or on each of the musicians. Now, that's the way we're supposed to listen when we're playing. We have to be relaxed, listen to what is happening and to what everybody is playing, and then react to what we listen to. And that's what Miles meant. You listen and you play."

For Moreira, listening is a way of life. He listens and he lives.

"When I was living in New York, I used to know the time of the day just by the sounds," Moreira says. "Like, 'it must be 5 o'clock in the morning, because the garbage trucks are coming, and also, the trucks that come from out of town bringing food into the city.' I used to sit at Central Park in a yoga pose, just relax, and hear the squirrels and the different kinds of birds. Now, every time I go to a forest I take a walk and just sit and listen, sometimes to the sound of nothing, really. It's some kind of meditation, this whole thing. It influences my being, myself, my emotions... Emotionally I'm more in touch with the real world, not just running and competing to be the first one to get there."

His way of listening through the years also changed his playing.

He no longer plays for the audience, the musicians, or himself. He plays for the music. His 2001 Narada release *Perpetual Emotion*, in association with Purim, marks, Moreira says, a slight change of style. The simple beauty of Moreira's work, using just shakers and triangle, in "Crystal Silence," is an example of a purely music-driven approach.

"I am not playing so aggressively anymore," Moreira says. "I am not playing really fast licks either. Now I play

totally loose and natural, and that is different from the way I used to play. I used to love to just go there and bang and make it happen. Now it happens naturally. The energy is there, but it's gentler and actually, I think the audience accepts it much better."

Audiences listen to Moreira. When he plays, people are entranced:

"Music is energy translated through us, musicians, into sound. It goes out as sound to the audiences, and the people feel something different," Moreira says. "If we really mean to play that energy music, the music that touches people on a positive way, you can see in people's faces that they are feeling great. They get elevated into a different state of mind and reality that takes them out of life's everyday hassles. They get transported into a higher level of awareness and that's what I always look for when I play."

Moreira works from his side (many times the center) of the stage, immersed in an array of instruments. There is a *pandeiro* or tambourine, *caxixis* and other types of shakers, six *surdos* or Brazilian drums, several gourds and beads from Africa, an Egyptian tabla, bird calls, and an Egyptian instrument "that you blow and has beads inside that make a great sound." Moreira calls them his "toys." He has plenty of them. For him, it is like collecting sounds.

"I wouldn't be able to play all of them even in 10 different concerts," Moreira says. "The other day I was looking for a particular triangle to record some stuff for my latest album. It's an old, rusty, Brazilian triangle, hand made years ago, that has a beautiful, crystal sound. I only needed it for three or four beats. The other triangles didn't have the pure sound I needed. I started opening cases. I have cases in my garage, and in

two big storage spaces. So I opened this huge case that I've had for about 25 years, and inside there were so many beautiful things I hadn't seen in more than 10 years. I saw a gourd, carved and painted by a Colombian friend, a couple of didgeridoos that I hadn't seen since the first time I went to Australia with Dizzy Gillespie, and an old, yellow and red cowbell that used to belong to the cowboy Kit Carson. Now I feel like instead of having my instruments well stored and in cases, I want to open everything up and just spread everything somewhere in a studio, leaving the instruments out there so I can just go and play whatever I want."

Airto's latest album is *Life After That* (Narada).

"It has a double meaning," Moreira says. "First of all, there is life after the way the world is right now. Watching the news is depressing. And I'm not talking about America or Iraq. I'm talking about everything. The whole world is in turmoil. But there was life before this turmoil, and after it, life will be there.

"The second meaning has to do with reincarnation, which is life after life," Moreira says. "Not everybody accepts it because we learn so many things from different religions. Our bodies, one day become like old cars that don't work anymore, but our spirits stay alive because we are spirits. So with the help of a higher spirituality, we are reborn in new bodies as children, and then go through the process again, many, many times, always evolving, until we get to a point where we can go into a better world."

How many lifetimes would have taken for Moreira to be born with such musical talent?

"I was not even walking yet when

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my mother started worrying about me," Moreira says. "From time to time, I'd be crawling in the living room and suddenly I would sit and shake and bang on the floor. My mother thought I was having seizures. So she took me to my grandmother's house and both of them observed me for two days. Nothing happened. Then one day I had a 'seizure.' My grandmother looked at me and turned off the radio. My 'seizure' stopped. So she put her hands over her head and said, 'Oh, my God! He's going to be a musician!'"

Shortly thereafter, Moreira's grandmother gave him his first *pandeiro* or tambourine, and he began playing then. *Life After That* includes a live *pandeiro* solo, which Moreira has been developing for many years in live performances. Just with a *pandeiro*, a whistle, his voice, and the microphone, Moreira evokes bare feet dancing in Rio de Janeiro's *Carnaval*, youngsters *batukando*—jam drumming—at the shores of a Brazilian beach, street peddlers, rain forest birds, and an Amazonian pow wow.

During one of the recording sessions, Moreira had to go out for two hours, leaving percussionists Giovanni Hidalgo, Meia Noite, Marco Gibi, and Michito Sánchez at the studio. When Moreira returned, he found that Hidalgo had written most rhythms on small pieces of paper, "distributed them around the musicians, and then put the pieces of the puzzle together like a real wizard." That's how "Hala, Tumba and Timbal" was created.

The opening cut, "Rhythm of the World," a *samba reggae*, features Moreira's daughter Diana on vocal arrangements and vocals, and guest singers Sonia Santos and Kátia Moraes. Hermeto Pascoal's early '70s composition "O Túnel," a slow *baião* with a dazzling melody, was recorded as an instrumental on *Natural Feelings*, Moreira's first album in the United States. Pascoal himself played the melody on flute.

"One day Flora said, 'I think I've got the lyrics for 'O Túnel,'" Moreira says. So she wrote them down and in about twenty minutes she said, 'I've got them.' When I saw them I said 'Oh wow! Those are incredible! That's inspiration.'"

In the new version, included in Moreira's latest CD, he beautifully sings Purim's lyrics.

"Just like Flora, my daughter Diana came up with lyrics for a beat box jam that I did with her husband, Krishna, about two years ago. It's the song 'Let it Out, Let it In.' When Diana heard the recording she said 'OK, wait a minute... I'm ready. Can I go and sing?' So she went and sang. This whole process took about an hour. She sang and then I did a vocal improvisation and that was it."

Diana Moreira is the lead singer in Moreira's new project, a jam band.

"It's a mixture of improvisation and jamming, and sometimes all that jamming becomes a song. In rehearsals, we play like for an hour-and-a-half or two hours, without stopping or talking between songs. It's about playing and keeping that really beautiful energy.

"The music has strong Brazilian rhythms, but I wouldn't say it's a Brazilian band. It's a jam band. Like we can be playing a Brazilian thing and then two minutes later it turns into something else. That's what I like to do, to jam. We're going to London by the end of January. We'll be at Ronny Scott's for three weeks. Then we're going to Italy, France, Portugal, and Switzerland."

So Moreira's present is the jam band project. And it's his future as well.

"Whatever we do now is our future," Moreira says. "So let's start now doing some good things for ourselves and everybody else, to make sure that the future will be OK."

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