



Photo: Patricia Varela

JOSE RIZO AT THE HOUSE OF BLUES WITH FRANCISCO AGUABELLA

by Patricia Albela

On any Friday evening at 7 o'clock, disc jockey Jose Rizo sits at KKJZ's (formerly KLON) control room as comfortably as in his living room, and talks to his listeners like he does to his friends. He has been doing it for 13 years, and he still remembers his first show at the station.

"I didn't know the board," Rizo says. "I thought the other DJ was going to train me, but he just left. I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm on the air in KLON, I'm on my own, and I don't know how to use the board.' So I sat there trying to figure it out. All of a sudden, the phone rang. It was Poncho."

Conquero Poncho Sánchez, a good friend of Rizo's, had encouraged him to go back to radio and highly recommended him at KLON. On the night of Rizo's first show, Sanchez was enthusiastically listening nearby.

"Poncho said, 'It's me, man. I can't hear anything on the radio.' I went like, 'What? No!' The first song I had played on the air had been completely silent. Poncho told me, 'Why don't you push some buttons and see what happens?' So I hang up, pressed the buttons and after about fifteen minutes Poncho called again and said, 'Oh bro, I think you got it now.'"

Rizo had stayed away from the radio for six years, when he first moved to Los Angeles to concentrate in finishing his electrical engineering studies. But one day, in 1989, he contacted then KLON's programming director Ken Borgers, and proposed a Latin jazz show. At first, Borgers was skeptical, because he had received similar offers, which focused on salsa. Still, he asked Rizo to tape a demo.

"So I went to the station on a Saturday and taped an hour show. I had collected all the albums from Areíto, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Chucho Valdés,

Arturo Sandoval, Irakere. At that time, the jazz world didn't know about these guys. So I did a demo with them and Luis Gasca. When I told Poncho, he immediately called Ken Borgers and, I guess, he told him I was a good choice and all that. The next day Ken called and asked me when I wanted to start."

Rizo had met Sánchez when he went with Cal Tjader to perform in Santa Barbara, where Rizo used to go to college and had his first experiences in radio and show promoting. In fact, Rizo booked Sánchez's first concert with his own band, which then included pianist Charlie Otwell, trumpeter Sal Cracchiolo, percussionist Ramon Banda and his bassist brother Tony, the musicians who helped Sánchez launch his successful career, and who were initially his garage band, *La banda del cuartoito*. The concert was also Rizo's first as an independent promoter. Before, he had produced the Annual Cinco de Mayo Latin Dance Concerts at UCSB, bringing Chicano bands such as Los Lobos and Tierra.

Rizo got into radio initially to help better represent the Chicano community.

"Once there was a Chicano radio program from Ventura College. The DJ's were just playing around, making jokes, nothing solid. I thought I could do it better. So I started writing letters to UC Santa Barbara to try to get a radio program. My thing was to do it right and to teach people positive things about us; to be professional, even though I had no idea how, because I had never done radio before."

Rizo asked Luis Torres, a consultant at the Chicano Studies Center at UCSB who had worked in radio in Los Angeles, for help. The two put together a public affairs program on Sunday mornings at KIST, the Top 40 station.

"Luis took me into the production

room and taught me how to use the equipment," Rizo says. "He was my first and most important teacher. He taught me professionalism. We would bring people from the community, put them in the studio, and interview them. Social service centers, car clubs, musicians, you name it, every Sunday morning we'd have a guest, and in between, fill in with music. After about five months Luis had to come back to L.A. He said, 'José, you know enough now, you just continue.'"

"José was an inquisitive person," KNX news reporter Luis Torres says. "And once something got his interest, he would pursue it with a lot of dedication and perseverance. He was energetic, bright, and clearly had a passion for the music. You could see it back then."

Rizo and Torres formed Radio Chicano, which became an organization aimed to bring Latinos on radio. After Torres left, Rizo recruited, trained and helped license more than 20 new Latino broadcasters. Then he went to UCSB's campus radio station, KCSB, where eventually he became programming director, and set up daily Chicano/Latino programming. There, he moved from public affairs to music.

"I called my first music radio program 'Barrio SalSoul,'" Rizo says. "I did it on Sunday nights for about six years. It was a mixture of salsa, R&B, funk, Latin jazz, and oldies but goodies."

As a child, Rizo, who was born in Guadalajara and raised in Oxnard, listened to salsa, big bands, rancheras, and mariachis. Later, he learned to play trumpet.

"I played trumpet since I was in third grade up to high school. I went through the high school band thing. But I never found anything that I'd love playing. I'd play to learn the instrument, but no

Beyond the Airwaves Jose Rizo's Jazz on the Latin Side

music captured me. During my senior year in high school, I heard a lot of funk; James Brown, Kool and The Gang, Earth, Wind, and Fire... So I joined this barrio band in Oxnard called 'The Flaming Skulls.' We played right there in the barrio, all the funk songs from the mid-70's. But it was the barrio. So a lot of drugs, booze, and after a while, it turned me off.

"In my freshman year at UC Santa Barbara," Rizo says, "I discovered Weather Report in the college radio station. They would play some Santana off and on, but then you'd hear a little bit of Miles, Jaco Pastorius, Passport, Herbie Hancock and the Headhunters. I got into Chameleon and all those great albums he did with the Headhunters, and that became a bridge for me to get into Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelouious Monk and Cannonball Adderley."

At that time, Rizo probably did not imagine that, 15 years later, he would become an important presence in the Los Angeles jazz scene. The success of his first membership drive in 1990 proved that his Latin jazz show was there to stay. His program, *Jazz on the Latin Side*, described by Torres as "a treasure for Southern California," covers the various musical nuances of the Latin jazz spectrum: Jazz with Afro-Cuban, Nuyorican, Puerto Rican, Brazilian, Flamenco, South American tinges, and more.

"To me an authentic Latin jazz program not only includes the Latin artists who are doing Latin jazz," Rizo says, "but also the straight ahead jazz artists who do very authentic Latin jazz, even though they might not know it. The Jazz Crusaders, Cannonball Adderley, Charles McPherson... there are about a hundred records I can pull out of straight

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ahead Latin jazz but not from Latin artists. I featured McCoy Tyner one night and some people who didn't know called and asked, "How may I get the Latin jazz artist McCoy Tyner?" That's why, I guess, my show is a little special."

What makes Rizo's show special is his innovative approach. One example is turning his guests into co-hosts.

"I've had great guests like Andy Garcia, Horace Silver, Cachao, and Eddie Palmieri," Rizo says. "I told them, 'I don't want to interview you. You're going to help me do the radio show. So you tell me what to play.' And sometimes I let them introduce the songs like they're the DJ's."

Another example are the live recordings, which he had started at the end of his time at KCSB.

"I remembered how fun those were," Rizo says, "so I started to invite live bands here (at KKJZ) and have live sessions on the air. Once I had the Estradas with Justo Almario. Mongo Santamaria came to visit and played one night. Then I had Bobby Rodriguez and Francisco Torres with his band."

In November 1996, Rizo took his Jazz on the Latin Side beyond the airwaves, by producing the Latin Jazz Club Caravan, which is now going into its 8th year. In May 1997, he started the Annual Cinco de Mayo Latin Jazz Dance Concert.

When Jazz on the Latin Side's 10th Anniversary came in January 2000, Rizo first wanted to have a "big party session" at the station. He wanted to have the best Latin jazz musicians in town playing his own compositions.

"I had all these little melodies and ideas for songs on tapes," Rizo says. "They sounded so good in my head, I didn't want to lose them, so I sang them on a tape recorder. I just stacked up the cassettes through the years. I didn't think I was ever going to use them. Little did I know that one day, they'd come in handy. So I pulled some of the songs like 'Mujer Chicana,' 'Arabian Moods'... I asked some of the arrangers, Francisco Torres, Joe Rotundi, and Robert Inceilli for help.

"These great musicians were so patient. They sat with me, wrote the music, made sure that it was the way I wanted it, asked me were I wanted the breaks. They would bring in suggestions. We arranged a bunch of songs. So many musicians agreed to play, that we couldn't have the session at the station."

The anniversary concert took place at B.B. King's. It was announced as a fundraiser and sold out two weeks in advance. Cubop agreed to document the event, and the CD <D>Jazz on the Latin Side All Stars, Volume 1 came out of it. Next came gig offers, and Jazz on the Latin Side All Stars, with different musicians according to their availability, became a working band. A second CD was recorded, and a third one is on the works.

Two days before the John Anson Ford Theater concert, a 16-piece Jazz on the Latin Side All Stars rehearses at the Holloway Studios, in Santa Fe Springs. The Stars include saxophonists Justo Almario and Robert Inceilli, flutist Danilo Lozano, percussionist Francisco Aguabella, vocalist Freddy Crespo, and trombonist/musical director Francisco Torres. The concert will be a tribute to Poncho Sánchez. Rizo has taken the day off from his elementary school teaching job, and so has his wife, Leticia, who has prepared a very spicy shrimp <D>ceviche and burritos with meat, chile, and rice for the musicians. Paul López directs his arrangement of Rizo's composition "Cozumel." The band is spending time on this piece, and Rizo is worried, because there are still other tunes to go through. Suddenly, the band finds the right tempo, a medium <D>chacha, and it decides that the bass intro goes better with <D>güiro and <D>tumbales. Piano and horns come in a few bars later, and the piece is now solid.

Rizo still has an unfulfilled dream: A yearly Latin jazz festival.

"I think it could work," Rizo says. "But right now, because of the economy, it's a big risk."

If in a few years the festival happens it would be just one more of Rizo's ideas that became a successful reality.

COMMENTARY

WHO'S DOING WHO?

This past August 13th, my soul was lifted and I experienced a new pride in what I do. The KKJZ's Jazz at The Bowl, "To Ella With Love," put together by vocalist Dianne Reeves was a thrill ride in classic Jazz. I had heard that the previous concerts were marginal so my expectations were not that high. But the evening's performance captivated me as well as the thousands of music lovers who shared in the final standing ovation. It was a splendid performance reminiscent of the early African-American big bands, the groups who created and developed the concept of "swing." The band was led by one of the most intense and artistically developed musicians of our time, Patrice Rushen, remembered as a vocalist by a younger generation for several R&B hits several years ago. Many of them do not know her as a premier pianist who can swing a rhythm section off the stage.

I enjoyed this production for several reasons. First, there was a fellowship of great vocalists Kevin Mahogany, Dame Cleo Laine, Janis Siegal, DeeDee Bridgewater and newcomer Denzal Sinclair, all on stage at the same time, supporting each individual offering, in the spirit of the real Jazz jam session. Secondly, there was a tiny dynamo of a woman directing a rather large ensemble, showing a deep understanding of each composition as she lead the musicians through various levels of emotion.

And then there was the band. A predominantly African-American, yet racially balanced collection of talent. When I say balanced I mean that the all-star jazz orchestra featured black musicians performing black music. That is not to say the compositions were written by Black writers, but the interpretation which came to be known as Jazz and swing was indeed a direct result of the Black experience, a fact that American culture seems bent on erasing.

Curiously, besides the masterful solos of Patrice Rushen, the other featured soloists were Bobby Rodriguez (trumpet), Bob Sheppard (sax), Tim May (guitar) and George Bohanon ('bone), some of LA's finest. It goes

without saying that the rhythm section, Ndugu Chancier (drums), Munyungo Jackson (percussion) and Ken Wild (bass), was smokin'! I've been in LA for may years and every Big Band I've seen has had one or two seemingly token Blacks on the stage. Could it be that, in fact, the "City of Angels" is in reality one of the most racially segregated cities in America? This stratification translates onto the music scene, especially the Jazz community.

This event was different. As involved as some of the arrangements were they were not stretched past the bounds set by the writers. The performers had fun. They did not abandon the intent of the music, which is to bring joy. Today many of the big bands function without emotion, without passion. When music lacks these two components you can call it "contemporary American music," but please don't call it Jazz. A recent review of this same event made me wonder if I and the astute critic/journalist were at the same event, and if so, how did we hear so differently. It would be very hard to miss the enthusiasm emanating from the band shell into the ears of the audience. The simplest measure of the success of this program was that no one left until the final note.

Unless you know what an art form really means to a people, an aficionado might be thrown off by the perceived indifference of the very group of people who were said to have created this music. Don't forget that the Black musicians artistic disenfranchisement began a long time ago; around the time Benny Goodman was crowned "King of Swing." If we are to keep this treasure as part of the cultural fabric, we must continue cultivating high level presentations such as this. We must allow the "trickle down theory" to operate from the Hollywood Bowl down into the public schools. I would suggest that you contact the Bowl with feedback on these concert series. It is the only measure that they have in planning future events.

—Billy Mitchell

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