

David Sánchez

Cultural Survival

Ask a roomful of jazz fans about Grammy Award-winning saxophonist David Sánchez and the ensuing buzz will be filled with exultant praise for one of the finest saxophonist of his generation. Such comments are entirely valid, to a point. The Puerto Rico-born Sánchez is unquestionably one of the finest, most progressive players on the contemporary scene, as more than a decade's worth of bold, brilliant work has already proven. But, is Sánchez a master of Latin Jazz or an exemplary player who also happens to be of Latin heritage? The distinction may seem subtle, but is actually profound. As noted critic Bob Blumenthal observed, "[Sánchez] has been nurturing his own distinct variety in recent years, one that draws heavily on...Miles Davis and John Coltrane and weaves rhythms in fluid strands. What results is far closer to the more daring postbop tradition than to standard Latin music." Pose the question to Sánchez himself, and he heartily responds, "I completely agree. When it comes to labels and the inevitable references to Latin Jazz, it's hard for people to get away from that stamp. But I think the music speaks for itself. If you really listen, you'll discover that it would be incomplete to call it Latin Jazz. But I don't get concerned about labels. There's nothing you can do to change that, so why fight it? It's like art in a museum. You see a painting and it means something to you, but it means something completely different to someone else. I know my influences and I know my direction. I just keep doing what I'm doing."

In 2004, that fervent desire to "keep doing what I'm doing" found Sánchez concluding an 11-year, seven-album relationship with Sony Music. Three years of intense writing, performing and shopping around for a new musical home followed, with Sánchez ultimately opting to sign with Concord, where his latest, and arguably most artistically progressive, album, *Cultural Survival*, will be released on May 20, 2008. Of the new relationship he's forging with Concord, Sánchez says he finds it "very refreshing. I'm

grateful for all the years at Sony, but my input into the creative process was getting less and less, which was very frustrating. So, I'm really happy to be part of a new scenario and a new experience. With this first recording I was allowed to do anything I wanted to do. I mean, I was even allowed to include a piece [the album-closing "La Leyenda del Cañaveral"] that extends to 20 minutes — *that's* how supportive the label is. To me, it's all great news."

Explaining *Cultural Survival's* intriguing title, Sánchez says, "It's generally about the human condition. It started one day when I was just checking out the radio to find out what's going on in the world. I love listening to NPR and especially "All Things Considered." But I'm often left wondering, 'where is the world going?' You realize you're surrounded by a younger generation that seems a little unconscious, living in their own space, their own reality, and not being very conscientious about the world around them."

As for his artistic goals with *Cultural Survival*, Sánchez, who also served as the album's producer, says, "First was to play that 20-minute piece and make it flow, to make it sound like a musical idea that is developing [spontaneously]. Generally speaking, when I take a look at the whole album, I'm glad we had the chance to develop the material by playing in little clubs that gave us the opportunity to take a look at the music and really get inside it." In discussion with the album's fellow musicians — guitarist Lage Lund, bassists Ben Street and Hans Glawischnig, drummers Adam Cruz and Henry Cole, percussionist

Pernell Saturnino and special guest pianists Danilo Pérez and Robert Rodriguez — Sánchez determined that "this recording sounds very organic. There was a lot of written music, but it sounds relaxed and it isn't pretentious. You know, as artists you're never completely happy, but I noticed and appreciate that there's such a sense of relaxation, with everyone willing to stretch out and make changes. These days, it's increasingly hard to find musicians who are willing to give it up and just let the music take you wherever it takes you. It happens live, but not in the studio. People have the tendency to be more uptight and very predictable; the playing has to be perfect, so you miss out on the adventure."

Longtime Sánchez listeners will notice significant lineup changes on *Cultural Survival*, most notably the absence of piano on all but three of the eight tracks and the inclusion of guitar. It was, he explains, “an idea that came from different directions. First, I was listening to a lot of African music — from south Cameroon, from Ethiopia and also from Mali. That is a very strong influence for this album, especially on the first tune [“Coast to Coast”] and the final one. Also, I had the chance to work with Pat Metheny. He called me at the last minute to join his trio on tour as a special guest. Never before in my career had I worked with a guitarist on such a focused and consistent basis. It was so fun. I’d been working with pianists from the very beginning of my career, and after I worked with Pat I discovered a whole different vibe. How you react to harmony is different, and you can go in so many fresh directions. It’s more linear than horizontal, and it can really open things up. I had already written a lot of music with piano doubling the bass and decided I wanted more of the guitar sound with the saxophone.”

As for his choice of guitarist, Sánchez says he was “impressed with Lage the first time I heard him. A lot of people focus more on a player’s ability and technical skills, but for me the most vital part of technique is the sound, and Lage’s sound is the first thing that attracted me. Ben [Street] knew I’d been talking about making a change to incorporate guitar, so he said ‘you’ve got to check this guy out.’ I called Lage, and he gave a *great* audition. Working with guitar is something I’ve only been doing for about a year, but it has enormous potential to grow in so many ways, and I’m hugely excited about it.”

The most notable absence from *Cultural Survival* is alto saxophonist Miguel Zenón, a fellow Puerto Rican who appeared on several of Sánchez’s previous albums, including his final Sony disc, *Coral*. “It was,” says Sánchez, “fun to play with two horns. Miguel and I have an affinity because we come from the same place and I’ve known him ever since he was a young kid coming out of Berklee. A big part of his development was having the chance to play with our ensemble, but our itineraries started conflicting. And then, once I started hearing the guitar, I thought maybe instead of two horns I could have saxophone and guitar and that would change the color completely, because the guitar would become the other horn.”

On drums, the album's eight tracks are divided evenly between Sánchez's longtime colleague Adam Cruz and new addition Henry Cole. "I felt it was very important to have Henry [on the album]," says Sánchez, "because in live performance Henry was very important in the development of the music. I've known him since he was a kid in Puerto Rico, and I'm astonished by his progress. What's great about playing with people like Henry, who plays drums but also understands how to play percussion instruments, is that they aren't unidirectional."

Speaking of percussion, Sánchez has often confessed that, prior to discovering the sax, his childhood love was for percussion. So, providing himself the opportunity to play percussion on the marathon "La Leyenda del Cañaval" was, he admits, "just great. Rhythm is something I've always felt, and it was a great opportunity to play with Pernelle because he knows so much and can play in so many different ways. I wanted to capture the raw character of those African recordings I'd been listening to, which weren't studio recordings but were actually recorded in the middle of a forest. I was very happy because we were feeling the rhythm together, and for me it was just a trip!"

Of the album's two guest pianists, Robert Rodriguez, who appears on "La Leyenda del Cañaval," is, says Sánchez, "from a younger generation, and I was very impressed with him. His skill [and] musicianship are very strong. He did an unbelievable job. He came very prepared, and is a guy who is willing to commit everything to the music." As for Pérez, Sánchez enthuses that "he is like my brother. We've known each other for such a long time, and having him on the album was a real treat. These days, he's extremely busy playing with Wayne [Shorter] and teaching fulltime at the New England Conservatory. So, when he said he could do it, I was like, 'Wow! Great!' Words can't describe his musicianship. These days, people are easily impressed with pyrotechnics, but you don't see too many who are impressed with the ability to respond to *any* type of music. Danilo has that. It takes not only a great ear, but also great intuition. To me, it's an amazing level of artistry, and it's a blessing to have him on the recording."

Agreeing with the observation that *Cultural Survival* is an album of wide-ranging moods and emotions, Sánchez notes that, "for instance, "Manto Azul," which is one of the newer compositions, came to me on a cruise ship. I was planning to write while on the cruise

and brought my keyboard along. One night, I pulled one of the cables and it got stuck and the keyboard stopped working altogether. So I started writing by ear, sitting on this little balcony, looking out at the endless sea. I could see nothing on the horizon. It was a little scary, yet so serene. It was a beautiful morning, and I felt the shape of the song matching the extreme solemnity but also the immense power of the sea.”

Offsetting the wide-open spaces of “Manto Azul” is the gritty, urban “Coast to Coast,” which Sánchez acknowledges, “comes from a completely different place. I had the fragment that goes on and on and on at the beginning and again at the end, and I had guitars and all those African sounds in my head, and I thought, ‘Okay, where do I take this from here?’”

The deep, dark and urgent “Adoración” is perhaps the closest to Sánchez’s heart because, he says, “it is a little tribute to a person who is very important in my musical development and who I *always* have to acknowledge — Eddie Palmieri.” Equally heartfelt is “The Forgotten Ones.” Sánchez recalls, “It started out as a tribute to the people of New Orleans. That’s what I had in mind. But then I started thinking about all the things happening around the world, all the hardship and strife, [and] it became about people from so many places, like Haiti, that are in turmoil.”

Sánchez included the album’s sole cover, “Monk’s Mood,” simply because “it has always been one of my favorite pieces.” Thanks to his determination to “not make it anything fancy, no big arrangement,” the gorgeous results are tender and reverential.

Finally, there’s the mammoth “La Leyenda del Cañaveral.” When the suggestion is made that it sounds like a long and varied journey of discovery, Sánchez enthusiastically responds, “That’s exactly right! That’s precisely what it’s supposed to be. It’s a little story, a journey, set to a poem.” At the piece’s end, Sánchez and company seem to arrive at a welcoming harbor where a chorus of voices greets them. In fact, that chorus is comprised of just a single voice. Revealing who the surprising singer is, Sánchez explains that, “On those African recordings I was listening to, the singing isn’t polished. It is just people from the community who understand that music is extremely important to their culture. That’s the quality I wanted, and I wanted [all the musicians] to sing, but there

wasn't time. Everybody had to leave. So, I had to do it on my own. Those voices you hear are just me!"

Sánchez's plans to tour in support of *Cultural Survival* are still being finalized, but he notes that he has "two very important dates coming up. The first is in Chicago on May 16, and it's a double bill with Danilo. The second is at the San Francisco Jazz Festival on June 13. Then, a west coast tour will likely follow."

Concurrent with what is sure to be a crowded tour schedule, Sánchez will continue his longstanding tradition of assisting with jazz education programs. Such work, he says, "gives me great satisfaction. At the same time, it's a real challenge, and you end up learning so much yourself. You give, but you receive too. It gives me such tremendous joy. I see so much talent out there. I am very optimistic. But we're living in a tough time. There's no real chance for [young players] to develop their music. The only way to truly develop is by playing. The history of jazz bears that out. But it's hard for them to find opportunities to play. They have lots of technical ability, but they need to develop the spiritual side of their playing. Wisdom is knowledge applied, and their knowledge isn't getting applied. You need to experience it to understand its power. That's where the passion comes from, that urgency to express yourself. The only way to get that is by getting the chance to get out there."