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hand drum

# Paoli Mejias

## Santana's New Conguero Has A Passion For Percussion

### TRIPLE DRUMMERS

Karl Perazzo and Paoli Mejias flank Dennis Chambers. Mejias on the big screen.



By j. poet

Paoli Mejias doesn't only play music; he is music. Standing behind his beloved congas or moving around the stage to add rhythmic accents to the music on one of his "toys" — the name he gives to his battery of smaller percussion instruments including cowbell, shekere, and chimes — the man is never still. You can see the rhythms percolating in his bloodstream before they're made manifest in his playing. With a style that's noted for its mastery of dynamics, speed, and tone, Mejias has already played with some of the biggest names in Puerto Rican folkloric music, Latin pop, salsa, and jazz,

including José Nogueras, Marc Anthony, Dave Valentín, and Eddie Palmieri.

### A Call From Santana

Late last summer, on a hot, beautiful Tuesday morning, Mejias was at home, basking in the warm Puerto Rican sunshine and talking about his latest gig as conga player with the Santana band. He was personally invited by Carlos Santana to join the group and his tenure with the band will only further validate his status as a first class musician.

The Santana organization put up an announcement on its website welcom-

ing Mejias to the band. They called him a master percussionist and praised his ability to fuse "straight-ahead jazz with African, Mediterranean and Caribbean folkloric rhythms to create a new dimension of Latin jazz that is global, energetic and modern." Mejias says he's flattered by the description and chuckles frequently as he talks about joining the band, speaking with the same enthusiasm and humor that marks his playing.

"My first gig with the band was in September," he says. "I played with them at the House Of Blues inside the Man-

Photograph: COURTESY PAOLI MEJIAS

delay Bay hotel in Las Vegas. [Santana] lives in Vegas now and invited me out to see what the vibe was." The current show is called "Santana: Greatest Hits Live Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow" so Mejias was sent tracks from Santana's studio albums, as well as some live recordings of the band, so he could familiarize himself with the material. "I was able to spend time and practice in my house to get ready for the gig. I do everything by ear and, except for two new songs, most of the things are older like 'Oye Como Va,' 'Black Magic Woman,' and 'Jingo.'"

When Mejias arrived in Vegas, he went straight to the sound check and then played the gig, an unorthodox audition, to say the least. "It was a baptism by fire," he says. "I had to perform that first night with no

rehearsal." After the gig, he was formally invited to join the band and record the new album Santana is working on. He started his job by playing with them during their eight-day residency at the House Of Blues in November. "They're going to put me up in the Mandalay Bay while I'm there. It's great to be able to stay in the same place for a while. It makes the gig a bit easier."

## The Santana Connection

The Vegas audition gig marks the second time that Mejias has played with Santana. His wife Sarah is from Seattle and Mejias plays there often with his Latin jazz quintet. In 2012, the city's Experience Music Project, an interactive art and music museum, gave Santana their Founder's

Award for his contributions to popular music. Michael Shrieve, the drummer on Santana's first eight albums and the legendary Woodstock date, lives in Seattle and put together a band to play at the Experience Music Project tribute concert they put on in Santana's honor. Shrieve personally selected Mejias to be the band's percussionist, perhaps familiar with his yearly residency at Cornish College Of The Arts. "I already met [Santana] when his percussionist Karl Perrazo invited me to one of his concerts in Puerto Rico in 2005," Mejias says, "but we didn't get to speak until the concert in Seattle. He's a good person and likes to talk to people and connect on a very human level. [Since joining the band], we hang out like a family. Everybody in the band and all the people that work with the band are very warm and open."

The current Santana group includes three drummers and percussionists: Mejias on congas; Dennis Chambers, known for his strong funk feel and work with John McLaughlin, Maceo Parker, and Parliament/Funkadelic on traps, and Karl Perazzo, a longtime Santana associate, on djembe, timbales, bongo, handheld percussion, and vocals. "I've known Karl for 20 years, and everybody else in the band has played together for so long that there are no rehearsals. During a sound check, if we're going to play new music, or if we're going to change something up, it becomes a rehearsal."

Mejias said he had no trouble fitting into the band. Santana is a generous bandleader and everyone gets a moment to solo during their sets. "Every night, something new happens. We always let ourselves be led by the music and the momentum. There's a lot of communication going on within the music." Mejias is a quick study and picked up on the nods and hand signals the other drummers used to communicate changes in tempo and direction. Since there are no written charts, there's a lot of freedom in the arrangements. "I'm hoping I can stay with the band for a long time. They treat me like a brother and everyone is really professional. It's the most incredible gig I've had in my life."

## Mejias' Santana Setup



**PERCUSSION LP** Galaxy Giovanni Series Congas (custom paint)

**A** 11" x 30" Quinto

**B** 11.75" x 30" Conga (*seguidor*)

**C** 11.75" x 30" Conga (*tumbador*)

**D** 12.5" x 30" Tumbadora (*low bajo*)

**E** 12.5" x 30" Tumbadora (*high bajo*)

Paoli Mejias also uses LP Triple Conga and LP Futurelite Conga stands, Sabian cymbals, Vater sticks, Remo heads, and Hansenfütz practice pads

## Haiti And Beyond

When he's not touring with Santana, Mejias is busy working on a new recording, an album he hopes to release this year. The still untitled set is collaboration with his friend Jafet Murguía, one of the best percussionists in Puerto Rico.

Murguía is currently doing missionary work in Haiti and his descriptions of the music he was hearing in the churches there

## Paoli Mejias

inspired the new project. Mejias traveled to Haiti with a portable recording studio and a video crew and met up with Murguía to record Haitian singers, church choirs, and folkloric performers. Mejias and Murguía each wrote songs that the artists translated into Creole so they could do their own treatments of the material.

“The videos capture the artists in their natural setting and we’ll include some of that footage with the package,” Mejias explains. “I’m taking the [vocal] tracks and adding music and percussion by local Puerto Rican musicians.”

The finished album will be a fundraiser, with all the money going to the people of Haiti and the missionaries working with them. Mejias is also working on a new Paoli Mejias Quintet project. He’s creating complicated rhythms and patterns using djembe, congas, timbales, and other percussion elements. Like his last three CDs, the music will incorporate diverse elements taken from Asian, Greek, Flamenco, African, and other world music sources.

“When I was on tour with Eddie Palmieri and other bands, I heard music from

all over the world. I started to have the desire to explore new creative outlets for jazz because the music of the world is very rich in rhythms. I wanted to break out of the traditional constrictions that sometimes keep artists from moving to the next level, without abandoning the rich Puerto Rican folkloric rhythms that are the root of my music.”

### Puerto Rican Roots

The roots Mejias speaks of run deep. He was born in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. His first band experience was playing in a parranda (a singing and percussion group that goes from house to house to serenade their neighbors at Christmas time), on homemade instruments, mostly pots and pans borrowed from the family kitchen. He didn’t consider himself a musician, but everybody that heard him play, even before he was a teenager, told him he had a natural talent for music.

Although they weren’t musicians, his parents loved music and filled the house

### A SELECTED PAOLI MEJIAS DISCOGRAPHY



**1995**  
*Live At Heineken JazzFest Puerto Rico*  
TITO PUENTE



**1995**  
*Arete*  
EDDIE PALMIERI



**1996**  
*Vortex*  
EDDIE PALMIERI



**1997**  
*One Thousand & One Nights*  
KIP HANRAHAN



**1998**  
*Rumbero Del Piano*  
EDDIE PALMIERI



**1998**  
*Machetazo! Ten Years On The Edge*  
JOHN SANTOS & THE MACHETE ENSEMBLE



**1998**  
*Shadow Nights, Vol. 2*  
KIP HANRAHAN



**1999**  
*Puerto Rico Jazz Jam*  
HUMBERTO RAMÍREZ



**2000**  
*Acuarela de Tambores*  
ALEX ACUÑA



**2000**  
*Masterpiece*  
TITO PUENTE & EDDIE PALMIERI



**2001**  
*Cada Loco Con Su Tema*  
JOSÉ NOGUERAS



**2003**  
*Feeling Good Again*  
CHARLIE SEPÚLVEDA



**2003**  
*Live At San Juan Heineken JazzFest*  
CHICK COREA



**2004**  
*Mi Tambor*  
PAOLI MEJIAS



**2006**  
*Transcend*  
PAOLI MEJIAS



**2007**  
*Evolución*  
BOBBY VALENTÍN



**2008**  
*Jazzambia*  
PAOLI MEJIAS



**2008**  
*Habla El Tambor*  
MARVIN DIZ

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with the sounds of Patato Valdes, Batacumbelle, Irakere, Hector Lavoe, Eddie Palmieri, Ishmael Rivera, and Tito Puente. "I sold newspapers and used the money I made to buy a broken pair of bongos for three dollars. I used the parts to put together a small set of baby congas that I still have."

Mejias started playing by trying to copy the sounds he was hearing on the records his parents played. He'd practice for hours every day and, when he saw other players in concert, or on the street, he'd try to memorize their patterns, then go home and reproduce them on his homemade drums. Early on, he realized that every drummer had an individual sound and tone and he worked hard to develop his own identity. "I had a passion for percussion, especially the congas. They were my first love and that's how I still express myself best."

When he was young, he didn't think of himself as a musician, but anyone who heard Mejias play was impressed and the word soon spread through the neighborhood. Every weekend, he'd participate in jam sessions on the streets and beaches of San Juan. In the plaza of Loíza, he met drummers that were involved in the Yoruba religion, people who still had the feel of African music in their playing. They accepted Mejias as one of their own and he started winning the trophies they awarded at their yearly competitions. The African tinge he picked up has remained an important part of his sound.

He landed his first paying gig, playing congas in a steel band that performed six days a week at hotels, while he was still in grammar school. "I was able to buy my clothes and schoolbooks with money I made at my gigs," he says, laughing. "I bought a set of professional congas too, but it was never work for me. I was happy playing and practicing."

A local batá master, José Ramírez, saw Mejias playing rumba in the street and asked him to join his batá group. He quickly learned the patterns and rhythms and was soon playing for Santería ceremonies and rituals, which added another layer of rhythmic knowledge to his style. "I was not in the religion of Santería, but I love music and participated as a musician. I learned a lot with them. Like the Yoruba, they have a lot of unique patterns in their music."

## A Young Professional

By the time he was 17, he was playing with a salsa band and touring the island. "People started talking about my talents and a lot of bands were calling me to play, including folkloric groups, Luis Enrique, La India, and



Marc Anthony, before he was a superstar. I played one year with Luis Enrique and then I got a call from Eddie Palmieri." Mejias stayed with Palmieri for more than ten years. It was the music he heard while traveling the world with Palmieri that inspired him to start his own band.

"I left everything behind to work on my own ideas," he says. Mejias put together his own quintet and started recording an album of original music in June 2003. *Mi Tambor* was released on his own label a year later and the record nabbed a Latin Grammy nomination for Best Latin Jazz Album. "It was an exciting time. I produced everything with musicians and composers that were my friends and followed my vision of combining salsa, jazz, and folkloric music."

The follow-up, 2006's *Transcend*, added Greek, classical Indian, and other world music elements to move closer to the universal sound Mejias was developing. "I wanted a more complicated, more well rounded

concept. I don't remember the name of the group, but I heard tabla at a concert and wanted to investigate Indian music. I invited an Indian musician from New York that played tabla to collaborate with me. The rhythms are different than what I've known all my life and I wanted to do a fusion of Caribbean music with sounds you'd never hear on the radio in Puerto Rico."

Mejias summed up the first phase of his solo career with *De Jazzambia A Mi Tambor El Concierto*, a Blu-ray disc he released in 2011. It included songs from all of his albums in complex new arrangements, as well as new material like "Rumba 7x4," a tune that features folkloric drum group Yuba-Iré, along with four dancers. "I composed it in 7/4, a complicated rumba rhythm from Cuba," Mejias says. "It's an unusual tempo and it's interesting to see people trying to dance in 7/4. At this moment, I'm working on something a bit different. I'm always trying to find new ways to express myself and I still practice. Every day." □