



by Elizabeth Sayre

Felix "Pupi" Legarreta, *Charanguero Mayor*

A personal note: For me, writing about the life and work of musicians is the next best thing to playing music, but it can also be daunting. Basing my writing on interviews and research into the histories of sounds and places, I strive for two goals: accurate, nuanced representation and increased visibility and understanding of the artist's work and life in cultural and historical context. I used to find this task most challenging when I was faced with an unfamiliar musical style or art form and had to learn enough about it, quickly, to represent it well. It turns out that describing something better known can be equally challenging. How do I capture what I, and others, have heard and felt over years, or even decades? How do I express the visceral feelings and understandings that certain sounds give me? How do I relate those personal thoughts to a bigger picture? How do I connect an individual's story to a complicated cultural history in just a few pages? How do I inspire in the reader the same respect that I have for a musician, based not only on his or her reputation, but also on my own accumulated musical experiences?

Writing about Pupi represents exactly that kind of challenge. I first saw him

playing with the outstanding Puerto Rican Latin jazz drummer/percussionist Steve Berrios at International House in the 1990s. I met Pupi several years ago through AMLA, a North Philadelphia-based non-profit arts organization that has worked on behalf of Latin music and musicians for more than 25 years.* In 2003 I had the unforgettable opportunity to rehearse and perform as a percussionist with Pupi and 22 other musicians as part of a two-year project that brought new arrangements of "classic" Latin tunes (mostly Cuban) to audiences in Allentown and Philadelphia. Under the direction of Johnny Pacheco (a Dominican star of salsa music from the sixties and seventies) and Elio Villafranca (Cuban, a former resident of Philadelphia, and a Latin jazz pianist from a younger generation), the orchestra was made up of people from the Philadelphia area. Many were experienced Latin musicians; others came from different genres, such as classical music or jazz. (The concerts were titled "A Night of Latin Classics;" major funding was provided by the Philadelphia Music Project.)

Sitting across the stage from Pupi was a remarkable experience. I had played in Latin rhythm sections (which usually

consist of *congas*, *bongó*, *timbales*, bass, piano, and *percusión menor*), but I had never been part of a *charanga*. I had never experienced first-hand the unique sound of violins in Latin dance music. In that context, the violin is an important rhythm instrument, as well as a melody and harmony instrument. A skilled *charanguero* must have the instrumental technique of a classical player, the ready-to-invent ear of a jazz musician, and the rhythmic sense of a Latin percussionist. The violins in *charanga* play legato melodic lines, but they also cook! They add to the collective rhythmic energy of the music by playing repetitive, syncopated patterns (called *montunos*), just as all the instruments do at certain times. The *montunos* of the melodic instruments along with the *tumbaos* of bass and percussion create a rhythmically dense engine to propel dancers, and a thick platform of sound to support melodic soloists and singers. The confidence, attitude, knowledge, and heart that Pupi put into his playing — both *montunos* and solos — during those rehearsals and shows made the whole experience inspiring, energizing, and fun. Pupi plays the simplest line with feeling that makes clearly audible his more than 50 years' worth of experience. — ES

Pupi Legarreta.
Photos:
Elizabeth Sayre



Master musician Felix “Pupi” Legarreta has performed and recorded with the best of the best in Latin dance music since the 1950s. By turns a violinist, flutist, singer, arranger, composer, and bandleader, Pupi has personally witnessed and participated in the birth of several important musical genres: *charanga*, *cha-cha-chá*, *pachanga*, *salsa*, boogaloo. Yet he is humble, accessible ... and, unfortunately, not so well known by people outside his community or generation.

Pupi was born in 1940 in the city of Cienfuegos, also known as *La Perla del Sur*, the “Pearl of the South,” for its French-influenced colonial flavor. Cienfuegos is on the southern coast of Cuba, the heart of the sugar-growing lands. It was the original home of Orquesta Aragón, founded in the late 1930s and one of Cuba’s most important *charangas* (a type of Cuban dance orchestra that uses violins, cello, and flute instead of horns). This was the music that Pupi grew up hearing. By the age of seven he was studying violin—and more:

Our fathers, they are very strict. We’re poor, so our fathers have to be sure that we get some profession because they cannot support us for too long. It’s not like here. All the music courses in Cuba are the long way. Studying reading four or five years, with *la teoría, el instrumento, la forma de la música*, harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, conducting. Oh, please. Ear training.... [When you begin] music in Cuba, the teacher will be sincere with you. If the teacher puts you to do, let’s say, the scale — [sings] “*do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si, do*” — and he sings that to you. And he says, “I want you to catch the same note. I’m giving you this scale by ear.” And you don’t do that? He’s going to tell you that you cannot do [music]. Teachers in Cuba used to say to some of us, “Hey, you don’t have the ear for music. Try to be a barber, or a tailor, or something. But quit music, ‘cause you got problems.”

By the age of fifteen, Pupi had moved to Havana with his uncle, who would escort him to gigs. He soon joined another of Cuba’s best-known *charangas*, Orquesta Sensación:

When I was around twelve, I was

playing with a band by the name of Orquesta Sorpresa over there in Cienfuegos. And I played with that band maybe two years, and then I went to Havana. [Orquesta Sensación] used to go to Cienfuegos sometimes to play. The guy who played the drums, he used to be my friend, Chuchú [Jesús Esquizarrosa]. He saw me in Havana. I went to see San Lázaro around December 17,² and [Chuchú] saw me down in Rincón, Santiago de las Vegas. He saw me there, and he said, “Hey, Cienfueguero, you’re here?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “What are you doing?” I say, “Nothing, I don’t even have a violin.” He said, “Don’t worry about it. Go tomorrow to the radio station, and we’re going to get you a violin, and you’ll play with me. You’re working with me. That’s it.” And that’s the way I started playing with Sensación. We used to do Radio Mambí, a radio program. We used to do Radio Cadena Habana. We’d do three radio stations, live, a day.

Pupi began his professional life at a time when Latin dance music of the Spanish/Afro-Caribbean variety was internationally popular; and well-

[Continued on p. 22 >]

known bands toured frequently between Cuba and the United States. Mexico City was also a desirable working environment for Cuban musicians; Pupi headed there after a few years with Sensación to work with a group led by Ninón Mondéjar (1914–2006):

With Sensación, I played a few years. From around 1956, I was playing with Sensación. And then, Ninón Mondéjar from Orquesta América, he had problems with [his] musicians in Mexico, so then I quit Sensación to go to Mexico with América. 'Cause that's the people that did the cha-cha-chá, so I said, "Let me go with Ninón Mondéjar." And besides that, I was going to Mexico. Anybody, to really be a musician [at that time], you had to be in Mexico and live two or three years. Music and art in Mexico, it [was] like in Cuba. If you were a musician in Mexico, you were a professional.

I used to be very good friends with Enrique Jorrín [1926–1987].³ I was in Mexico, I was with him almost every day, seeing the music that he got on top of the table, writing music. He played the piano — that's how he wrote his music. And he was incredible, an incredible musician, Enrique Jorrín. Violin player, piano player, good composer. He did incredible music. Top of the line. The time of the cha-cha-chá, the tunes that he did, I'm not going to see a Cuban person do that again. He was very intellectual, his words about the music, incredible. The melodies, type of connections in music, you know that he studied music. You know, the system we use in Cuba is very long, but in the long run, we are musicians.

When he returned to Cuba in the late 1950s, Pupi realized that daily life there was changing because of political developments. He decided to leave and soon found a way to do so:

I stayed in Mexico from, I would say, '57, '58, beginning of '59. I went back to Cuba. I saw Cuba real

depressed, you know what I mean? No dancing, nothing — everybody was scared to go outside. So, I went back with Sensación. When I came back from [Orquesta] América, from Mexico, right away Rolando [Valdes] said, "Pupi, all right?" That's the way I went back to Sensación. At that time, América dissolved over there [in Mexico]. The contract finished, and some musicians stayed, and others went back to Cuba.

When Fidel Castro came in, I was in Cuba. A little before that, I meet Rudy Calzado [1929–2002], the singer. I understood there were some Cuban people — they used to have Orquesta Nuevo Ritmo de Cuba in Chicago, with Rolando Lozano on the flute, René Hernandez on the piano ... a bunch of those Cuban musicians. So I said, "Rudy, can you get me out, and talk to Cuco, the drummer, and Armando Sanchez [1920–1997]?" To see if they can bring me there to Chicago with that band. "I want to get out of here." Rudy used to sing with Enrique Jorrín in Mexico, so he knew what the problem was in Cuba. He was living in this country already. So Rudy said, "Pupi, let me talk to Armando and Cuco, because we need a violin player there. Let's see, maybe they'll help you out." It was like that. One day, Rudy said, "Pupi, those people, they're interested in bringing you to go over there." He gave me the papers the Palladium in New York gave me a contract.⁴ Yeah! To make them believe that I'm going to play with [José] Fajardo [1919–2001] at the Palladium in New York and to come back to Cuba. But it was not true, I was not going back to Cuba. 1959. November 18, 1959. It was very cold, Chicago! Whew!!

After coming to Chicago in 1959, Pupi stayed with Nuevo Ritmo till the early 1960s, when the band dissolved at the end of a tour that wound up in Los Angeles. He and some of the other musicians in the group were picked up immediately

by Mongo Santamaría [1922–2003]. Pupi recorded four albums on the Fantasy label with Mongo's group⁵ and eventually moved to the Bronx, where he lived till the 1980s except when he was gigging and recording in Colombia or Venezuela or some other place. In the early 1960s, Mongo's group was the most successful among several competitors in New York, playing at the Palladium, the Village Gate, Birdland, clubs in the Bronx around Hunt's Point, and other venues. In 1962, Pupi ventured to put together a band and eventually made a dozen records of his own on the Remo Records label. In 1962 he became the first person to use the term "salsa" in a record title — *Salsa Nova with Pupi Legarreta* — on the Tico label, anticipating the rise of this new term for Latin dance music in the late sixties. In the mid-1960s Pupi decided that he needed to learn the flute. He practiced for a year or so and came out playing the five-key wooden "charanga flute," which is preferred by some musicians for its full-sounding high notes. The flutes he prefers were manufactured by Martin Frères in Paris in the 19th century.

On a lot of my records, I play the flute, not the violin. Because [the five-key] is the flute we use in Cuba. And that's the one we need really to make the sound of this thing that we play.

The late 1960s saw the rise of Fania Records, and the 1970s, the creation of the Fania All Stars. Arguably the best-known salsa group in history, the All Stars were essentially a collection of superstar performers who had all had their own groups at different times. Pupi performed with Fania through the mid-1980s, touring the U.S., Puerto Rico, Europe, Japan, and Africa.

We used to travel there like crazy. One time we went in one week to these countries: we went to Madrid, Madrid to Barcelona,

[Continued on next page >]

Barcelona to the French Riviera, Nice or Cannes. [Then] to Paris. From Paris to Amsterdam. In one week. In 1980 we did it, those five cities like that, in one week.

Because when I came back, that's when those people were leaving Cuba. I cannot forget about that trip. When I came back they say, "Oh, people leaving from Cuba!"⁶

[In 1974] we traveled from here to Spain to change planes. We went to Congo, Zaire, Kinshasa. We went there, we waited there about three or four days with that weather. And then the day of the concert, we start playing, on the stage, and we were playing [sings] "*Que baile mi gente*." I was playing the flute. I grab the flute from [Johnny] Pacheco, and put the violin on the [ground] ... I was standing right there by the drum, so I put the violin on the floor, and I grab the flute [laughs]. It starts raining, and you know what the guy with the camera says? "That's it, fellas!!" We start playing the tune. They canceled the [Ali-Foreman] fight,⁷ and we start playing the concert at the baseball stadium... and the guy, the camera technician, he said, "That's it!" They didn't want to get those cameras wet. Just like that. We started the concert, and finished!

After the mid-1980s, live music scenes declined as disc jockeys became more prevalent; work for dance bands—in all styles of music—became scarce. Salsa bands, usually large ensembles with rhythm section, horns, and singers, were affected too. Pupi found himself obliged to seek other work.

I'm going to tell you the real truth. After Fania and the salsa went down or whatever, I had to look for a job. Music—people really cannot make a living with music, sometimes. So, I liked electrical [work]. I found a job with this person, that's where I learned, and he helped me 100 percent. After that, I went to school, I got my license. I went to take the test with the City [of Philadelphia]. I went

there three times; I failed. And the fourth, I took the test. When I came back to the job, the lady at the office said, "Pupi, go back, you passed the test." I say, "What?! What you say?" "Go back. The lady from the city called that you passed the test. You have to go over there to fill out all the papers." "Ah, OK!" You know how many times people fail this? Twenty-seven, 30 times! It's serious!

I've been having more bad moments than good moments. In music ... this is a dangerous job here ... the economic situation. To be a good musician, most of the best musicians, they've been suffering in life a lot. No, I haven't stopped playing! I'm still playing, but I cannot count on ... covering the expenses of this house with music. So, I got a living. Thank God I got that. Some other people, they don't even have that.

Pupi settled in Philadelphia in the mid-1980s, although his connections with musicians here date back to the early 1970s. He continues to play with local musicians. Most recently he played on a 2006 CD by local band *Foto Rodríguez y Charanga la Única*. That CD was dedicated to him and his work with Philadelphia Latin musicians. He is still regularly called to New York and Puerto Rico to bring his expertise to other musicians' projects, particularly in the realm of *charanga*.

To close, I would like to share the words of my friend and teacher Orlando Fiol, himself a young master of Latin dance music and a newer addition to Latin music scenes in Philadelphia.⁸ He offers an expert bandmate's perspective on Pupi's musicianship:

By the time Pupi left Cuba in 1959, he'd already played with all the great *charangas*. If he didn't play with a group, he knew everyone in it. Like most *charanga* violinists of his day, Pupi received classical training. That classical background is probably responsible for Pupi's mastery of not only the violin, but

also the Cuban five-key flute and the piano. Upon arriving in the States, he quickly got incorporated into New York's burgeoning salsa scene. He helped Arsenio Rodríguez realize many of his latter-day arrangements and arranged for [Johnny] Pacheco, [Ray] Barreto, Orquesta Broadway, and other *charangas*. As we all know, he became a Fania All Star during the 1970s and has remained closely associated with that enterprise, for good or ill. But there is so much more to Pupi than biographical details. Pupi is one of the most deeply knowledgeable and continuously probing musicians I know. His solos are simultaneously soulful, jazzy, dotted with Cuban folklore, tuneful, and emotionally gratifying. His intimate knowledge of the *charanga*, *bolero*, *son montuno* and jazz standards repertoires is truly breathtaking. I fondly recall my first gigs with him, where he'd tell me the key of a song, very briefly familiarize me with its chords, and school me on how to play it, all live in front of an unsuspecting audience. Pupi seems very interested in modern Cuban music and frequently cites Paulito FG as one of the best of Cuba's current crop. His harmonic grasp is truly unparalleled, at least in Philadelphia's Latin scene. Pupi has schooled us all. I've seen him teach tumbaos to bass players, breaks to percussionists, and coros to vocalists. We've spent many moments critiquing arrangements or live performances, always sticking to the music itself and evaluating harmony, beauty in melody, and tightly structured presentation. In today's Latin music world, careers are often meteorically launched and quickly discarded before musicians get a chance to apprentice in truly great ensembles and familiarize themselves with the vastness of the many repertoire strands that

[Continued on p. 30]

contribute to our great traditions, including folkloric music, commercial popular dance music, American jazz, and Western classical music. There is an indescribable charm to encyclopedic knowledge, and Pupi definitely possesses it. He sees patterns between songs, distinguishes between similar chord progressions, and always reserves his most prized mental faculties for the veneration of beautiful melody.

We look forward to more contributions from Pupi soon; he plans an album with a few of his own compositions alongside classic but forgotten Cuban tunes, as well as songs written by some of his Fania compatriots. He was recently honored with a prestigious Pew Fellowship in the Arts — well-deserved recognition. I can only encourage you to take any opportunity you to hear the history of Cuban music in Pupi's sound.

—Elizabeth Sayre

Notes

* “Latin music and dance” can refer to any music and dance from Latin America, from any social register — classical to pop to folk. A more specific term is “Spanish Caribbean popular dance music,” describing the music developed in Cuba, Puerto Rico, New York City, and other locations over the 20th century. Son montunos, guarachas, cha-cha-chás, salsas, boleros, danzones, and other forms may be heard in an evening of “Latin dance music.” Another common umbrella term, “salsa,” refers specifically to a certain type of instrumentation (the inclusion of trumpets and trombones) and tempo (medium fast). Musicians and others have challenged the use of this word, which some view as a marketing handle pushed by Fania Records

and other labels in the 1970s, and others see as a valid rallying point for Puerto Rican cultural pride.

¹ Cuban-influenced rhythm sections have evolved from lighter sounds of bongó, güiro, and maracas (son) to the louder and fuller rhythm sections of today; in Cuban timba (the island's contemporary dance music, distinct from salsa in instrumentation and feeling), the rhythm section also has a drum set. “Charanga” refers to both a musical ensemble and a musical style, first heard in the early 20th century, that grew out of the elegant dance orchestras, *charangas francesas*, of 19th-century Cuba; instrumentation usually consists of flute, violins and cello, piano, percussion, and male voices in unison. Orchestras typically play *danzón*, *cha-cha-chá*, and *pachanga*. *Pachanga* is an up-tempo variation on Cuban dance music from the early 1960s. Boogaloo, from the 1960s, is a New York City blending of Cuban and Puerto Rican dance music with rock, R&B, and soul music.

² San Lázaro is the saint ruling illness and healing in Cuba. On December 17 there is a major procession of devotees, some crawling on hands and knees, to his shrine in Rincón, Santiago de las Vegas, near Havana.

³ Enrique Jorrín created the cha-cha-chá in 1951, a rhythm designed to have universal and easy appeal for dancers. Jorrín played with Mondéjar's Orquesta América, the band that popularized the cha-cha-chá, but after a dispute over credit for this invention he left for Mexico City, where he formed his own orchestra. Mondéjar eventually followed him there and re-created Orquesta América with new personnel.

⁴ From 1948 to 1966, the Palladium Ballroom, a second-floor hall at 53rd and Broadway in New

York, programmed Latin bands; it was a famous destination for dancers and musicians.

⁵ One source, <http://www.donaldclarkmusicbox.com/encyclopedia/detail.php?s=2184>, says he appears on six of Mongo's albums.

⁶ This was the “Mariel boatlift” exodus from Cuba in the spring and summer of 1980.

⁷ This concert coincided with the 1974 “Rumble in the Jungle” fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman.

⁸ Orlando is a pianist, percussionist (both popular and Afro-Cuban folkloric music), singer, arranger, and composer. He was raised New York playing from childhood in his father Henry Fiol's salsa band. Orlando is also an outstanding student of North Indian classical music. He has lived in Philadelphia since 2001.

Resources for further exploration

Books:

Bardfeld, Sam. 2002. *Latin Violin: How to Play Salsa, Charanga, and Latin Jazz Violin*. New York: Gerard/Sarzin (book and CD).

Gerard, Charley. 2001. *Music from Cuba: Mongo Santamaria, Chocolate Armenteros and Cuban Musicians in the United States*. Westport, CT: Praeger (includes a chapter on Pupi Legarreta).

Moore, Robin. 2006. *Music & Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

_____. 1997. *Nationalizing Blackness: Afro-Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920–1940*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Sublette, Ned. 2004. *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.

Waxer, Lise (ed.). 2002. *Situating Salsa: Global Markets and Local Meaning in Latin Popular Music*. New York: Routledge.

[Continued on next page >]

Online:

Legarreta biography/discography:
<http://www.donaldclarkmusicbox.com/encyclopedia/detail.php?s=2184>

Orquesta Sensación, past and present:
http://www.cubamusic.com/pg018_op-lookup_t-FIGURES_s-BIOGRAPHY_v-133.shtml

University of Texas online resource on Latin American music:

<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/music/>

Archived articles from
<http://www.descarga.com>, an excellent commercial Latin music

resource: <http://www.descarga.com/cgi-bin/db/archives/index?Rj4ZvDhQ;;453>

(articles on *charanga*, *charanga* 5-key flute, various musical groups, and much more)

Fania Records: www.faniarecords.com

Selected Recordings:

Fania All Stars. 1980, reissued 2006. Commitment. Fania/Emusica remastered edition 130 184.

_____. 1976, reissued 2007. *Fania All Stars Live in Japan 1976*.

Fania/Emusica remastered edition 130 278.

Larry Harlow. 1975, reissued 2006. *El Judío Maravilloso*. Fania/Emusica remastered edition 130 115.

Pupi Legaretta. Reissued 1993. *Pupy y Su Charanga*. Tumi 33.

Israel “Cachao” Lopez. 1977, reissued 2005. *Cachao y Su Descarga*. Salsoul 7015.

Orquesta Nuevo Ritmo. 1960, reissued 1999. *The Heart of Cuba*. GNP 2264 (reissue with Peruchín recording).

Foto Rodríguez y Su Orquesta La Única. 2006. *En Honor a Pupi Legarreta — el 27 Aniversario*. CM/Corre Music 52.

Mongo Santamaría. Reissued 1996. *¡Arriba!* Fantasy 24738.

_____. 1963, reissued 1998. *Watermelon Man*. Milestone 47075.

Various Artists. 2007. *Charanga at the Palladium, Vol. 1*. Universal/Protel 160

conservatory kind of music! It was folk music. So that’s how it started. What we found out is that every city has its own kind of klezmer tunes, because the people that settled in New York came from some wherever, and they brought their music with them. Boston has its own. Philly is known for its particular kind of klezmer, and a lot of it is in Grandpop’s book. Everybody has their own shtick, their own genre, and we don’t do that. We do Philadelphia klezmer. That’s what we’re known for.

Elizabeth: Can you tell me any ways that it’s different from the other styles?

Elaine: It’s just different melodies, that’s all. It’s still klezmer. It’s still a freilach, it’s still a bulgar,⁵ it’s just different tunings. Some tunes are exactly alike, but they start in different places in different cities.

Elizabeth: Since klezmer has come back, or been revived, by these younger guys, how has that affected you? You’ve been able to do some traveling, and you go teach at workshops?

Elaine: We didn’t know about these klezmer things. This KlezKamp in New York, Henry Sapoznik — it’s been there! I said, “Susan, you and I

are going to go.” It was at this broken-down hotel in the Catskills. We go up there, and we start to play. They had no idea who we were. They went, “Oh, my God, who are they?” And that was it. In 1996. And then, Alicia Svigals — I played on her record, *Fidl*. I always say she discovered me. She played for me in Washington at the concert we did for the NEA.⁶ So, [now at] KlezKamp, I have a class. Year after year after year. And then Hankus got me into KlezCanada.

Elizabeth: Do you see a lot of young people who are interested?

Elaine: Oh, it’s marvelous! It is really great to see all these kids, and my grandchildren, of course.

Elizabeth: So you think it’s going to continue to live?

Elaine: Oh, I hope so, yeah. They travel — some of these

ethnomusicologists travel to Europe, to these little towns, to dig up things.

Leaonore: Elaine is a genius musician. She was properly educated to bring it out of her, the finishing touches.

Now through change of environment and situations, the horah, the Jewish dances, it’s all being recognized and properly brought forward. Before, a klezmer played on a corner in a street, with my father’s time, before

the War, before the Depression. Times change, that’s all it is. Of course, you get disappointments and frustrations, and fortunately, now, at this age, Elaine is being recognized for what she worked for and really deserves. Really, it’s a wonderful feeling.

Notes

¹ Podemski was a percussionist in the Philadelphia Orchestra and author of the now-classic *Standard Snare Drum Method*. Grupp was timpanist in the Philadelphia Orchestra in the 1950s.

² A type of lively Yiddish dance and tune.s

³ Originally located in Center City Philadelphia, this well-known area nightclub relocated to Cherry Hill, NJ, in 1960, and finally closed its doors in 1978.

⁴ Another common klezmer tune type: improvised, said to derive from the music of Romanian shepherds.

⁵ Popular klezmer dance tune.

⁶ In Summer 2007, Elaine and other winners of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) National Heritage Fellowship were honored in Washington, D.C.