

The Latin Jazz Corner

Latin Jazz Conversations: Ed Fast (Part 1)

Local music scenes across the United States are home to musicians that have found national recognition, but in most cases, the heart and soul of that music scene can be found elsewhere. While major names bring attention to a local music scene and often help sell concert tickets or recordings, their contributions to the actual artistic development of the scene can be inconsistent. These musicians are focusing their creative endeavors upon producing a product that reaches listeners outside their local scene, largely through travel, concerts abroad, and streams of recorded works. While they may perform in their local scene, their presence just isn't consistent enough to make a genuine grassroots impact. The daily act of creating music within a community shapes the aesthetics of that music scene, and it requires a group of artists that spend the majority of their time in the trenches of that region. The musicians that perform in the nightclubs, work in the symphonies, teach in the schools, and play on the streets create the area's musical character. They feel the pulse of the community, and they find ways to translate that into their artistic output. They reflect upon the needs of their community, discover the best ways to deliver a musical solution, and then do the long hard work to make it a reality. These are the musicians provide an area's artistic heartbeat, and they should be celebrated with enthusiastic appreciation.



Drummer Ed Fast has helped shape the heart and soul of the music scene around Hartford, Connecticut for many years, sharing his love for Latin Jazz and more. A Connecticut native, Fast found a love for music at an early age, both at home and in school. He eventually connected with drums and percussion, a path that led him into

collegiate music studies at The Hartt School Of Music. During his time in college, Fast studied with master percussionist Alexander Lepak, who encouraged him to dive into percussion instruments across the musical world. Fast took this lesson to heart, spending time mastering symphonic percussion, mallets, drum kit, and more. A marimba gig brought Latin music to Fast's attention, and he soon discovered the Latin Jazz mastery of Cal Tjader. Recordings from the legendary musician enthralled Fast, who soon became hooked on the combination of Afro-Cuban rhythms and jazz. His interest in Tjader inspired Fast to search for percussionist Bill Fitch, who became an important musical mentor. Fitch connected Fast to the music's history and provided essential insights into the world of Afro-Cuban percussion. As Fast moved from the role of student to professional, he balanced his work between Latin Jazz, Broadway musicals, and symphony performances. All pieces of Hartford's musical world benefited from Fast's impeccable musicality, with his love for Latin Jazz at the center of his musical output.

Fast built a wealth of musical knowledge and experience during his formative years that he eventually applied with his group Conga Bop on the album [Straight Shot](#). His musicality goes beyond the confines of genre or tradition, bringing broad skills that will benefit any musical situation. In the first piece of our interview with Fast, we look at his development as a musician, his discovery of Latin Jazz, and his relationship with important conguero Bill Fitch.



LATIN JAZZ CORNER:

How did you get started in music - was it something that you started in your childhood or did it come later?

ED FAST: When I was a kid we had a piano in the house. My mom played piano and I taught myself to play a bit. We had some teach yourself books lying

around the house so I picked up the piano a little bit. Then I switched over to drums in elementary school. I studied drums all through elementary and high school and then ended up going to The Hartt School Of Music.

LJC: What type of music was around you when you were growing up? Were you into jazz at that age?

EF: There wasn't much jazz going on. My mom used to play a lot of the old standards - Jerome Kern, Oscar and Hammerstein stuff. Then some other popular stuff of the day, Burt Bacharach and that type of thing. But there was no real focus on jazz in the house. I got into that a little bit later when I got into college.

LJC: I read that in your early studies one of your teachers told you to master all different percussion instruments, which gave you a broad perspective. Who gave you that and how did it shape your relationship with the instruments?

EF: When I went college, I went to The Hartt School Of Music; the reason that I went there was to study with Alexander Lepak. He's the one that made sure that you studied all the percussion instruments, for a couple of reasons. You really learn a lot about music from bottom to top. Just studying timpani you learn bass clef and understand how the bass functions. The same with the marimba, it's kind of like studying piano; you get your harmony and melody and rhythm all in one instrument. So he was a big proponent of that. He also made it clear that you'd have a lot more luck trying to find work if you didn't have to say, "No, I can't do this show because I don't know how to play the xylophone or I don't know how to play timpani." So it served two purposes - you became a very well rounded, well-educated musician, plus it made you much more marketable when it came to work. I found that to be very true.



LJC: When were you at Hartt?

EF: I was there twice. From '83 to '87, I got my undergraduate degree. Then they put me on a full scholarship to come back and get my graduate degree. So I got to study for a couple of more years with Lepak. He was just a remarkable musician and teacher, so I couldn't pass that up.

LJC: When did you get into jazz in that course of things?

EF: Lepak was a great big band drummer and composer. He composed great big band charts. When I got there to the school, I had already been playing drum set, but mainly more rock type stuff. I did a little bit of jazz band things in high school; I went to Old Lyme High, a very small school - there wasn't a whole lot of jazz going on there. Lepak was a big jazz musician, composer, big band writer and drummer . . . a great jazz drummer. Right from the get go, we worked a lot on that. Not only on drum set, but also on mallets. We got into all the chord voicings on the vibraphone. I'm very, very thankful that we got into that. Once I started writing music, I felt like I had something to back it up with - that harmonic knowledge and chordal knowledge from studying jazz with Lepak on mallets and drums.

LJC: How did you make the leap into Latin rhythms, checking out Afro-Cuban and Brazilian rhythms - was Lepak into that as well?



EF: That wasn't a specialty of his, but he was knowledgeable in that area. Actually what happened was, when I was still in college, I got hired by some guys to play marimba doing Mexican folk music. From there, it was a small leap to checking out the vibraphone and in particular, Cal Tjader. The thing about Cal Tjader was he had the real guys on there, Mongo Santamaria, Willie Bobo, and of course later on, Poncho Sanchez. But everything was clean and not overdone - you could hear how all the parts were supposed to

fit together. Once I heard Cal Tjader, that kind of captured my imagination and I kind of ran with it from there. I have to say that Cal Tjader was probably my biggest influence early on when I got into Latin Jazz.

LJC: Was someone in the area who was a mentor and helped you learn about the Latin side of the music?

EF: When I got into Cal Tjader, there was one record in particular that really drew me in, and that was [Sona Libre](#). That album in particular had a tune on there called "Insight," that was written by the conga player on the album, Bill Fitch. That tune really knocked me out. I took that tune "Insight," that was written by Bill, and I transcribed all the parts - piano, bass, timbales, congas, vibraphone - I transcribed everything. I learned so much from that tune. It really impressed me



that this conga player, Bill Fitch, took an amazing solo over one of the hippest montunos that I've ever heard in Latin Jazz. That's the only album that I ever saw him on. It turns out that after trying to track him down for literally years and years and years, he lived in New Haven, Connecticut. That was right down the street from me . . . well, forty minutes away. So I got to hook up with him quite a bit. This guy was an amazing guy. He kind of dropped out of the music scene. He came up with Chick Corea in Boston and went to Berklee. A buddy of mine just worked for Chick out in Colorado, and Chick said that Bill Fitch hipped him to the real deal when it came to Latin Jazz piano playing. He came up with Chick Corea, Gary Burton, Don Alias, Tony Williams, and more. I used to go down every week to play with him. I took his advice on who to listen to and what was important playing wise. This guy was an amazing guy.

LJC: I'd love to hear more about him, he sounds like a pretty important player.

EF: This guy is amazing. Have you heard about that movie, [The Soloist](#), about the violinist who was in L.A.? He went to Juilliard; they made a whole movie about him . . . well, Bill Fitch has got a story like that, but times ten. He went to Berklee, and he was one of the first conga players at Berklee. Gary Burton, and all these guys know Bill. I saw Don Alias just like a month before he passed away; he said, "Man, you think you know who the greatest conga player is? It's not many of the guys out there, it's Bill Fitch, the greatest conga player ever!"

People don't know about him because he dropped out of the scene so early. Once he left Berklee, he went to New York. Cal Tjader was in New York and someone came running over to Bill's apartment. He was living with Chick Corea at the time; they were roommates. Someone said, "Hey, Bill, Cal's looking for a new conga player, you've got to come down and sit in with him." So Bill sat in with him and got hired on the spot. Cal flew him out to California and he made that record with him, [Sona Libre](#). He did a couple of other things. From what I hear, Bill wrote so many amazing charts, but where those charts are . . . who knows? Apparently all the conga drummers used to come out and watch Bill play because he was really something special.

LJC: That would be interesting to track down some of that music.

EF: Bill told me that they made a videotape out on Hermosa Beach; I think it was for Fantasy Records. I was trying to get in touch with anybody that might have a copy of that. I have no idea what tunes

they videotaped, but it would be great to Bill when he was twenty-one years old, doing his thing with Cal.

Bill is on another album with this organ player named Charles Kynard and that album was Bill Fitch, Armando Peraza, and one other percussionist. On the cover it says "The Greatest Latin Percussion Section Ever Assembled." It was Armando Peraza on bongo and Bill Fitch on congas. All these guys were very close.

LJC: Is Bill still with us?

EF: He is; that guy's got nine lives. I went away on a tour to Japan and he was in the hospital. I was thinking that I would never see him again. I was going away for two months, and he was skinny as pole, didn't have the strength to move his legs or anything. I came back from Japan, he had put on fifty pounds and he was wheeling someone down the hallway in a wheelchair. Eight years later, and he's still with us.

Make sure that you check back tomorrow for Part Two of our interview with Latin Jazz drummer and percussionist Ed Fast. We'll be going into more detail about Hartford's music scene, the creation of Conga Bop, the recording of *[Straight Shot](#)*, and much more. Don't miss it!

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