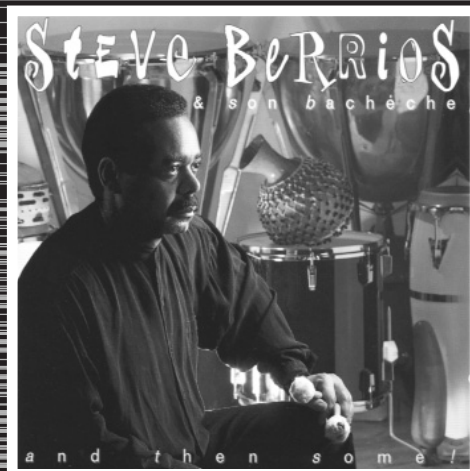


The Fort Apache Band



Andy González, Steve Berrios, Jerry González, Larry Willis, John Simblefield, Joe Ford.



Top: Photograph © 1995 Phil Bray.

Bottom left: CD cover of Steve Berrios & Son Bachéche First World. Milestone Records (MCD 9234-2);

Bottom right: CD cover of Steve Berrios & Son Bachéche And then Some. Milestone Records (MCD-9255-2).

Rejecting the Shadow: Steve Berrios, An Apache of the Skins, Discusses his Musical Influences, Latin Jazz Music, and the Significance of the Fort Apache Band

WILSON A. VALENTÍN-ESCOBAR

Steve Ramon Berrios,

characterized by many as the leading inventor of Latin jazz drumming, is one of the unspoken heroes of Latin jazz music. He was born on February 24, 1945, in New York City to Puerto Rican parents, Steve Berrios, Sr. and Mérida Pizarro Berrios. They raised the talented musician on the Upper Westside of Manhattan, where his neighbors included some of Latin music's most prominent performers, such as Israel "Cachao" López, Federico Paganí, Mario Bauzá, and Lino Sierra. Born and raised into a musical family, the elder Berrios was a professional drummer who performed and recorded with Macelino Guerra, Noro Morales, and Pupi Campos. Exposed to Puerto Rican *bomba*, *plena*, *jibaro* music, African-American jazz, as well as Cuban music, Steve Berrios recalls listening to an array of musical genres at home, from European classical music to Trío Los Panchos to Charlie Parker. This organic musical environment proved invaluable for his musical formation and imagination.

After picking up the bugle and the trumpet, he became a proficient drummer as a teenager. Through his father's recommendation, he performed with a local house band at the Alameda hotel in Manhattan. He was then invited into Mongo Santamaria's band, playing traps and timbales for over a decade with the late Cuban bandleader. In 1981 he joined the legendary Jerry Gonzalez and the Fort Apache Band, contributing his knowledge and experience to the ensemble. The leader of his own band, Son Bachéche, Berrios has performed and/or recorded with the late Tito Puente, Larry Willis, Paquito D'Rivera, Eddie Palmieri, Art Blakey, and many others. In this interview, an excerpt of a larger oral history conducted on October 25, 2001 at Columbia University's Center for Jazz Studies, Steve Berrios reflects upon his family, musical influences, teaching strategies and performance techniques, performances at the Soundscape music club, and the significance of the Fort Apache Band. Mr. Berrios continues to reside in New York City.

Wilson Valentín: Before we talk about your musical influences and experiences, can you discuss some of your educational experiences?

Steve Berrios: I barely got out of high school. Matter of fact, I got left back a year. Not because I was dumb or anything, but I never went to school. I used to cut school like crazy, and I'll tell you why I cut school and my mom used to allow me to do that. As opposed to going to school, I used to keep my lunch money and then hop the train to go to the Apollo. If you arrived before twelve o'clock, it was a dollar admission and you could see four or five shows a day, and in between the shows there was a cartoon, a newsreel, then the same show goes on again. And I used to see people like Tito Puente's band, when he had Willie Bobo and Mongo Santamaria and Bobby Rodriguez on bass. I saw Machito's band too. I used to cut every time there was a good show, and there was basically a good show every week. The show used to last like a week and then another show would turn over. So I saw from like Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers to Machito and his Afro-Cubans to Duke Ellington and his orchestra. So that was my schooling.

WV: How do you identify racially/ethnically?

SB: I'm an African in the Diaspora. That's how I've seen myself. Not by choice, because that's a fact. That's what it is. It's not because, "Oh, I just want to be called a Puerto Rican," or I want to be called Latino, I want to be called Hispanic. To me, all that's hogwash because it's not getting to the root of what you really are. I'm an African in the Diaspora, and I'm proud of that. And I speak Spanish muy bien. *Y a veces puedo hablar como un puertorriqueño o un cubano.* And that's a feather in my cap. Some people think that I am Puerto Rican who has a desire to be a Cuban. That's basically because I was raised among more Cubans than Puerto Ricans.

WV: Did the Civil Rights Movement assert a more positive notion of being a black man in the Diaspora?

SB: I was in the Nation of Islam. I joined the Nation of Islam, which I was one of a handful of Puerto Ricans, black Puerto Ricans at that time. And I was in the Nation for a while.

WV: Who invited you? How did that happen?

SB: Through mutual friends in high school. I was very attracted to Malcolm X. I used to go see him at temple number 7. He used to make speeches at 116th Street and Lennox Avenue, which is now Malcolm X Boulevard, or on 125th Street. There were a lot of speakers there. So I was always attracted to nationalism, pan-Africanism, I would say. And so much so that when they assassinated Martin Luther King I was having lunch with Mongo and a few other musicians in the band, and we were working in San Francisco that week, a place called The Matador. And I read in the paper, or it came on the news or something that Martin Luther King was assassinated. My reaction was, "Oh wow, now they're assassinating Uncle Toms." So that shows you where my head was at that time. You know, of course now I'm much more mature. But that's how I felt because I was leaning more towards Malcolm X at that time than to Martin Luther King. I was seeing Martin Luther King as an ass-kisser, and I was seeing Malcolm as the one standing up for the underdog. Now I see the validity in both of them.

WV: Why were you attracted to the nationalism of Malcolm X, to the Nation?

SB: I always had that nationalism. I always felt myself as a pan-Africanist; it was very easy for me to be attracted to Elijah Mohammed and the Nation of Islam back then.

WV: What made you eventually leave the Nation?

SB: Because there were a lot of restrictions—and I understand why—there were a lot

of restrictions. For the masses of people, they need that, that kind of chaperoning because our people are so in need of direction. So the rules are very strict. But being I was a pan-Africanist or very nationalistic before I joined the Nation, and also being a musician on the road, it was a little harder, more difficult for me to abide by a lot of the rules.

WV: As you were growing up in New York City did your parents, relatives, or friends talk to you about Puerto Rican and/or Latin American history?

SB: Not directly, but my dad was a socialist, he was involved in the Communist Party. On the other side of the coin, my mom was a very religious woman. She was into *espiritismo*. When my dad used to go to work on the weekends, my mother and aunts would do their *séances*. *Era como una misa espiritual* in my house. My dad never spoke to me about politics or even history, per se. But just the exposure, either musically or by friends coming over, his friends coming by the house, it was just done in that way, in that form. I know there was a big difference between my dad's way of thinking and my mom's way of thinking. My dad and my uncles used to meet and have communist meetings at my house. I remember some FBI agents even came by my house one time, looking for my dad during the McCarthy era of the 1950s. My dad was gung-ho for liberation of Puerto Rico and socialism and all that stuff.

WV: When did you pick-up a musical instrument?

SB: My dad gave me a bugle for my 11th birthday. So then after that I got pretty good on it, and then he gave me a trumpet. So from like eleven through seventeen I was a trumpet player. When I was in elementary school up through high school I studied trumpet. I had private music lessons, and I played the trumpet in the junior high school and the high school band. And I picked up drums much later, around seventeen or eighteen years old. My dad always had drums in the house, and I would set them up and play along with records or just bang on my mother's pots and pans.

WV: When did you start performing professionally?

SB: I'd say about sixteen, seventeen years old—playing trumpet. I played with Pucho and the Latin Soul Brothers. I played trumpet in that band. I played trumpet with Joe Panama's band. I also played timbales with Hugo Dickens. In that band there was Hubert Laws, Barry Rogers, a few other guys. Artie Jenkins on piano, or Roger Grant sometimes. I started playing at a very early age.

WV: As a child what musicians were you listening to? I know you mentioned you'd go to the Apollo and listen to Tito Puente, Mongo Santamaria, as well as the Teenagers; which musicians had the most influence on you at the time?

SB: I wasn't that aware of it then but now, as a grown man those influences were very important and very profound in my being, in who I am today. I run the gamut from my dad, we used to hear European classical music, to Trío Los Panchos, jíbaro music, *aguinaldos*, Cuban music, a lot of Cuban music in my house. And a lot of jazz. Just play the music and I was surrounded by it, so much so that I'm like a sponge; I pick up things pretty quickly. Especially at that age. Then I used to become the disc jockey in my house. I used to play the records, whatever I wanted to hear at the time. And there was such a varied music library in my house, you know. It was 78s at those times.

WV: You played the trumpet from eleven to seventeen, and then at seventeen you started percussion. Can you be more specific as to what type of percussion instruments and what type of musical genres you were playing?

SB: Well, from a toddler through seventeen, which is the era you're talking about, I was aware of the *conga*. My dad always had instruments in the house and he'd set up his drums, his *timbales*, he had *bongo*, congas, he had all that stuff. And then on the weekends my aunts and uncles used to come by the house, they used to give little

parties, and they used to bring their guitars, and I used to sit around playing the bongo or the conga, you know. But my first professional job, one of my first professional jobs on playing percussion, on drums, was when my dad was working at a hotel on 57th Street called the Alameda Room. And the drummer—there were two bands, like a show band and a dance band—and for some reason the drummer left so my dad said, “Would you be interested in doing this job?” And I was around seventeen, eighteen years old. It was a steady, six- night-a-week gig and making good money for those days, so at seventeen I was already making good money. And I stayed on that job for about four or five years, every night. I never missed a night, six nights a week. During this time, I learned a lot about different types of music. Playing *paso dobles*, tangos, all that kind of stuff. Because then after that my dad left the show band, and I took over playing the shows, and I did that for four years. So I played with Ruth Fernández, Miguelito Valdez, Bobby Capó, Johnny Rodríguez, Tito Rodríguez’s brother, Los Tres Aces, and Myrta Silva. I accompanied all those shows. That was really a great learning experience for me.

This was on 57th Street, so we used to do a show and then we had an hour and a half break. I used to run to the Palladium on my break to go see where my heart really was. There was Palladium or Birdland, which was the next block. So I used to do that faithfully. On my breaks I would run back and forth. Sometimes I used to take a cab or just run down there and catch maybe a half hour of the music. So I saw Machito’s band, Puente’s band, you name it, I saw them there. And then right down the block I used to go to Birdland and see Miles Davis, Horace Silver, Art Blakey, Thelonious Monk, all at that same age. I was like seventeen or eighteen years old. I was being bombarded with different styles of music all at once, it was all coming into my head. And at that age you can process so much stuff subconsciously.

WV: How did you meet Mongo Santamaria?

SB: I met him through my dad. On Sunday afternoons they used to have matinees, and they used to have a pretty hip band, they used to have La Playa Sextet or Mongo Santamaria’s band used to come by. And he heard me playing and because his drummer was leaving at the time he asked if I’d be interested in joining his band. And you know what my reaction was. That was like my freedom after four years of doing something I didn’t appreciate at the time. I did, in a way. But I wanted to play hipper kind of music. So I jumped at the opportunity. I just left it all there and joined Mongo’s band. First time I got on an airplane. I was really green at the other side of life, you know. And from then I stayed with Mongo’s band from like ’67, ’68, on and off through 1980, ’81. So I did a lot of traveling; I grew up on that band. That was like my real college.

WV: Why did you leave Mongo’s band?

SB: Trying to be a good father and husband. Finally raise some of my children. And I was tired of playing that music. After fifteen years of playing with one band I think I’d graduated from Mongo’s school. I wanted to branch out and do something different.

WV: Were you being creative or was there a lack of creativity?

SB: I think for me it was a lack of creativity by then. It was too obvious and too premeditated and predictable for what I wanted to do at that time. And the quality of the bands came down a lot. I was playing both drums and timbales. Because of what we’re talking about now, to say you’re a Latin jazz artist you better be careful what you’re saying. That’s a lot of weight to carry; you have to know a lot about a lot. As you have to know both cultures. And which they’re similar but—no, let me go back. Not both cultures, but two ways of saying the same thing. Which is the

African-American culture and Afro-Caribbean culture, that’s what makes Latin jazz. So you have to be pretty well versed. And not too many people, I think, are well versed in understanding those two ways of saying the same thing.

WV: What did you learn from Mongo Santamaria?

SB: I learned more of that Africanness through Mongo also. Not as much as from Julito Collazo. And then just also being able to—for all those years—play timbales and drum set at the same time, which is very unique. And playing some slick music at the same time. And traveling around the world with good musicians, making a lot of good records. Yeah, that was my college. Between that and Julito was basically my college.

WV: Talking about this mentor/mentee connection, can you discuss your relationship with Julio Collazo; what did he teach you and how did he teach you to play percussion?

SB: I’ve known him since I was very young. He came here, I believe, in 1954 with a dance troupe called Katherine Dunham. And there were two outstanding percussionists who are both of my mentors: Francisco Aguabella and Julito Collazo, who were in that ballet. And so I met him through my dad. He used to come by the house, and then we really became friends as a man, when I became a man, playing in Mongo Santamaria’s band. I was very attracted to Julito Collazo because of his knowledge of Africanness. And I don’t just mean musically or religiously, I mean the way he carries himself.

In Puerto Rico that side of history was wiped out, of the African Puerto Ricans anyway. They don’t speak any African language—well some people speak a little Güembe. But in general, in the island of Puerto Rico there’s no other language than Spanish. Puerto Rico is so small, and there wasn’t that much diversity in the African slaves that went to Puerto Rico; but it was a big mass diversity of the ones that went to Cuba. You know, so you couldn’t control the masses of Africans. Where you can have a lot of control is over small masses that were basically coming from one tribe. Cuba, which is a much bigger island, and so many slaves came from so many different parts, you could have people from the Congo and people from Dahomey, Nigeria. They maintained a lot of their Africanness, either musically or religiously. And I was always very attracted to that. So that’s what he taught me. Not only did he teach me about the sacred drums, bata, but about the religious aspect and the language. The drumming language and the different religious languages. I learned how to play *chekere*, I learned something about the *rumba*, *guaguancó*, and the languages, too. Julito Collazo is *cubano*. He’s a *babalao*. He’s an overseer of the *Santería* religion. He was a mentor musically, spiritually, and socially.

WV: Did you have other musicians who served as role models or mentors?

SB: Sure. Within the Afro-Caribbean context, I’d say Willie Bobo. He is so underrated as a musician and as a keeper of the flame, as a keeper of our culture. He was Puerto Rican from the barrio, 111th Street. As a kid in one sentence you couldn’t tell if he was African American or in the other sentence you couldn’t tell if he was Puerto Rican or Cuban. And to me that’s so unique and so valuable and so important. And he could play jazz like an African American, and he can play Afro-Caribbean music as if he were born in Puerto Rico or born in Cuba. And a black Puerto Rican on top of that. So those are the kind of people that I was very attracted to at a very young age. You know, and that’s not even including the Art Blakeys, the Max Roaches, you know, Elvin Jones, you know, on the African-American side of drumming.

Art Blakey was another mentor. I played with him and I was his road manager for about a year in 1985 and 1986 and hung out with him. He taught me a lot about life, about being a band leader, about how to get the best out of your musicians without making it obvious so they can feel comfortable, so they can feel wanted or that they're contributing something to the group. As a road manager, I used to check the musicians in at the airports and at the hotels. I used to get paid from the promoters, I used to pay the band, I used to pay Art Blakey, I used to pay myself. I learned a lot from that. And before I got that job, before he offered me the job, he asked: "Well what are you doing?" And I wasn't working at the time. He said, "Why don't you come to Paris with me, just as a vacation." I said, "Oh sure, why not." And from that, one thing led to another. Then I was with him as a road manager for about a year.

WV: Did your mentors provide a foundation for your teaching/mentoring philosophy? What do you talk about when leading a music workshop?

SB: I've worked with a lot of great percussionists, and they never spoke to me about music. Everything else: baseball, politics, movies, but never about music per se. You know, and I find that consistent with all my mentors. Which I think is very interesting and that's the way I apply teaching students that I have, and I don't have that many. You know, because all music is cultural. But some people, for whatever reason, separate certain musics from their culture. And certain other music genres you must know the culture and their language. Like for example, not putting down European classical music, but if you go to a college to learn music, if you want to or not, you have to take a European classical music course. Because they say those are the masters and that's the legitimate music. You have to know where Beethoven was born, what language he spoke, what he ate. When it comes to our music, that's *passé*. You don't need to know that. Which I think is very derogatory to our culture because we have the same kind of heroes who are just as valid as a Beethoven or a Mozart. It's just as valid. I mean what Ramito ate, what Chano Pozo ate, what Dizzy Gillespie ate, and what town he was born in.

WV: Is that something that you talk about with your students or mentees?

SB: Yes, but not that direct. Because it's more subliminal. If a student wants to learn how to play Afro-Cuban guaguancó, you have to speak in that language.

WV: What is that language?

SB: You have to learn just a little Spanish, just to know the names of the instruments, for one. So right there you're speaking another language, you know. And it'd even be better to, "Alright, you want to know how to play Afro-Cuban guaguancó. Why don't we go have some rice and beans at a Cuban Chinese restaurant?" To understand all of that, how all these things came about. If you want to learn how to play jazz, you can't dismiss Afro-American people. You cannot dismiss that, because then it's not jazz. If you want to play *bomba y plena*, you can't dismiss Puerto Rican people and you have to know what, for example, *morcilla* is, and you have to know what a *parranda* is.

WV: You're stating that Latin jazz is a lifestyle, but it's also a technique that requires a level of proficiency. Do you talk about those techniques in your clinics?

SB: Sure. By talking about what we're talking about now as opposed to me playing a drum solo for you. Anybody can play a drum solo. Some better than others, but you're missing the point if you'd rather hear me play a drum solo as opposed to me speaking about my life experience with you. That's how you get to know who Steve Berrios is, and maybe hopefully some of that will rub off on you. You know, because there's only one Steve... But if I can get something from you, I become a

bigger Steve. If you can get something from me, you become a bigger you. And that's when a lot of people miss the point. You can't teach a social music in a homogeneous hospital-like setting that exists in some schools and clinics. You have to be aware of the musician's social world. If you don't have those elements, you might as well have some plastic gloves: "Sutures! Scalpel!" You know what I mean? And that's why most of those people who are big stars today sound the way they sound, they sound very shallow to me. There's no substance. And I know why that is; it's because they're separating the culture from the art form. Picasso used to party and drink wine, and so did Ravel and Stravinsky, all my favorites. They didn't separate their art form from their culture, from their life, their daily life. Because it's all one; you can't separate yourself from whatever you do.

WV: Can you discuss how you were introduced to Verna Gillis's Soundscape music club in Manhattan?

SB: I was living three blocks from Soundscape—I still live in that apartment—and I heard they were having jam sessions every Thursday night. Soundscape, was located on 52nd street off of 10th Avenue. So I could walk there. So I started going there and noticed it started developing musically. That was also the same time of the Mariel boat lift, so there were Cubans who came from el Mariel. There was a nice cultural exchange. Daniel Ponce was fresh out of Cuba, playing a different style than the way they play here. Orlando "Puntilla" Ríos was there singing and playing *batá*. So you add that freshness, that raw freshness from Cuba to New York, and it really made something very unique. Paquito D' Rivera, Jorge Dalto, Claudio Roditi used to come down; many great, great musicians used to come down. So we would jam tunes. There was a little bit of everything: a little bit of bebop, a little bit of guaguancó, a little bit of Santería, batas, all thrown in together. It was pretty unique. I enjoyed those days.

From then Fort Apache developed. Jerry Gonzalez got a gig to do the Berlin Jazz Festival, and I think the promoter asked him, "What's the name of the band?" So off the top of his head, from what he tells me, he said, "Well, Fort Apache," because that's a famous precinct in the Bronx. At that point there were fifteen guys or more. Not to put anybody down, but I think the band is more condensed and more to the point of what we're trying to do. We condensed it to the nucleus now that we can do almost anything with five guys as opposed to fifteen. And we can all make a little more money too. I'm in the *The River is Deep/El río está hondo* and every album thereafter.

WV: The band members in Fort Apache are perceived as pioneers. Why do you think the band is perceived in that manner? What makes Fort Apache unique and different?

SB: It's because we know how to say the same thing in different languages. When we're playing jazz I dare anyone say that when I'm playing jazz drumming with Fort Apache that I'm a Latino trying to play jazz like an African American. Because I am an African American, too. Because I come from African descent, and I was born in America. And I know that genre very well because I grew up listening to that. At the same time that I was listening to Tito Puente, I was also listening to Art Blakey. I know both languages extremely well. That's what I think makes me unique or the Fort Apache band unique because everyone else in the band is just as well versed in speaking those two languages. That's what I think makes us the pioneers and the most valid Latin jazz band out there.

WV: How are you approaching the music different from a typical jazz drummer?

SB: It's because my exposure to knowing those both sides of saying the same thing, and it's so much, that it's subconscious. When I'm playing something with a

clave involved in it, I'm not saying, "Well I'm speaking Spanish now." Or when I'm playing jazz I don't say, "Well I'm speaking English now." It's all one thing. And I'm glad you mentioned that I have bells on my drums, but that's not my invention. Because back in the early days Chick Webb had cow bells and temple blocks on his drum set, so did Papa Joe Jones, and so did Sonny Greer. But I just took it somewhere else, from listening to records, from watching rumba, people dance rumba and playing rumba. So I take a little bit from here, little bit from there, and then when you put it all together, then it sounds like Steve Berrios.

WV: When did you decide to expand or change the way you perform the drums?

SB: After being exposed to the Cubans who arrived after the Mariel. What they brought to the table was quite unique to me. I saw Ignacio Berroa at Soundscape play with one bell or something, and I got some from his style of playing, and then I added more bells, and then I added my knowledge of the Afro-Cuban experience and it turns to be Steve Berrios.

WV: What's your technique?

SB: I have none. First of all, I'm self-taught. Even if my father was a great drummer, he never gave me a lesson. Just by osmosis, watching him and watching all the drummers that I like and—not just drummers, musicians in general. Watching them live, I think that's very important to do. You know, and you can hear a record but if you don't see the body language and the way musicians move and the way they set up, it's not as valid to me. So my technique: the closest way I can answer that is when I'm playing something with a *clave* involved, I'm thinking of rumba and congas and *clave* and *casarita de baile* on the side of the drum. That's basically my approach.

WV: Over the years, there's been a growing tendency to perceive U.S.-born Latin jazz musicians as imitators; as invalid artists imitating musical forms that derive from Cuba and elsewhere. What are your thoughts of this perception?

SB: I'm glad you brought that up. I'll answer that very simple. All those "jazz" musicians that are big stars from Cuba, that are big stars today, can't play in the Fort Apache Band. That should tell you something. Not one of them can sit and play with us. And I've played with all of them. You know what I mean? And believe me, I'm pro Cuba. But that's not what we're talking—we're talking about reality and what's true or not. Not one of those musicians can play in the Fort Apache Band. You know, again because they don't understand the vernacular. They don't know the vernacular.

WV: In addition to speaking both musical languages efficiently, what is it that makes musicians want to emulate Fort Apache? Is it how the harmonic structures are synthetically combined with rhythm?

SB: I think it's all of the above. But all of that is more, I think if a person is aware of it or not, it's raw. It's really unadulterated music. It's raw and it's very unique to New York City. I think the only place that this can be done is in New York City because of all the different cultures that melt here in this city.

WV: When Fort Apache is performing, all the band members know all the breaks without sheet music on the bandstand. How did that develop? Is it that each member reads cues very well or is it because the band has been playing together for so long?

SB: Okay, it's mostly E.S.P. and coupled with some understanding of the language; if we're playing in a *clave* setting we understand the things you can do and not do. So that's how that comes out. We rehearsed once for the *Rumba Para Monk* album. Because we had to pick the tunes and find out how—in what setting we were going to play them in. That was the only time we got together at Jerry's house when he was living in the Bronx. I think we rehearsed like two or three days and made that record.

Other than that, everything's on the job training. A lot of people ask me, "Hey man, you guys are so tight. You guys rehearse a lot, right?" And I said, "No, we don't rehearse." We just know the music and we know each other. That's what makes it a unique band, while you see other bands playing Latin jazz that is premeditated and so obvious, you know what's coming next, you know. Because they don't have that camaraderie and they don't have that E.S.P. and they don't know the vernacular like we do.

WV: The Fort Apache Band plays Latin Jazz, but so do the Tito Puente Latin Jazz orchestra, Eddie Palmieri, and Ray Barretto. But Apache's Latin Jazz is different.

SB: Because when we're playing Latin we're not playing mambo, which is what Barretto plays, Palmieri plays and Tito Puente plays, they're playing a mambo beat with jazz melodies on top of it. So everything—the rhythm section stays the same, just the horns are playing some jazz songs on top of a mambo beat. Where with the Fort Apache Band, we're playing guaguancó, rumba, and then sometimes we just stop and don't play anymore *clave* and we're playing straight ahead jazz. That's what makes us unique. Because nobody can play—nobody plays, not that they can't, no one plays straight ahead four/four jazz without a conga and a bell and a *clave* like we do and do it extremely well. That's what makes us apart from all those other bands. Dizzy, Puente, Palmieri, all of them, they're playing mambo on top of some jazz harmonies, jazz melodies.

WV: When Fort Apache is performing, who decides when to switch between jazz and Latin rhythms?

SB: Whoever feels like making the switch will announce the switch and we all switch.

WV: Is this a democratic decision, although Jerry is the leader?

SB: There's a democratic setting on the bandstand. It all depends. For example, sometimes we could be playing jazz on Joe's solo, and he'll give a signal to play *clave*, and we all jump in on it.

WV: What kind of signal would that be?

SB: Oh, that's a private secret. That's a Fort Apache sworn to secrecy. Sometimes it's a visual cue, sometimes it's a melodic cue, sometimes it's just a look, sometimes it's, you know... But it's mostly E.S.P. We don't even talk on the bandstand, you know. That's what makes this music so unique because it's so raw and it's so honest. Sometimes we'll make mistakes, we'll try to clean it up, you know. Even if we're playing the same songs, it's never the same. That's what makes the band valid to me. If you see some other Latin jazz band and see them playing it the same way twice, ah. There's no creativity happening there. You could teach a monkey how to do that. If this is art, if this is an art form, it has to be live at the moment. With a few exceptions, like even in any band, you have a few guidelines that you have to adhere to, but other than that, it's wide open for anybody's suggestions—if it's within the music, you know.

WV: What's the reception like for Fort Apache outside of the United States?

SB: Oh, it's great. Outside of this country it's wonderful. It's just here, like—most of us are born and raised here in New York and—we can't get a gig here. We work here very seldom, maybe once a year. But I understand that's the politics involved, and they'd rather have some younger kids playing something a little more "palatable" that they can control as opposed to the rawness of this band. We're all grown men in this band so you can't treat us like kids. Individually we are all band-leaders, that's one thing that's very unique. Everyone has a band apart from Fort Apache. We all have recordings as leaders and we've all worked with diverse artists, the best in the country. So put all those components together and you got the Apaches.

