Ritmo Caliente: Breaking 1950s Dichotomies and Cal Tjader's "Latin Jazz"

Abstract
Cal Tjader’s role in the development of 1950s jazz has been given little attention. Many Latin Jazz musicians and critics acknowledged him as a major figure in this regard, but he is largely ignored in formal historical studies. Most of the writing about jazz in the 1950s shows a romantic view of black musicians primarily from the East Coast. Scholarship tends to focus on biographical concerns and personal issues, rather than a nuanced musical analysis. Tjader’s legacy also suffered from a tendency in earlier criticism to portray white fifties-era West Coast jazz players as musicians that do not play “true” jazz. The critical writings on 1950s jazz thus tend to paint a simplistic picture of black versus white musicians and an unrealistic battle for jazz dominance. It seemed historically unlikely that in the 1950s Cal Tjader was a major participant in a musical revolution fueled by the incorporation of Latin music and jazz. The Latin style that inspired Tjader utilized Puerto Rican, Cuban and other Caribbean musicians living in New York. Geographic location and ethnicity were against him. Even Poncho Sanchez, who had worked in Tjader’s group in the last years of his life, was an outsider, as a Mexican-American musician developing an interest in Caribbean music. Ted Gioia, author of West Coast Jazz, stated that Tjader was not easily labeled due to a potpourri of musical influences that spanned cultural boundaries; all this in a decade when segregation was a way of American life. This dissertation will confront the simplistic picture created by music historians by addressing the impact of a third group of musicians, largely ignored by conventional jazz histories, who nevertheless played a crucial role in 1950s jazz’s incorporation of musical influences from the Caribbean. Because of his role as both a San Francisco native and a white musician of Swedish descent, Cal Tjader’s career in particular presents multiple layers for semiotic analysis.

Due to the limited materials available on Cal Tjader, preliminary study on this project required extensive and varied research tools. The methodologies and materials employed for research included iconographic analysis, interviews conducted by myself, book, journal and periodical authorship, discographies, musical transcription and musical analysis. Original research focused on creating a timeline of musicians associated with Tjader’s groups throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. This was created through interviews with surviving members of Tjader’s groups and a thorough analysis of Tjader’s discography. The discography was most helpful. It revealed the relationships, knowledge, understanding and involvement of Tjader with specific Latin American musicians from New York and California. Another original contribution was the addition of new interviews with surviving relationships. Interviews were conducted with family members, musicians from various eras of his career and industry related people, such as album cover artists. Three surviving percussionists were interviewed and contributed to the creation of a chapter focusing on the careers of pivotal Afro-Cuban performers in the 1950s. This dissertation also utilized iconographic analysis to show the simplistic, yet non-threatening, portrayal of a musical style to a group of Americans that were unfamiliar, yet entranced by the mambo craze. Musical analysis was also used to show the original contribution Cal Tjader made in the incorporation of Latin jazz to the small combo. In the field of Latin jazz, Cal Tjader is known and revered by the participants of the genre, but not by the historians. Tito Puente highly respected his work, and his greatest percussionists left his group for Tjader, only to create fame for themselves as bandleaders in the pantheon of Latin jazz. Tjader’s experimentation in the 1950s with the synthesis of the jazz combo and Afro-Cuban music was an original, and eventually successful, endeavor that has been mimicked from its inception to the present day.

URI
http://hdl.handle.net/2346/19567
Vibraphonist Cal Tjader's 1950s recordings for Fantasy did a great deal to popularize Latin jazz and solidify its innovations. This CD has the complete contents of the two LPs Ritmo Caliente and Mas Ritmo Caliente. With such fine sidemen as flutist Jerome Richardson, pianists Richard Wyands, Eddie Cano, Manuel Duran and Vince Guaraldi, bassists Al McKibbon, Boby Rodriguez and Eugene Wright, and quite a few percussionists (most notably Armando Peraza and, on three songs, Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo), the fusion of bop and Latin music results in some exciting playing. In addition to gr