A Nuyorican Son

By Christopher Washburne

I am a trombonist, I approach composition through an instrumentalist's sensibility, a utilitarian approach of sorts: I write music that features the trombone and me as the trombonist. I am also deeply ensconced in. and a product of, educational institutions, with a B.M. degree in classical trombone performance, M.M. in Third Stream Studies, and Ph.D. in ethnomusicology. This said, my moments of compositional inspiration seem to emerge from one idea or feeling-a groove or melody that I begin to sing to myself. In the heat of composing, it seems as though this materializes from a "nowhere" within, driven by an intuitive urge to create. The moments usually occur just after psychological clearings of inner space. such as a vacation to a foreign place, a run in Central Park, or the experiencing of another artist's work that captures me and shakes something loose inside that simply must come out. At other times, compositions are prompted by a more pragmatic need for new repertoire for live performance or an approaching recording session. Style, feel, and rhythmic determinations then are dictated less by epiphany, and more by the fact that the band needs an up-tempo and high-energy piece. In hindsight and with closer introspection, regardless if a new piece is generated from a need (an outer place) or a mere inspiration (an inner place), it becomes clear how the influences of my past musical life and my current performance settings are integral to the music that I hear. In other words, my trombone performance and educational experiences are both invaluable and present complementary sources of inspiration in my life as a composer.

Over the last twenty years, I have led several regularly performing groups, playing a variety of jazz styles, from straight ahead, to free, to Latin. Since I don't care much for writing music that I cannot hear performed, I write for whatever band I am currently performing with. Although this limits stylistic parameters, it greatly enhances the speed with which I can explore various possibilities within those constraints. It allows my compositions to remain works in progress and provides satisfaction in watching them transform over time. In this way, I have adapted a compositional process that relies upon live performance and the input of talented musicians whom I know intimately.

The jazz styles that I perform allow and even require that improvisation play a significant role. That means my compositional process is tied to the choices I make concerning who plays in my band. My criterion for hiring sidemen is based on creating the most positive of vibes within the group's

interactive context. I hire musicians whose company I know I can enjoy, even after several weeks of touring. They are usually friends whose musicality I respect. As I shall demonstrate below, their abilities and personal style become intricately tied to my compositional choices.

When I was first learning how to play jazz in the early 1980s, I would often speak with older musicians, asking advice, taking lessons, or just hanging out. They would say repeatedly, "You can't learn to play jazz in school; jazz is learned on the street." This comment was steeped in their own youthful experiences in a time before jazz was accepted as a legitimate field of study in the academy. It also highlighted the importance of the master/apprentice and elder/youth relationship that has served to perpetuate the "jazz tradition." For younger musicians, the road big bands and after-hours jam sessions where the seminars for the "University of the Street" were conducted during the first 75 years of jazz history barely exist in today's scene. I did learn jazz in school. In fact, I was forced to, much like most of my other thirty-something jazz colleagues. The jazz scene has been transformed by a complex of social and economic factors in which classrooms now replace bandstands, and private lessons in a professor's studio replace the hours spent sitting on a bus during a tour, rapping to more experienced musicians. Us young guys still hang out with jazz elders—just more so in institutionalized settings than in smoky bars. My professors (the seasoned veterans) profoundly shaped my musical identity and their presence in my compositions is like a palimpsest, existing just beneath the surface of every note I write or play.

The first serious jazz I played was at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW). When tiring of the regimented practicing of orchestral excerpts, I signed up to study with bassist Richard Davis and to play in his big band. On the first day of class he said, "To play jazz you have to be flexible." He meant being open to spontaneously create and interact with your immediate environment. I understood it as freedom. I never stopped practicing my orchestral excerpts, but relished my newfound liberation in exploring improvisational possibilities. During that class I decided to pursue both jazz and classical trombone performance. While I was at UW, Wynton Marsalis came to perform for the students. Hanging out with the young "master" after the concert, he flippantly remarked to me that he viewed jazz as a black thing and I needed to know that experience to play the blues. He was in his early twenties at the time and his youthful arrogance should probably be forgiven. However, I was young and impressionable, and as a white musician I left the concert feeling as though I had no right to play the blues. As time passed, I realized that it wasn't my skin color that prevented me from using the blues idiom to express myself, just lack of experience. Since that realization, I have focused on developing my skills for transforming real-life, "feelingful" experiences into real-life musical gestures. The blues is a particularly adept vehicle for that purpose, and consequently I turn to blues expression in some form in many of my compositions. For this insight, I am grateful to Marsalis.

Seeking a graduate program that prized musicians who refused to be pigeonholed as solely jazz or classical players, New England Conservatory's (NEC) Third Stream Department was an obvious choice. The department was founded by Gunther Schuller in 1969 and reflected his attempt to establish a contemporary approach to conservatory training that would cater to the freelance music scene he experienced in New York. With a limited number of orchestral jobs available, the majority of this nation's conservatory-trained musicians were, and still are, forced to seek employment alternatives. Some turn to nonmusical jobs, others to educational positions, and yet others have adapted their skills to an emerging freelance scene in New York and other large cities. Schuller brought with him several key instrumentalists from New York to join the faculty at NEC to assist him in implementing his new educational vision. They included trombonist John Swallow, saxophonist and microtonal specialist Joseph Maneri, and pianist Ran Blake.

These three musicians profoundly changed the way I approach music, and their influence can be heard in much of my work. Swallow, whose diverse career included playing trombone in the New York City Ballet orchestra and being one of the busiest freelancers in the contemporary music scene, taught me to approach every performance situation from the same perspective, namely, that of making music on the highest level. His approach focused on accentuating similarities of styles and de-emphasizing differences, thus avoiding the building of walls in one's mind in order to differentiate playing styles. He taught me to allow my classical playing to inform my jazz playing, and vice versa. This approach enabled me to adapt easily to new musical situations, and I found the demands of freelancing in New York, which frequently includes traversing a wide stylistic spectrum within one day, challenging but manageable. On numerous occasions I have played a classical concert in the afternoon, a jazz gig in the evening, and ended the night with a late performance in a salsa club. This chameleon ability has not only expanded my employment possibilities, but has enriched my compositions by allowing me to draw inspiration from fairly disparate musical traditions.

Joe Maneri taught me to open my ears to the possibilities "in between," to view music as a continuum, in terms of pitch, rhythm, harmony, and musical possibilities. His improvisations would move from Coleman Hawkins–like silky, sinewy tones with phrases extending over many measures, to Schoenbergian gestures with octave displacement and shifting

tonal centers, to Elliott Carteresque metric modulatory phrases, and to Ezra Sims-like microtonal scalar structures. The ease with which he could draw from each approach and combine them within one solo left a huge impression and reinforced Swallow's message about the strength of blending traditions.

Ran Blake developed my taste for "musical spice"—those special tones and serendipitous harmonies that surprise the ear. His textual approach to improvisation on the piano demonstrated how to use in improvisation-based music the timbral developments made in European and American contemporary music. He further encouraged me to listen to world musics for inspiration—not in a Paul Simon— or David Byrne—exploitative and superficial way, but in a Third Stream way.

The term "Third Stream" has changed over the years. In the 1960s it referred to music that combined classical and jazz forms. With its institutionalization, however, it grew to encompass much more, and became associated with a process more than with a musical style. I understand the term in its function as a verb rather than as a stylistic label. It concerns the dedication to immerse oneself in two or more musical styles, to become competent in both, and then to combine the two separate streams to develop a personal style, or third stream. Its emphasis on improvisation and ear-training has prompted NEC to change the Third Stream Department's name to the Department of Contemporary Improvisation. The instruction I received from that program opened the door for crosscultural exploration, which has played a prominent role in my music-making ever since.

During my studies at NEC I was introduced to Latin music. In my first year, a Latin music ensemble was offered by two Third Stream graduate students. We played a variety of Caribbean and Latin American styles. During the first week of class, a janitor at the Conservatory, who happened to be a trombone player who never quite finished his studies, heard me performing with the ensemble. He approached me and asked if I would be willing to sub for him on the next Saturday night with a Colombian band that played salsa, cumbia, and merengue (Puerto Rican, Colombian, and Dominican dance music, respectively). Born and raised in rural Ohio and schooled in jazz and classical music, I had little exposure to Latin music and culture. I played my first salsa gig as a complete outsider. Except for the one rehearsal of the Latin music ensemble, I had never listened to salsa (save for brief moments when blasting car stereos passed me by while driving through Boston's Latino neighborhoods), I had only met a few Latinos (classical musicians who were studying at NEC), I had never visited a Caribbean, South or Central American country, and I did not speak Spanish. When I inquired about how to play salsa he responded with the

following advice: "Just show up on time. Smile a lot and have a good time. And most importantly, play really LOUD. They are going to love you!" Much to his demise, he was right. They subsequently fired him and hired me. My continued performance of Latin music in the Boston area culminated in a tour to Brazil. I spent a summer in Rio de Janeiro performing with musicians such as Danilo Caymmi, studying the local musics, and collecting music books and recordings.

In 1992 I came to Columbia University to pursue an ethnomusicology degree because I wanted to continue my musical education by exploring more rigorous academic avenues. My aim was to return to Brazil and write a dissertation on some aspect of bossa or samba. However, my salsa contacts from Boston, along with the thriving New York Puerto Rican music scene (and the comparatively smaller Brazilian music scene in New York), led to my immediate employment playing salsa. Within a year I was performing five to six nights a week. As my ethnomusicological training progressed, I recognized how limited my knowledge was of the music I was performing nightly. Encouraged by Columbia professors Dieter Christensen and Peter Manuel, I began using my newly acquired field-method skills and interest in analytical and interpretive ethnographic examination to embark upon a systematic study of Latin music. I began collecting recordings and transcribing solos. I learned to play percussion, picked the dance steps. acquired Spanish skills, and observed the dynamics of participant interaction. As a deep love and respect for Latin music's rich historical traditions developed along with my growing understanding of the salsa scene, I noticed how little was written in the scholarly literature on salsa. When it became time to decide on a dissertation topic, my life was enmeshed in the salsa scene, touring throughout the world with the top salsa artists, such as Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Mark Anthony, and La India, and recording for numerous others. It became clear that I was in a unique position to offer a perspective that had not appeared before in the salsa literature.

While attending classes at Columbia I set out to form a new band that would combine the salsa music I was performing with my past jazz experience. The Latin jazz genre was an obvious choice. With a Third Stream mentality I selected six musicians that had a complete command of both salsa and jazz styles. The name SYOTOS (an acronym for "See You On The Other Side") came from my experience of fighting a bout with cancer that coincided with the establishment of the group. The "Other Side" refers to that which is just beyond our reach, grasp, and touch. Over the last ten years much of my compositional energies have focused on that group.

In 1995 I was asked to perform weekly with SYOTOS at a unique performance space in the East Village called the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.

("Nuyoricans" are persons of Puerto Rican descent who reside in New York City.) Jazz writer Howard Mandel describes the locale as "a hyperactive cultural oasis," which hosts poetry slams, cabaret shows, performance art, satirical plays, and jam sessions. He writes, "It's not chic, but takes no pleasure in being grungy—it's simply real." My kind of place. The management, unlike most New York venues, is supportive of new groups, and prizes those who experiment, seeking to establish their own voice: a bandleader's dream, in other words, and I still view it as a true musical blessing. Over the past seven years (a tenure rare and almost unheard of in today's jazz scene) this weekly outlet has been invaluable to my development as a bandleader, trombonist, composer, and arranger.

From Epiphany to Big Band Chart

One day in January of 1999 I began singing a melodic fragment while strolling down the street, a bluesy pentatonic phrase, exercising my right to sing the blues. It corresponded with the fourth anniversary of my gig at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. Since I wanted to commemorate that event with a new composition, I began sculpting the melodic fragment into a work that would capture the essence of my Cafe experience and express my deep gratitude to both the Cafe and the Nuyorican musicians who share their musical culture with me. My big band arrangement of this song is included below.

The medium tempo and duple meter of the original inspiration lent itself to the *son montuno* rhythm, a Cuban style that emerged in the 1920s. The son montuno has served as the rhythmic foundation for many Latin music styles popular in the Nuyorican community, including salsa, mambo, and cha-cha. The title *Nuyorican Son* reflects the inspiration of the composition, both culturally and in terms of music structure. After completing the melody of the A section (mm. 9–23, 36–43), I constructed the accompanying harmony by using a variation of the standard vamp progression I–IV–V–I, which is most typical of son montuno. My version included a "bluesified" bIII chord, thus transforming the repeated progression to I–bIII–IV–V (mm. 4–8)—Cuban music infused with a New York attitude. The key of Bb minor, a trombone-friendly key that facilitates the use of the most boisterous and forceful notes in the trombone's upper range (Bb4 to F5), was also chosen because of its dark quality, lending itself well to late-night, smoke-filled expressions.

Borrowing from popular music and jazz practices, I chose an AABA song structure where the B section offers a contrast in mood and flavor, a release from the repetition found in the A section. The alteration of angular and chromatic motion of the B melody (mm. 24–31) serves to contrast the pentatonic and linear A melody. Here, Ran Blake–ish spice notes are

incorporated, with E and A\ used over the D\⁷ chord in mm. 25 and 29, and the Et over the F⁷ chord in m. 31. Furthermore, the harmonic shift to the subdominant (Eb) tonal center together with harmonic motion by major and minor seconds contributes to the mood change.

Once this much of the composition was completed, I brought the music in a lead-sheet form to the Nuyorican to be performed. When I saw audience members get up and dance, I knew I was on the right track. It is such a thrill to have my music move people, whether it be physically or emotionally. The compositional process continued over the next few months on the bandstand and with impromptu experiments in tempo, arrangements, reharmonization of the melody, solo form, soloing order, and background figures for solos. During one performance, for instance, SYOTOS drummer Bobby Sanabria inserted an Afro feel on the B section to accentuate the contrast. An Afro is another Cuban rhythmic construct, which was popular in the 1960s. His spontaneous decision became a permanent part of the arrangement. This prompted me to add a fourmeasure, harmonically suspended section that employed a cha-cha rhythmic feel over the dominant F⁷ chord (mm. 32-35), in order to smooth out the transition back to the A section. Over time the composition grew, as musicians, using the song as a vehicle for personal expression, pushed its limits to see how far they could take it into deeper realms of interactive communication.

When Sanabria, who is Nuyorican, obtained a contract to do a live big band record at the Birdland jazz club, he asked me to arrange one piece. I suggested Nuvorican Son as a tribute to him. His exceptional knowledge about Latin music history was integral in my ethnographic work on the salsa scene. I am indebted to him for sharing so much of his knowledge and culture with me. His commission prompted another step in the compositional process, in which I solidified in notational form the developments made on the bandstand. For instance, the tempo was set at 120 bpm and the soloing over the AABA form was deemed best. I notated background figures that were improvised during performances at the Nuvorican, and whose authorship I cannot verify. I then expanded the orchestration to a big band, embedding the music in traditional jazzarranging techniques (i.e., chord voicings, sectional writing, et al.) first heard in Richard Davis's class and studied in jazz arranging classes at UW and NEC.

In line with my trombone-centric bent, the first statement of the A section (mm. 8-15) is orchestrated for all four trombones in unison. Furthermore, I take the first solo on the recording. Taking advantage of the larger instrumentation, I employ mutes, contrapuntal melodies, and more extensive use of spice notes to accentuate contrasts between the A

and B sections. And as a way of infusing the arrangement with "rhythmic spice," I insert a 5/4 bar in m. 27. This surprise break from Latin music practice, borrowed from other styles (contemporary jazz practice), posits this version of *Nuyorican Son* out of the dance music realm to a stylistic place somewhere "in between" (Latin jazz).

As a nod to the rich Latin big band tradition and to pay tribute to the most influential Nuyorican musician of the 20th century, Tito Puente, I added a mambo section. The mambo is traditionally an elaborate instrumental section that is played as an interlude between solos or vocal parts. My mambo (mm. 70–77) was constructed in a Puente style that features the contrapuntal layering and rhythmic interlocking of separate instrumental sections. This additive form begins with the saxophones playing a rhythmic figure in octaves, followed by a harmonized trombone counter melody, and preceded by a harmonized trumpet melody. The result is a gradual buildup in dynamics and energy, which propels the music into the final return of the theme and coda.

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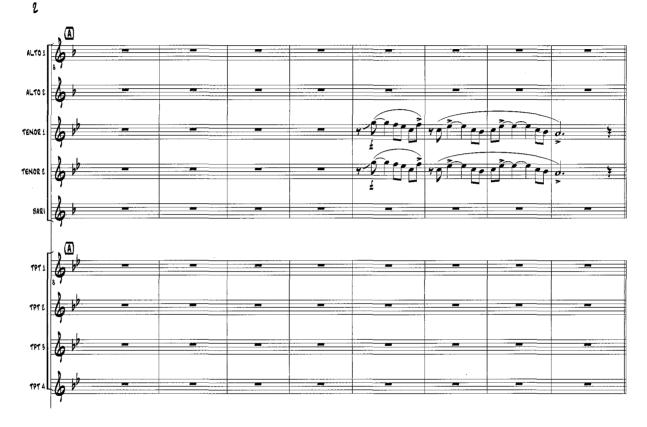
Nuyorican Son is a mixture of things from my past. It is a blues-infused, Cuban son montuno mixed up with American big band jazz, Latin dance traditions, contemporary music practice, and my Nuyorican experience. I play Latin jazz because I am innately driven to explore the other side, that which is always just beyond our reach. Richard Davis opened the door for exploration. John Swallow, Joe Maneri, and Ran Blake gave me the tools. NEC introduced me to Latin music. My Columbia experience taught me to conceptualize the compositional process. I am indebted to my fellow musicians. I strive for those moments when my music transcends the smoke-filled bar and becomes larger than its constituent parts. My musical experiences have transformed my real-life experiences, one of which bore me a Nuyorican son. Nuyorican Son can be heard on Bobby Sanabria's Afro Cuban Dream Big Band 1999 release entitled Live and In Clave (Arabesque Records AJ0149).





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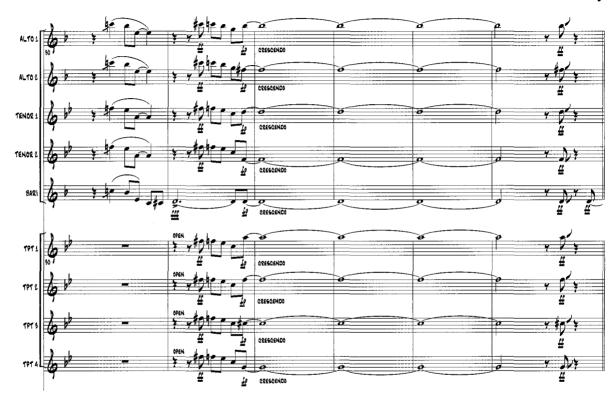


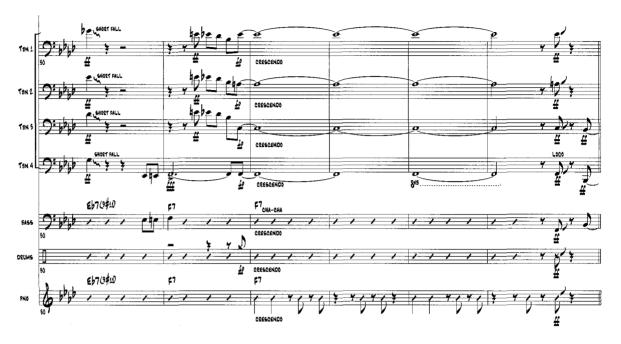






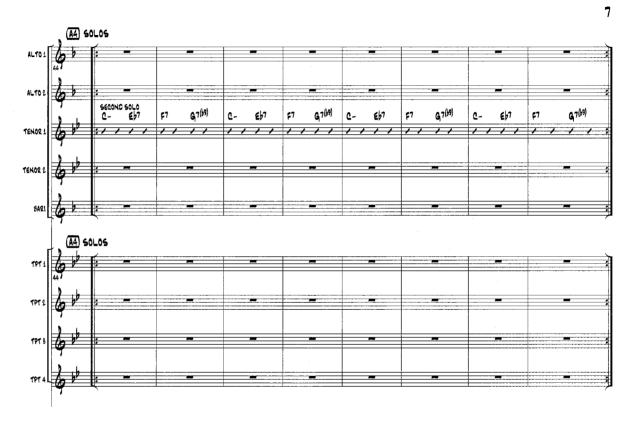


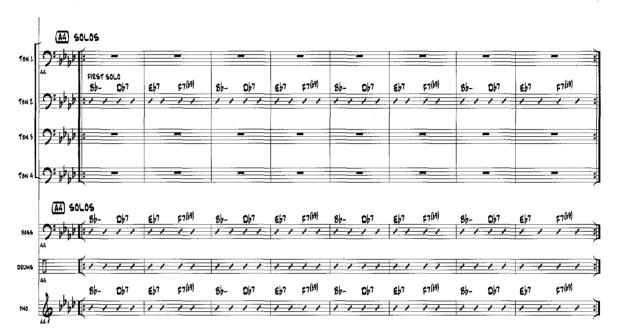












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