

seeing sounds



Throughout her career composer Pauline Oliveros pioneered the modern philosophy of deep listening - the art of exploring the space between the casual ways we hear the world, and the intentional process of mastering how to listen to it. Both meditation and treasure hunt, deep listening sharpens our ears to the sonic environments around us, fostering a heightened awareness for how sound shapes the essence of our being. Foraging for artists and music to explore these kinds of listening experiences can be challenging. Luckily there's musicians like drummer Willy Rodríguez and expansive albums like his debut recording *Seeing Sounds*.

Avant garde philosophies provide precarious but often brilliant edges to how open or free improvisation function in Jazz. Complex, chaotic, and often dissonant, this sub-genre challenges traditional structures, and when transcendent, incorporates an advanced and unconventional level of mastery. Avant garde artists travel to curious destinations using peculiar forms specifically designed for their mercurial adventures. In the process, audience engagement requires a nuanced understanding of tone, touch, voice and the fluid organic structures that creatively bind them all together. In this regard, drummer Willy Rodríguez has spent his entire professional career preparing to explore these unique types of musical relationships.

Born in Puerto Rico, the son of a *timbalero*, Rodríguez's rhythmic journey also began on the timbales, developing hand skills by playing in Latin rock bands that made up his crash course on Puerto Rico's remarkably diverse Afro-Caribbean musical culture. High school brought an introduction to the drums as formal training blossomed into an invitation to a coveted summer program at the Berklee College of Music in San Juan, Puerto Rico. By the time he left the island to attend Berklee full-time on scholarship, Rodríguez had already dabbled in pop, rock, metal and Latin Jazz. Humbled by Boston's deep Jazz drum culture, Rodríguez dove head first into his studies absorbing the influences of legends like Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Roy Haynes, Jack DeJohnette and Terri Lyne Carrington.

In time Rodríguez recognized the paradox of a historical percussive divide: while new friends or colleagues might not fully understand Latin American rhythmic traditions, his own knowledge of drumming in the US, specifically the preeminent legacy of Black musicians, was woefully lacking. Filling that gap with a Master's degree from the New England Conservatory of Music (studying with virtuosos like Billy Hart, Cecil McBee and Bob Moses), Rodríguez eventually settled in New York City where he also rediscovered artists like Machito, Mario Bauzá and Tito Puente and their celebrated contributions to the very foundation of Jazz.

Aside from Jazz, Rodríguez continued to flourish by performing and recording with progressive rock band The Mars Volta, the pop duo Domino Saints, and Chilean indie star Mon Laferte, winning a Latin Grammy for his work on Laferte's album *Norma*. Expanding his range and exploring new musical avenues, Rodríguez continued to hear the call of an odd opportunity - various invitations to explore free improvisation. Perhaps the most important voice aiding this momentum was Dave Liebman, the storied

multi-instrumentalist whose career spans decades of innovation within and outside of traditional contemporary Jazz.

Stereotyped into predictable categories, Pan-Latin musicians remain undervalued for the full spectrum of musicianship embedded within their artistry. Show up to a gig, and suddenly congas appear for you to play. As contemporary musicians like Román Filiú, Aruán Ortiz, Román Diaz and David Virelles have established themselves as prominent voices within avant garde Jazz, the larger field remains historically dominated by non-Latin artists. Even within Latin American, often visual artists, poets, designers, classical musicians and filmmakers are embraced and celebrated more than Jazz musicians who utilize free improvisation in their music.

Rodríguez's hesitation finally gave way as Liebman and others eventually persuaded him to dive into the deep end of their pool. Always striving to compliment his surroundings, Rodríguez quickly discovered a new scope of expression that would challenge his ability to listen while accentuating the diverse skill set he'd manicured throughout his burgeoning career. Suddenly freedom and adventure reigned supreme. "That sense of connection," as Rodríguez recalls it, "continually searching for something. I became addicted to that and now it always shows up when I play." And his search continues with *Seeing Sounds*, featuring trumpeter Jason Palmer, saxophonist Hery Paz, pianist Leo Genovese, bassists John Hébert and Kenneth Jimenez, and special guest artist, saxophonist Dave Liebman.

The dawn of *Seeing Sounds* rises with Rodríguez's musical perfect storm *Beyond the Struggle*. Inspired by John Coltrane's *Psalms*, the composition explores the "growth and wisdom one gains from

failure," as Genovese, Jimenez, and Rodríguez provide a salient backdrop for saxophonist Hery Paz to probe all parts of the song. Eventually clouds clear as sonic enlightenment serenades the tune towards its peaceful resolution. Informed by numbers charting the course of the complex meters used within the composition, *Roy's Masterplan* unfolds as Rodríguez's angular nod to the ingenious influence of a former Berklee colleague, featuring fascinating interplay between Palmer and Paz. Rounding the corner into straight ahead Jazz is the swinging *Where There's A Will, There's A Way*, Palmer's ode to Rodríguez and their fifteen years of playing together.

Guani, named after the long beaked hummingbird found in various parts of the Caribbean, lumbers above a 3/4 waltz pattern but with a 4/4 feel, as the band improvises on five phrases drawn out by composer Hery Paz. Here "each musician gets to be a drummer in the band," Rodríguez describes, as the group collectively paints a colorful picture of the bird anointed by Taino Indians as their animal teacher in the spirit world. The rarely recorded *Fixed Goal* manifests the kind of odd tension you'd expect from a Ornette Coleman composition, as the tune swings with angular chord progressions, neatly placed Monk quotes by Paz, and stair stepping sequences that finds the band in full form.

Living up to its name, *Waltz Dilemma* dances between time signatures with Jimenez's bass anchoring Rodríguez radiant drum work behind Genovese's sparkling phrasing. After a rigorous climb through the melody, everyone agrees to disagree harmonically as Paz muscles the tune back to 3/4 before the impasse is eventually resolved. Depicting a kaleidoscope of emotions, *The Infinity of Your Love* is Rodríguez's exposé on the varied nature of affection. Pensively circling each other while flowing in and out of harmony, Liebman and Palmer finally punctuate the song's end as if to say, "Sorry Dorothy, love's

not a Hallmark card anymore."

Making matters even more delightfully bizarre is *The Red-tailed Hawk is Going to Eat Your Babies*, featuring field recordings by music producer Tehn Vega. Here Rodríguez shines anthropomorphizing the aviary chaos that routinely played out in backyard mango trees during his time in Puerto Rico. *Un Pequeño Desahogo (A Little Relief)* takes the form of a temperamental *amuse-bouche*, cleansing our pallets while showcasing the remarkable amount of polyphonic information Rodríguez can squeeze into a sub three minute song.

Splashing cymbals announce *Self Love*, the muscular but also sensitive display of Rodríguez's technical creativity when allowed to play by, and just for, himself. Celebrating the spirit and deep influential impact that drummers Ralph Peterson and Bob Gulloti have had on Rodríguez the album concludes with *Praise*, a rollicking composition by Genovese reminiscent of the compelling styles and the elite musical traditions these master drummers sustained throughout their careers.

Listening deeply allows for the gentle displacement of artifice, ego and traditional expectations. It creates the space required to appreciate music for what it is, as opposed to anything we might want, or need it to be. As with anyone who's ever struggled with meditation, emptying one's mind like this can be exhilarating, surprisingly peaceful and thoroughly educational. *Seeing Sounds* is a deep listening bonanza, a special album using the inquisitive nature of free improvisation as an artful form of musical inquiry. Surrounded by close friends doubling as agile musical agents, *Seeing Sounds* finds Rodríguez introducing his impressive range of talents while challenging us to listen deeply, with heightened awareness, to this remarkably impressive achievement.