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Riviera Maya Jazz Festival

reviewed

jazz & blues report

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ON THE COVER

Luis conte played gongas and percussion as a special guest with Sacbe on Saturday night's show for the 2007 Riviera Maya Jazz Festival. Photo by Fernando Aceves



"Buffalonious"

Our original mascot from the early Buffalo Jazz Report days – mid '70s. He is older now, but global & still very cool!



Riviera Maya Jazz Festival reviewed

Live Music By
The Caribbean Sea



The beach at Playa del Carmen was packed all three nights

By Bill Wahl

All photos ©2007 Fernando Aceves unless otherwise noted

Last year came to a sand, sea and palm tree filled closing for this writer as I attended not one, but two jazz festivals in the sunny Caribbean region. The first was the Blue Bay Jazz Fest in St. Croix in November, which was reviewed in our December issue. The second came just two weeks later, November 29-December 1, in the area just south of Cancun, Mexico known as Riviera Maya. While the St. Croix event was the first in what will hopefully be a series, the Riviera Maya Jazz Festival for 2007 was the fifth annual event.

The festival was organized and produced by Fernando Toussaint, a very talented and popular jazz drummer who works with the Riviera Maya Tourism Board. I have to say, Fernando and his workers did a mar-



Festival Producer Fernando Toussaint also played drums with Aguamala and Sacbe

velous job in putting this three day event together, from the morning press conferences each day with the artists to be featured that night, to the staging, sound and lights – all of which were first class – right on down to the superb graphics on the posters, flyers and t-shirts. In addition to all of that, he also played with two of the bands at the festival.



Marcus Miller headlined the first night

The headliners for the evening shows were Marcus Miller on Thursday, Tower of Power on Friday and George Benson on Saturday. The three opening acts were all Mexican bands - Aguamala, Los Dorados and Sacbe. All six of these bands were very different from each other, making this quite a diverse festival. The stage was set up on the beach at Mamita's, which is a restaurant and bar in Playa del Carmen, the main city in the Riviera Maya region and the home to many fine hotels. It was set up perpendicular to the sea, so the crowd had pretty much unlimited room to sit or stand on the beaches in front of many of the other hotels and eating/drinking establishments down the shoreline. And the entire three-day festival was completely free of charge to anyone wishing to stroll down to the beach. The stage was huge and the massive banks of speakers certainly indicated right off the bat that it would probably be very loud up front. It was, though not at all oppressive as I did spend quite a bit of time very close to them. As is usually the case when I review this type of event, my notes only provide me with some hints to jog my memory, as it is hard enough to read what I have written when I can see what I am writing. In the case of many live shows, it is dark when I am writing so the notes are quite a disaster. No problem though, as I figure the stuff I remember is the important stuff anyway.

The first night started about a half hour or so late, which is not so bad considering all the technical situations that arise and problems that need to be ironed out. Aguamala is a band led by Fernando Toussaint, the festival producer mentioned above. The other three members of the band, who play guitar, keyboards and bass, are considerably younger and are no doubt learning much from the veteran drummer. They played in a jazz-rock vein and often reminded me of the style played by Alan Holdsworth. They went over well with the younger members of the audience for sure, and they apparently have garnered a loyal following in the area. For much of the older part of the crowd the big hit of their set was when they performed with a slew of singers, a particular standout being the very talented lead



Marcus playing bass clarinet, with saxophonist Keith Anderson and trumpeter Patches Stewart

singer Caro Montes. I would very much like to hear more from her...have to look into that!

Aguamala warmed up the crowd well for Marcus Miller and his band. Classically trained on the clarinet from childhood, Miller became well known as the bass player for Miles Davis throughout the 80s. He and his regular touring/recording sextet came out on all cylinders and had the crowd dancing right away. They mixed things up with some funk originals, their versions of pop songs such as Stevie Wonder's "Higher Ground" and The Beatles "Come Together," and three from the Miles period, "Amandala," "Jean Pierre" and the final encore "Tutu." They also played a sweet version of the standard "When I Fall In Love, on which Miller played the bass clarinet and also featured his outstanding harmonica player Gregoire Maret. A very nice set.

Friday night's show opened pretty much on time with Los Dorados, a quartet from Mexico consisting of tenor sax, guitar, bass and drums. They played in a more improvisational style bringing to mind some of the European jazz from the ECM label as well as jazz-rock jam bands. While the music may have been over the heads of some in the audience, you will get that sort of thing with the diversity of the bands at this festival. They did a particularly nice job on their ballads, and pretty much everyone in the crowd could relate. I ran into a guy from Europe who really enjoyed them stating that they reminded him of King Crimson. Interesting.

Then, changing gears, Tower of Power took the stage a-blasting and the 10-piece band with 5 horn players brought the crowd to their feet and had many dancing. It didn't seem to matter that they didn't know many of the songs T.O.P played from their 4-decades in the business, they were into it. Many of the young couples were slow dancing and necking during the ballads - a perfect complement to the beautiful backdrop of the moon, the stars and the sea. Led by singer/tenor saxophonist Emilio Castillo, Tower of Power still has four original members in the band - Castillo, baritone saxophonist Stephen "Doc" Kupka, bassist Francis Rocco Prestia and drummer David Garibaldi. They played their hits such as "You're Still A Young Man," "What Is Hip?" and "So Very Hard To Go" along with many others in quite a long set, and had the beach packed with people of all ages.



Tower of Power came out blasting. Baritone saxophonist Stephen "Doc" Kupka, right, is one of the four remaining original members

Fernando Toussaint was back at the drums on Saturday night, performing with Sacbe, a band he and his brothers Eugenio Toussaint (piano, keyboards) and Enrique Toussaint (bass) formed in Mexico City 30 years ago. They are legends in Mexican jazz, and although they disbanded some time ago they get back together now and then for special reunions such as this one. As good as Fernando was in the jazz-rock mode on Thursday, he seemed really in his element with Sacbe. The band had a special guest on this night; Cuban-born percussionist Luis Conte played



Sacbe featured the Toussaint brothers with Luis Conte, center
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the entire set with them. Conte is a master on an arsenal of instruments including congas, timbales and bongos and has toured and recorded with some of the biggest names in music today.

This extremely talented unit played some of the finest Latin jazz I have heard live in a very long time, and each song sounded very different from the one before it. In addition to some songs by the master pianist and songwriter Claire Fischer, they varied the set with a variety of tempos and also got into some fine modal pieces. Between Conte and Toussaint it was a percussion extravaganza at times. I noticed several people in the crowd walking around "air drumming." That kind of thing is *always* a good sign! On Sunday afternoon someone asked me what my personal favorite band was at the festival. My quick reply was Sacbe.

Of course, as would be expected, the favorite of the majority of the crowd was George Benson, the main headliner for the 2007 Riviera Maya Jazz Festival and a star in both the jazz and pop worlds. Benson came out dressed in white and did what he does best – played some crowd-pleasing jazzy R&B/pop with a very tight band. He was in good form with that rich, full voice he is famous for. His guitar work, which many of us would have liked to have heard much more of, was certainly very fine indeed.

Benson is such a good guitarist that many critics and fans complained when he focused more on vocals after the success of "Breezin'" in the mid-'70s. But, as he mentioned at the morning press conference, he was a singer before a guitar player. Obviously it would be difficult to turn down such a lucrative career, so he went the more commercial route and has had great success with many more songs such as "On Broadway," "This Masquerade," "Give Me The Night," "Turn Your Love Around" and so many more. He pretty much covered them all in his rather compact set, which closed out the 2007 Festival.



George Benson gave the crowd what it wanted...hit after hit after hit



The beach at Playa del Carmen Photo: B. Wahl

Once again, hats off to Fernando and all who worked on the festival for doing a fantastic job. If you are interested in checking it out for later this year, go to www.rivieramayajazzfestival.com. If you can not connect, try googling it as the site is currently not working as I write.

Which brings us to some words about the region of Mexico where all this took place. Riviera Maya covers the area from Playa del Carmen south to around Tulum along Highway 307 on the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. Playa del Carmen is just south of Cancun, so the Cancun Airport would be your point of entry by air. The area is quickly becoming more and more well known for its white sand beaches and the turquoise water of the Caribbean Sea.

It is also becoming known for "all-inclusive" hotels and resorts. I stayed at one – The Grand Palladium – which is actually owned by the Fiesta Hotel Group of Spain. I was



One of the many lobbies at the Grand Palladium Photo: B. Wahl

just one of a large group of media people...writers, TV and radio people from all over who were also staying at the Palladium, and we all agreed that it was quite an experience. The first night I became friends with members of the group from Mexico City, and we went out to see a dance show at the lounge, and went later to check out the disco (still as big a thing in Mexico as it was when I was in Cancun 20 years ago). I had margaritas in both places and it seemed very strange not to have to pay for them. It was the same for an incredible buffet breakfast in the morning and likewise enjoyable dinner that night. Eat and walk! And, it is the same with the bar later and even the mini-bar in the room. You pay one price per night to stay, they put a color-coded wristband on you, and you are all set for your entire stay. On top of that, the price per night is extremely reasonable (I don't want to quote prices, but you will be surprised). I did get a massage, which is one of the few things not included in "all-inclusive."

The lobbies (there are several) are huge, luxurious in a tropical kind of way and open on each end, and each has several restaurants, a bar and many other amenities. The large rooms are in many buildings scattered about, which you can reach by riding the little train or walking the covered bridges that run throughout the area. There is also a fantastic beach, pool, spa and much more. My room, which seemed to be the norm, was quite large and well appointed, and has a balcony. I can't really say enough about this place to do it justice. To really get a better idea of the experience the Grand Palladium has to offer and see some pictures, you need to check their site at www.fiestahotelgroup.com and navigate to Riviera Maya and Palladium. Or it might be easier, at least at first, to go to www.locogringo.com/



One of the many covered wooden walkways at the Grand Palladium Photo: B. Wahl

kantenah/palladium.html.

The night I arrived in Mexico I joined up with the group at a very fine Mexican restaurant in downtown Playa del Carmen. Yaxche (pronounced Jag-shey) Maya Cuisine is a top-notch eatery featuring a wide array of food inspired by the Maya and their cooking traditions, as well as many other traditional entrees from Yucatan.

Located on 8th Street, just off of the city's famous 5th Avenue pedestrian thoroughfare, Yaxche is easy to find. After a lot of confusion caused by the airline which resulted in my missing my ride from the airport, when I finally made my way into Playa del Carmen I could not have wound up at a better spot. We were seated in the courtyard with all kinds of exotic plants, trees, shrubs and Mayan stone art. The food was unlike any Mexican restaurant this gringo has ever been to. We saw no burritos or tacos, but were treated to a variety of entrees that looked as great as they tasted. And the margaritas were just what the doctor ordered! If you ever find yourself in Playa del Carmen, by all means do not miss out on a meal at Yaxche. And the strolling musicians were a nice touch too...and they were very good. While I wish I had taken some pictures, it was very low light and I'm sure the flash would have been bothersome to most of the other patrons. You can find out more about them, and see some pictures as well at www.mayancuisine.com.



Some of the parrots-without-bars at Xcaret Photo: B. Wahl

There are many things to do in the area, and Xcaret Eco-Theme park is definitely one of them. Shortly after you enter the park you see several large and very colorful parrots comfortably perched and without a cage or restriction of any kind. There are so many different species of wildlife throughout the park it is every bit as good, if not perhaps better, than any of the well-known zoos I have been to over the years. But, it is quite different than any zoo with its other

attractions beyond the animals, birds, fish and the like. You can also swim in stone tunnels, walk through a butterfly pavilion, follow a river into the Caribbean where you can interact and swim with dolphins, visit a true size replica of an old Mexican cemetery, visit a Mayan village where you can see how life was when the Mayan civilization lived in this area, watch scheduled Maya ceremonies with the men and women dressed in authentic traditional attire, see replicas of Mayan houses with their wood & palm leaf roofs, and a whole lot more.



One of what looked to be hundreds of different and colorful graves at the cemetery at Xcaret Photo: B. Wahl

We saw not only some giant turtles, but also some little baby ones and somewhat larger ones in big ponds where they would be able to grow to full size before being set free. Our guide told us that only one out of every one thousand baby turtles makes it to full size in the wild. You can also witness Mayan traditions and customs through the work of weavers and craftsmen through out the park. And if you get hungry...which you will...they have a fantastic buffet with all kinds of Mexican food and a massive collection of peppers to go along with your meal. So watch out! If this sounds at all interesting, check out Xcaret if you visit the area. You can find out lots more at www.xcaret.com.

While I could only do so many things in my brief stay in the area, there is a lot more to do than we have touched on here. Spend a day shopping and enjoying outdoor restaurants throughout the downtown region of Playa del Carmen, as there is a lot to do in the city alone. Swim in the clear Caribbean or walk miles on the beaches. Some in the press group snorkeled and did the zip-lines over jungle foliage at Chikinha, and others visited Punta Venado Park and rode an ATV through the jungle before checking out the caves. Or...just lounge around, relax, re-group and enjoy the warm sun. But whatever you do, the music never has to be the only attraction when you go to a jazz or blues festival in a tropical locale. And I am sure few would travel to such a place and spend the money just for the music anyway. But, put the music and the tropical atmosphere together and you get one fine vacation.

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