

DAFNIS PRIETO BIG BAND

SAT 8 PM
MARCH 21

Cullen Theater,
Wortham Theater Center

Dafnis Prieto, drums

Román Filiú, alto saxophone, flute, clarinet

Michael Thomas, alto saxophone, flute, piccolo

Peter Apfelbaum, tenor saxophone, melodica

Joel Frahm, tenor saxophone

Chris Cheek, baritone saxophone

Mike Rodríguez, trumpet

Nathan Eklund, trumpet and flugelhorn

Alex Sipiagin, trumpet and flugelhorn

Josh Deutsch, trumpet and flugelhorn

Tim Albright, tenor trombone

Alan Ferber, tenor trombone

Jacob Garchik, tenor trombone

Jeff Nelson, bass trombone

Manual Valera, piano

Ricky Rodríguez, bass

Roberto Quintero, percussion

Selections to be announced from the stage

Tonight's concert will include one 20-minute intermission.



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When Dafnis Prieto was a boy of 9 or 10, he heard a big band in Santa Clara, Cuba called Orquesta Cubana de Musica Moderna. Because of political constrictions, the band was playing modern jazz under the cover of Cuban folkloric music. “When I saw that for the first time I was blown away,” he says. “That band had a great drummer. His nickname was El Peje. We are still friends from when I was a young kid.”

From that point on, Prieto had a dream that one day he would lead his own big band. That dream came true in 2018 with the release of *Back to the Sunset*, on Prieto’s own Dafnison Music label. The album features a powerful 17-piece band of consisting of top-flight New York musicians, led by Prieto from behind the drums, playing original compositions dedicated to Prieto’s musical inspirations. There are three guest soloists—trumpeter Brian Lynch, alto saxophonist Steve Coleman and tenor saxophonist Henry Threadgill—all of whom Prieto recorded with early in his career. While the role of rhythm is predominant, with Prieto joined by percussionist Roberto Quintero, bassist Ricky Rodriguez and pianist Manuel Valera, the air-tight arrangements often feature the reeds, trombones and trumpets slashing with and against each other, and solos rising above the rhythmic, harmonic and melodic cross-play.

Prieto writes, “The undercurrent of this album is to pay tribute to some significant mentors/musicians that have influenced and inspired me one way or another, directly or indirectly. This is a journey in time, looking back and remembering the way up to now, with gratitude and joy. *Back to the Sunset* is a state of mind, a place for contemplation and love.” Among the artists who receive dedications on the album are Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri, Bebo and Chucho Valdes, Art Blakey and Buddy Rich, Chico and Arturo O’Farrill, Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo, and there are more.

“I admire all of the big bands that are currently active,” Prieto says, name-checking Maria Schneider and Darcy James Argue, “but I don’t see any band that has the same musical vocabulary as this one.” In his review for the *All About Jazz* website, Jack Bowers wrote, “As an homage to Latin/American jazz, this is exemplary. More than that, it is an album whose rhythmic intensity, harmonic discernment, intuitive brilliance and impressive group dynamic should enhearten [yes, it’s a real word] jazz lovers of every persuasion...” The 2019 Recording Academy voters agreed, naming *Back to the Sunset* the best Latin jazz album of the year.

In addition to playing drums on the album and writing the material, Prieto is credited with all of the arrangements—what other big band drummer has ever written out a full album’s worth of arrangements for

a 17-piece orchestra—as well as producing the album and doing the studio mix-downs. Are you kidding me? Have we mentioned that Prieto received a MacArthur Fellowship genius grant in 2011?

Prieto says the program for DACAMERA in Houston will feature all the music from the album. “This is the biggest template I have had to put my music on. It has much more possibilities sonically, using as much imagination as possible. To me, it’s the optimal format.”

Dafnis Prieto grew up in Santa Clara, a small town about 150 miles from Havana where his father worked as an elevator mechanic and his mother was an accountant at a factory that makes equipment for sugar-cane manufacturing plants. His earliest exposure to music came from the conga drummers who would practice in the street outside his house prior to the annual carnival. “There was a lot of rumba and fighting,” he told Ben Ratliff of *The New York Times*.

Prieto studied the traditional son and rumba at a community school from the age of 7, playing guitar and percussion, and then studied classical percussion for four years at a local conservatory before going on to the National School of Music in Havana. He speaks knowingly and lovingly of Cuba’s classical tradition, which dates back to the late 19th and early 20th century composers such as Manuel Saumell and Ignacio Cervantes. In the 1920s and Thirties, composer and orchestra leader Ernesto Lecuena incorporated Cuban popular rhythms such as the *habanera* in a manner similar to the way George Gershwin drew from North American jazz and blues.

While at the National School, he began playing with jazz bands. One of these bands, Columna B, also included the saxophonist Yosvany Terry, with whom he still plays. Prieto found himself drawn to the Sixties jazz avant-garde, although that music was not widely available in Cuba, due in part to the longstanding economic boycott imposed by the United States. “I had one Ornette Coleman album and two John Coltrane albums,” he told me in an earlier interview, acknowledging his appreciation for Coleman’s drummer, Ed Blackwell. “I remember listening to Ornette in school. People thought I was crazy. I said, ‘He’s a really good musician.’ They didn’t like it.”

By the time he was 16, Prieto was traveling on music tours outside of Cuba with the pianist Carlos Maza. He knew his destiny was in New York, but he was unsure of when and how to make the move. He met Canadian flutist Jane Bunnett in Paris, eventually joining her Toronto-based band, Spirits of Havana, and spending time in legal limbo while waiting to apply for a green card. In 1998, he met trumpeter Brian Lynch at a

jazz-percussion master class at Stanford University. When Prieto finally arrived in New York, in 1999 at the age of 25, Lynch immediately asked him to join his band. “He brings the intelligence level up,” says Lynch, who has been a bridge between jazz and Latin music through his apprenticeship with Art Blakey and his long-running tenure with Eddie Palmieri. “He knows form, and he remembers things. He’ll be swinging, he’ll be in the clave rhythm, but he’ll make these little shifts with it—just a little spurt, where there’s an impossibly complex rhythm, but it’s all precise.”

The connection with Lynch led to a gig with Palmieri, who had already heard about the young Cuban phenom from Puerto Rican drummer Paoli Mejias. Although Palmieri had long since abandoned the dance-floor constraints of conventional salsa in favor of instrumental jazz, he rarely used a trap drummer in his orchestra, preferring the traditional set up of congas and timbales. With Prieto, he felt free to experiment. Palmieri’s 2002 album *La Perfecta II* features a piece called *Apeiron* that is essentially a freely-improvised duet between the drummer and pianist. “He’s extraordinary, a rhythmic stimulus,” says Palmieri. “He comprehends the two

most incredibly difficult rhythmic genres—being Cuban and being an extremely talented jazz drummer.”

For his part, Prieto calls Palmieri “a kind of guru to me. We have a great affinity for each other. That solo, completely freely improvised, actually opened my mind. That after doing what he’s done for so long, he could do something else as well... That really amazes me.”

Prieto eventually put together his own band. His third album, *Taking the Soul for a Walk*, was recorded with a sextet and released in 2008 on his own Dafnison Music label. Seven of the album’s 12 pieces were written in response to a commission from the Chamber Music America that he titled the Emotion Series. While the music is improvisational jazz, not composed chamber music, Prieto’s classical training can be detected in his precise arrangements. The instrumental solos as well as the drumming on each tune are intended to convey a distinct mood represented by the title.

“I interact with the horns,” Prieto says, when asked about Lynch’s quote on upping the intelligence quotient. “I have enough information to know what the piano player should

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Marvy Finger has been in the real estate business for over six decades, and is highly regarded not only for his business achievements but for his philanthropic efforts in civic,

medical and educational institutions across Houston. Mr. Finger, a native Houstonian, graduated from the University of Texas in 1957, and is deeply committed to providing motivated students the opportunity for continued education and employment.

The Scholarship program began in 2013 with awards going to 8 students, and has grown to 65 students in 2019. The scholarship provides full tuition, fees, and tools used in the student’s area of study.

be doing, and what the horns should be doing. I like *music*. I don't just like drumming." He has released seven albums as a leader, all on his own label, with another sextet recording set for this spring. The album will be produced by Eric Oberstein, who also produced *Back to the Sunset*.

From 2005 to 2014, Prieto served as an adjunct Jazz Studies faculty instructor at New York University. In 2015, he joined the fulltime faculty at the Frost School of Music in Miami, Florida. When he is preparing to record or go on tour, he prepares the music and sends it to the musicians in New York. In the case of his sextet, he says, "These are the guys I have been using for many years. They know my music."

Writing in *The New York Times*, Ben Ratliff observed that, "The essence of Mr. Prieto's style is his collation of various Afro-Cuban percussion sounds—from old religious music to modern music—within one set of trap drums. His playing is infernally complicated, and infernally precise; the blizzard of accents he throws into any pattern have their place as surely as pixels in a computer image."

Cuba is known for producing great drummers. The island may have more skilled percussionists per capita than any nation on earth, and beginning in the middle of the last century, some of these drummers—Chano Pozo, Mongo Santamaria, Candido, Carlos "Patato" Valdes—made their way to the United States and introduced a welcome element of Afro-Cuban polyrhythm into African-American swing. These drummers were *congueros*, masters of the skin-and-wood, hand-played drums preserved from Africa.

More recently, Cuba has been exporting fully-equipped jazz drummers, masters of the trap kit, the multi-drum ensemble assembled by New Orleans percussionists some 100 years ago. But where the early New Orleans jazz drummers were seeking to allow one musician to replicate the sound of a marching band—the snare, the cymbals, the toms and the bass drum—Cuban trap drummers translate the complex rhythms of the Afro-Cuban *conjunto*—conga, bongos, timbales—into the jazz realm.

"I don't go out and wave a flag saying I'm Cuban," Prieto told me in 2009. "I don't have to. We manifest these influences in our music. The roots are the source, the perspective, but this is a different time than the Forties or the Sixties. For us to try to play like that now would be like someone trying to play just like Johann Sebastian Bach. It would be great, but what is the point?" Prieto observes that just as an American musician can learn from listening to Cuban music, so can Cuban musicians

learn from listening to American music, and both can learn from listening to African music, Indian music, European music, and so on.

In 2016, Prieto published the analytical and instructional drum book *A World of Rhythmic Possibilities*. The book, which took seven years to write and weighs two pounds if printed out, includes 338 audio tracks and 33 video clips, demonstrating, among other skills, techniques for developing independence and coordination between two hands and two feet on the drum kit and strengthening one's weaker hand. But Prieto says the book is not intended to focus only on technique, "but also to focus on the inevitable questions about what lies beyond and beneath rhythms and patterns—what we bring to them and most importantly *how it can be done*."

His next book, due out this year, is titled *Rhythmic Synchronicity*, and is intended to help non-drummers improve their rhythmic acuity. "Being a drummer, I notice that many musicians not in the rhythm section need to learn how to do more than just play the notes so that the music can synchronize," he says, perhaps referring to his North American college students. "The book is based on a course I give to non-drummers to improve their ability to play more complex patterns and groove. In Cuba, we are exposed to it all the time in our culture. In [North] America, 80 percent of music is just oom-boom, oom-boom. It's not that exciting. Most people think that's what music is." Both books are published by Dafnison Music, and can be purchased at it the website www.dafnisonmusic.com.

Prieto recently returned to Cuba to perform for the first time since he left Cuba in the late 1990s. A short film, *Regresar*, available on YouTube, documented the trip. "It was a great experience on many levels, spiritually, emotionally..." he says. "I go to Cuba once or twice a year to see my family but this was my first time performing in twenty years. I did a concert with a big band, with a sextet, and I saw a lot of old friends I had not seen in a long time." He also conducted workshops with some of his former teachers. "As an educator myself now, I know the relationship between teacher and student is something that goes beyond the classroom," he wrote, "because there is an endless commitment, responsibility and joy that is needed to connect, and truly teach."

Perhaps we'll get to see if Prieto can teach a DACAMERA audience how to clap on the *clave*. Don't bet against it.

Rick Mitchell