



Charlie Sepulveda

By John Radanovich

Trumpeter-bandleader Charlie Sepulveda brings a lifetime of latin and jazz musicianship from his home in Luquillo, Puerto Rico, a place with hundreds of years of musical tradition preceding him. At the very dawn of jazz when James Reese Europe couldn't find musicians in the US who could read music for his orchestra, Europe went to Puerto Rico to hire from the many municipal bands. The best of the trumpeters of his generation, Sepulveda also taught music on the island for many years and believes fervently in encouraging young jazz musicians.

The Bronx-born Sepulveda credits seeing Louis Armstrong on television as the catalyst in his journey to become a jazz musician. Sepulveda's family moved to Puerto Rico when he was 8, and there he studied Classical trumpet at the conservatory Escuela Libre de Música de Puerto Rico. Later he studied jazz trumpet at City College of New York with Ron Carter, and a student of William Fielder. By his 20s, Sepulveda was musical director for his cousin—the trailblazing Eddie Palmieri—with whom he has recorded three albums. He has since played and recorded with Tito Puente, Hilton Ruiz, David Sanchez, Danilo Perez, Steve Turre, David Byrne and countless other well-known names across genres. He likes to refer to Eddie Palmieri as the Art Blakey of latin jazz, for the many great players who passed through Palmieri's Perfecta and later bands, but this measure must also include Sepulveda, who introduced another powerful trumpete--Brian Lynch--to Palmieri (Sepulveda named his first son Brian). Sepulveda and Palmieri talk every week.

In 2017 Sepulveda recorded "Mr EP: a Tribute to Eddie Palmieri." That same year singer Jon Secada asked Sepulveda to back him with his full big band for a tribute to Cuban great Benny Moré on "To Beny Moré With Love." Secada's pop vocal style wasn't well suited to Benny's music, and the controversy still continues in the Cuban music world about the spelling of Benny's name. However, there is no mistaking the power of Sepulveda's band, with brilliant arrangements by the late Ray Santos—whom Sepulveda had insisted was the only arranger he would work with on the project.

Sepulveda's style shows Lee Morgan, Freddie Hubbard, and Chet Baker as major influences on his tone: "I try to get their sound, but I never get close," he laughs. Many musicians and influential bandleaders like his friend Wynton Marsalis strongly disagree. Sepulveda and Marsalis first met when they sat next to each other in Dizzy Gillespie's United Nations Band in 1994, alongside Claudio Roditi and Slide Hampton, and have remained close friends.

Despite the difficult past years for Puerto Rico with hurricanes, earthquakes, and infrastructure issues, Sepulveda and his wife Natalia still love living in the surf town of Luquillo, east of San Juan, an area rich with Afro Puerto Rican history. He is part owner of C Note, a club on Playa Azul, for which Sepulveda put in a great deal of work in development and booking. Unfortunately, Sepulveda's relationship with the club has soured from disappointing business issues and other disagreements. Regardless, Sepulveda is committed to jazz in his hometown, and to continuing his work encouraging young Puerto Rican musicians to keep studying jazz.

In the past Sepulveda has visited New Orleans with Fania records great Johnny Pacheco, Tito Puente, and Sheila E. He is currently involved in preparations for a 25-year tribute tour for the Buena Vista Social Club, with many east coast stops in June. In addition to a project mixing hip hop, reggaeton, trap, and latin jazz Sepulveda calls "Urbajazz," a follow up to his excellent "This is Latin Jazz" is also in the works.

On May 4, Sepulveda leads his masterful, longtime band The Turnaround, as a septet: Emanuel Gambaro piano, Ivan Renta sax, Gabriel Rodriguez bass, Francisco Alcala drums, Gadwin Vargaz congas, and Sepulveda's wife Natalia Mercado on vocals. The band is sure to be in top form for that Thursday, the same day that Santana also appears at the fest.

Sepulveda will remain in town after the Fest for another few days before heading to the Cape May festival, and Dizzy's Club in Lincoln Center June 29<sup>th</sup>. With so many friends in the music world, it pays to watch for any jam he may attend while still in New Orleans.

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