

# Independent Weekly

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## Eddie Palmieri continues to reinvent his pioneering Latin jazz

by Sylvia Pfeiffenberger

The words "exciting" and "excitement" recur most often in any interview with Eddie Palmieri. With nine Grammys and 36 albums to his credit, the salsa pianist has been stoking those feelings on the bandstand for more than 50 years. At age 74, one of Latin music's most recognized innovators shows no signs of letting up; in fact, he's still leading new talents into Latin jazz, territory he helped invent.

Stretching back to the golden age of mambo in the 1950s and '60s, Palmieri's reminiscences on his long career serve as an oral history of Latin New York. His '70s productions on the Fania label, reflecting a deep love of the Puerto Rican homeland, are iconic to the salsa era. He won the first-ever Grammy for Best Latin Jazz album, a category he was instrumental in creating, in 1975. In 2009, the Library of Congress recognized his 1965 landmark album, *Azucar Pa' Ti*, making it part of its National Recording Registry. That LP contains a nine-minute song that broke with popular recording standards.

"'Azucar' became one of our biggest hits that we ever had, because it just took everybody by storm. It led to what we call now Latin jazz," notes Palmieri. "What [trombonist] Barry Rogers is doing, after the piano solo, it sounds like a Mack truck coming at you."

Palmieri formed that first band, La Perfecta, in 1961. With a brash sound, they muscled their way into the booming New York scene by putting trombones in the foreground for the first time.

"That was the most exciting band I would say that I've ever had. At that time we were primarily a dance orchestra, really heavy core," Palmieri says. Like his rhythmic left-hand *montuno* patterns on piano, his speech seems calibrated to move people on a primal level. "It was an orchestra with only eight musicians, but boy, they could let you have it. You wouldn't believe it was eight that delivered that power."

Palmieri's current Latin jazz octet has evolved for the 21st century. Like Art Blakey before him, Palmieri has a long history of nurturing young musicians—and being energized by them.

"I enjoy hearing the young talent and it excites me to see them play," he says. "We've got a great rapport together. That only enhances the presentation." One example is 27-year-old Luques Curtis, the band's current bassist.

"We have a very young bass player who in my opinion is one of the most exciting bass players who's come along for a long time. He's into the jazz genre, but he also knows his, what we call the *tumbaos*, the bass patterns for Latin music," Palmieri explains. "He's a very exciting player, so that stimulates the rhythm section, and it certainly helps the underlying principle of the rhythm attack. The horns can really lay into something that's swinging underneath."

This latest octet also includes trumpeter Brian Lynch, trombonist Conrad Herwig, alto saxophonist Louis Fouché and a full rhythm section featuring Little Johnny Rivero on congas, Orlando Vega on bongo and Jose Claussell

on timbales.

Boasts Palmieri, "It's really a little powerhouse that we'll be presenting on stage there in North Carolina."

**Correction (Feb. 17, 2011):** Jose Claussell's last name was misspelled.

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