

This year's Puerto Rico Heineken Jazz Fest was steeped in the nostalgia of triumphs past as it paid tribute to many of the notables who've graced its stages over the past two decades. While several, most prominently conga player Mongo Santamaria and bandleader Tito Puente, have passed away, many who've been honorees of previous festivals were on hand once again for this year's 20th-anniversary edition. Among them were drummer Alex Acuña, pianist Michel Camilo, woodwind artist Paquito D'Rivera and saxophonist Leandro "Gato" Barbieri, who, although in his mid-70s and in failing health, electrified fans with a virile reading of his 1970s hit "Europa."

The four-day series of outdoor concerts, attended this year by some 6,000 spectators, has always served as a showcase for the talents of the extended family of Puerto Rican notables. This year featured such native sons as bassist Eddie Gomez, *conguero* Giovanni Hidalgo, trombonist William Cepeda, saxophonist Miguel Zenón and trumpeter Humberto Ramírez alongside such U.S.-born Puerto Rican talent as flautist Dave Valentín and pianist Eddie Palmieri. The festival is also noted for its strong relationship with the Berklee College of Music. This year scholarships totaling over \$700,000 were awarded to the Puerto Rican jazz stars of tomorrow.

The sonic signature of the festival, however, turned out to be provided by the omnipresent two-tone chirp of the island's indigenous frog, the *coquí*. During quiet passages, the presence of the so-called "coquí chorus" became an inescapable part of the aural mix. At one point, D'Rivera aimed his clarinet into the surrounding darkness, picked the perfect interval, and engaged in a tuneful call-and-response with the tiny creatures. Pure magic. —**Story and photos by Mark Holston**

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Bandoneón player Jofre Romarion, bassist Pedro Giraudo and percussionist Enrique Cárdenas; clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera; bassist Eddie Gómez; trombonist William Cepeda; and flutist Dave Valentín.



From Battlefield to Bandstand

Tenor saxophonist Benny Sharoni says that music saved him. When the 49-year-old Israeli native was doing his mandatory three-year stint in the Israeli Army in the early '80s, the horrors of battle were overwhelming.

"While I was in the Army, when I had a moment of quiet at night, I'd put on headphones and listen to Steely Dan and Sonny Rollins," he says. "It saved me. The war experiences were just so ugly and so painful and so overwhelming that I think music really healed me. Music kept me safe from those insane experiences. It still does to this day. When I'm playing music, I'm in the moment, I don't have to think about the experiences that I hated in the past. Music just elevates me; it puts me in a place that you can't match any other way."

The 10 cuts on Sharoni's debut CD as a leader, *Eternal Elixir* (Papaya Records), reflect his depth of experience and overflow with the joy of living. Working with different small groupings of six Boston-area musicians who also happen to be close friends, Sharoni and company tackle a vibrant selection of material on *Eternal Elixir* — from a couple of Donald Byrd covers from the trumpeter's 1961 album *Free Form* (which featured saxist Wayne Shorter) and a recitation of Blue Mitchell's "The Thing to Do" to four original compositions, a version of *Fiddler on the Roof*'s celebratory "To Life," and sumptuous bossa fare (a cover of the classic "Estate" and Sharoni's own "Benito's Bossa Bonita").

"I just picked tunes because my heart was attracted to them," Sharoni says. "It's the same way when I improvise; I go after the notes that are beautiful. Every musician has a gift, and I think mine is to make music simple enough, but emotional enough, so everyone can feel good about it. I didn't think about having something for everyone on the disc, although I think everyone can find something they like on it."

In 1986, after his traumatic battle experiences in Lebanon, Sharoni moved to Boston, where he enrolled at the Berklee College of Music. He left after a single semester, opting instead for private lessons with saxophonists Jerry Bergonzi and George Garzone. In the meantime he began leading his own bands and has since appeared with Joshua Redman, Danilo Perez, Kenny Garrett and Larry Coryell. Today, having survived the trials and tribulations of war, Sharoni and his music stand as living testaments to the power of jazz to restore mind, body and spirit.

"Music healed me in so many ways," the saxophonist says. "If I didn't have music, I don't know what I'd do. Music is the only reason I'm still alive." ▲