

History of the Batá Tradition in New York City

as told by John Amira (2006), edited 2013 by Thomas Altmann

While researching for my web article *The Giraldo Rodriguez Record* in the year 2006, New York's Afro-Caribbean percussion pioneer, batá elder and co-author of the groundbreaking book *The Music of Santería*, **John Amira**, was especially helpful in contributing the bulk of the most "inside" historical information with respect to the beginnings of what was to become known as the New York batá drumming tradition. During our correspondence, John Amira, who was at the core of this movement, made the effort of giving his own historical account up from the roots. John Amira was born in New York City in 1944.

John is not responsible for omitting the names of other influential drummers on the scene, as I did not inquire him for these. The rise and immigration of capable young batá drummers is an ongoing process in New York (as elsewhere), which is certainly not going to end with people like Pedrito Martínez or Roman Díaz.

I am happy to finally present this important document to a broader public. Emphasizing words in italics and bold letters was done by me, as are the footnotes. Except for that, I kept the text almost entirely in John's own words.

Thomas Altmann, Oct. 2013

Thomas Altmann: John, you are generally regarded a key figure in establishing the Afro-Cuban batá drumming tradition in New York, and probably one of the first drummers in the U.S. to seriously study the batá. Can you tell me how it all started? I could imagine that Julito Collazo had quite an influence at that time ...

John Amira: In 1963 I was invited to join an African dance company (really African American) where I met a drummer named **Carl Vail** who played batá. I invited him and his partners **Ray McKethan** and **Rudy Wright** plus some other drummers to a jam session I had organized. **Marcus Gordon** was also there, and this led to us having a batá group along with **Johnny Montalvo** (it is the three of us in the photo in Charley Gerard's *Salsa* book¹). Carl had already taken a liking to me and had taught me a little, and when he agreed to teach Marcus, things fell into place.

Carl, Ray and Rudy started the whole lineage of batá in this country by taking a homemade set of batá to a ceremony where **Julito Collazo**² was playing drum and *güíro* and asking if he would like to play them. He had never been interested in teaching but he showed them *Chachalekpafun* so they could accompany him. (He didn't start choosing disciples until about seven years later.) After the ceremony they used their newfound knowledge of the three parts to identify the sounds on the *Lucumi* or *Afro Tambores Batá* record. With that sound code they learned all the rhythms on that and other records such as *Santero #1*, *Mongo In Havana*, etc. At first Marcus and I depended on Carl to show us the rhythms, but when Carl didn't show up one day, Marcus suggested that we listen to the records ourselves. I was highly dubious, but upon trying I discovered that he was right; we could hear as well as they could. At that point I became obsessed with listening and went back over everything that Carl had learned from the records. I picked up a number of details that they had overlooked and all three of us spent hours comparing notes. As different records became available, they would immediately be dissected.

Marcus and I got copies of the Fernando Ortíz books³, and we interpreted the feeling of the transcriptions based on our actual understanding of the records, thereby adding to our repertoire. Little by little the word got around that there was a batá group available for hire, and we were occasionally hired. We made our first set of batá out of different size conical shells, but this wasn't aesthetically pleasing to me and I came up with the idea of taking various size conga and bongo shells and joining them at the small ends to more closely duplicate the look and sound of solid shell batá (see the set in the Gerard photo).



The first set of solid shell batá in NY was made by **Chris Oliana** probably around 1961 or 1962 but was never played. Marcus made a set when he moved to San Francisco but not in NY.

Gene Golden joined our group for a while and in 1966 I left the group and started teaching **Manny Ramos** and **Ted Holliday (Sr.)**. Ted had many connections in the Santeria community and we got a tremendous amount of work. At one of these ceremonies Julito showed up and was so outraged to see a non-Cuban group playing that he walked out and just sat outside until we were finished. He never seemed very friendly to me and this just made it worse. We were so successful that it probably seemed pointless to him not to make his own group, and so in 1969 he started teaching **Gene Golden, Sonny Morgan, Richie "Pablo" Landrum,** and **Babafemi Akinlana**. For whatever reason that group didn't last too long.

In the early 1970s we played at the initiation of **Hector "Flaco" Hernandez** who approached me a couple of years later about learning batá. He turned out to be very talented and became a very strong member of our group.⁴ On the anniversary of his initiation he asked us to play for his *orisha* and mentioned that Julito, who was a good friend of his father, would play with us. I thought that would be very problematic, but Hector assured me that Julito was okay with it.

When the day came, Julito insisted that I take the *iyá* even though I offered it to him. I can only assume he was testing me and I guess he realized that I was very serious and respectful about the drumming and the religion, because from that moment on he was always friendly to me, always in my corner and always glad to drum with me.

Julito decided to try making another group and, seeing Hector's ability, asked him to drum with him. The third drummer, if I recall correctly, was named Moreno⁵. It was during that period that we often wound up at the same ceremonies and drummed together. I consider Julito to be one of the very few drummers who had real magic in his hands. Not only did I learn what I consider the most accurate way to play various rhythms; I also learned more from him about the true feeling of how to play batá than from anyone else.

<However,> I was not a direct student of Julito Collazo. We <just> played together at a fair number of ceremonies and I learned a lot from him at those times.

Our group broke up in the mid 1970s and I began playing with another group that did mostly drum-and-güiro, but by that time I had started studying Haitian drumming and was playing Vodou ceremonies which I found to be very rewarding. I created several more batá groups which never lasted too long, and played a number of Santeria ceremonies, but in the long run it seemed to be more trouble than it was worth. Although I play Vodou ceremonies regularly, I am still involved with the Santeria; I just don't play for it at this time (2006). [2013 postscript: In 2011, John "was finally initiated in Añá". Before, he "never felt that he had met the right person to do it with", although he was initiated to the drums in Haïti. Subsequently, he joined a *fundamento tambor* and finds himself playing batá again. - T.A.]

T.A.: In 1986, Milton Cardona published his record "Bembé". Except for *La Lu Banché*, he entrusted the *iyá* to Flaco Hernández, with Steve Berrios on *itótele* and Jose Fernández on *okónkolo*. Milton is featured primarily as a singer on this recording. Since he has played batá and also wrote a paragraph on the batá drums for the 1975 record cover of "Concepts in Unity" by the *Grupo Folklórico y Experimental Nuevayorquino*, he exemplified the archetypal religious drummer to me. Even his appearance as an *iyawó* on LP's 1974 album "Understanding Latin Rhythms Vol. 1" was impressing. (At that time I didn't know it was actually forbidden to take photos of neophytes in *Santería*.) Do you know where he came from?

J.A.: Somewhere around 1972 or 1973, Gene Golden brought **Milton Cardona** to a *güiro* ceremony that I was playing at. He also sat in for a while, which obviously was the beginning of his connection to Santería music. He was the *conguero* for Willie Colon at the time. I honestly can't remember with whom he studied batá later on, but I'm sure he got a lot of material from Gene and probably from Hector Hernandez, too. He was also practicing with people like **Frankie Rodriguez, Jerry Gonzalez, Andy Gonzalez** and maybe **Cachete Maldonado**⁶. (I remember teaching him a little bit about how to play *bonko* for *Abakwa*.)

As far as **Steve Berrios** is concerned, I don't know if he ever played batá with anyone else other than Julito. He keeps a pretty low profile and probably works more as a drumset player and *timbalero*. The last time I saw him was about two years ago at Julito's funeral. [Update: Steve Berrios passed away in July 2013. - J.A.]

T.A.: In his book "Orin Orisa", John Mason mentions Onelio Scull, Gerald "Yao" Gerard and Alfredo „Coyude“ Videaux.

J.A.: **Alfredo Videaux**⁸ didn't move to New York; he moved to New Jersey in the early 1980s. He occasionally showed up at *güiro* ceremonies I was playing at in New Jersey and sang a bit, but I never saw him play batá. I met one of the players he taught, but I can't remember his name. I know that Hector Hernandez worked with him a lot, and at times Julito did also (I believe they were cousins).

Onelio Scull⁹ was not very knowledgeable about batá rhythms when I knew him. He played a little *okónkolo* (maybe two rhythms). He eventually moved to Puerto Rico, got a set of *fundamento* drums and no doubt learned to play them. I have no idea who he studied with.

I met and drummed with **Gerald "Yagbe" Gerrard**¹⁰ when I was in San Francisco. He was born in Haïti and moved here when he was fairly young, but he has always been more interested in Cuban and West African drumming than Haïtian. He went to Cuba several times and received a set of *fundamento* batá, probably in the early 1990s, and does many of the *fundamento* ceremonies in San Francisco.

T.A.: How do Totico and Chief Bey fit in the picture?

J.A.: During the time when I was playing batá, **Totico**⁷ only did *güiro* ceremonies where he both sang and played. At some point he must have gone to Cuba to receive a set of *fundamento* batá, because he now (2006) has a batá group. I don't know if he actually plays batá himself now (which he didn't know how to do before) or if he just sings while others play. [Totico passed away in 2011 - T.A.]

Chief Bey¹¹ was most influential in the African American drumming community. He was not really a batá player, although he did put together a group around 1973. In fact he actually studied a bit with Louie Bauzo in the 1990s.

T.A.: What about Frank Malabe?

J.A.: **Frankie Malabe**¹² lived near me in the South Bronx and we often got together to jam in the early 1960s. He later studied batá with Louie Bauzo and was primarily an *okónkolo* player. **Louie Bauzo**¹³, in turn, had started learning batá from the Ortíz books around 1978 and eventually went on to study a little with Puntilla but mostly with **Roberto Borrell**. I believe he [Bauzo] has a set of *fundamento* that was made by a group of *babalawos* in New Jersey.

T.A.: It seems to me that, when Puntilla arrived in 1980, he almost turned the New York batá scene upside down. He became the major influence on everybody's style of playing and is now heading something like an "Añá trust", running two *fundamento* sets with a vast array of drummers covering the entire *tambor* business in New York and beyond. Was he the reason that kept you from playing batá?

J.A.: Puntilla (Orlando Rios)¹⁴ came to New York in 1981. I studied with him for a while, but had no particular interest in becoming a part of his organization. <But> he is not the reason that I stopped doing *toques*. [In 2008, Puntilla died after a heart attack at the age of 60 - T.A.]

I heard that many people, including Puntilla, were very critical when I wrote my book *The Music of Santería*¹⁵, but no one has ever confronted me face to face about it. I always heard about it second hand and I always told the messengers to go back and tell anyone who had a problem with my book to speak directly to me. No one ever has. I wrote my book not to expose any secrets (the rhythms are very accessible and there is a fair number of teachers), but to preserve a classical form of the drumming that I think is in danger of being lost or abandoned.

I hope I could give the interested reader a fair assessment of everyone that I personally know from the batá world.

John Amira

Footnotes

¹ Charley Gerard with Marty Sheller: *Salsa. The Rhythm of Latin Music*, White Cliffs Media, Crown Point IN, 1989.

² Julio Collazo (1925-2004); Cuban master drummer, singer, and *babalawo*, had been a disciple of Pablo Roche "Okilakpa" in Havana. He had moved to New York in the 1950's.

³ Fernando Ortíz (1881-1969); Cuban ethnomusicologist and author; wrote the books *Africania de la musica folklorica de Cuba* and *Los bailes y el teatro de los negros en el folklore de Cuba*, among many others.

⁴ Hector "Flaco" Hernandez played the *iyá* on Milton Cardona's record *Bembé* (american clavé AMCL 1004 2), along with drummers Steve Berrios and Jose Fernandez and Cardona on vocals. Also listen to the title *Emi ra obini lewa* on the record *Caliente=Hot* (New World Records NW 244), featuring Julito Collazo (vocals) along with Hernandez, Cardona and Berrios (batá).

⁵ probably Wilfredo "Moreno" Tejada.

⁶ Frankie Rodriguez (†); singer. Jerry Gonzalez (*1949); trumpet and conga player. Andy Gonzalez (*1951), brother of Jerry; bass player. Angel "Cachete" Maldonado (*1951), congas and batá, Puerto Rico, has studied with Julito Collazo in New York.

⁷ Eugenio "Totico" Arango (1934-2011); Cuban percussionist and singer. To be heard on the seminal records *Patato & Totico* (Verve V/V6-5037) and *Totico y sus Rumberos* (Montuno 515), the latter also incorporating Orlando "Puntilla" Rios, Hector "Flaco" Hernández, Carlos Sánchez and Fran Alcaso on batá, Jerry and Andy Gonzalez and others.

⁸ Alfredo "Coyute" Videaux; Cuban batá drummer of the Angarica lineage; godfather in Añá of West Coast percussionists Harold Muñiz and John Santos; lives in New Jersey.

⁹ Onelio Scull can be heard on the records *Santeria-Cubana* (Santero #135) and *Fiesta Santera Lucumi* (Santero #375, #108) as leader of the *Conjunto Santero Batá*, alias *Conjunto Obaoso* which also included drummers Julio Collazo, Carlos "Patato" Valdéz and Angel Gómez, as well as Domingo Gómez and Máximo Texidor (vocals), among others. (Thanks to Johnny Conga for this information!)

¹⁰ Gerald Gerrard, alias Yagbe Awolowo Onilu, came from Haïti to New York in 1966 and moved to California in 1976. [Source: <http://ileifaagbaye.com/about-us/>, viewed Oct. 2013] According to *Ile Ifa Agbaye*, he "received the sacred 'Anyá' Drums of Nicolas 'Titi' Angarica in 1990 <and> was the first non-Cuban to be given a set of sacred drums."

¹¹ James Hawthorne (1913-2004); famous drummer and *agbe* (*shekere*) player in the New York area.

¹² Frank Malabe (1940-1994); percussionist and co-author of the educational book *Afro-Cuban Rhythms for Drumset*.

¹³ Louis Bauzo, master percussionist, was born in Puerto Rico in 1948.

¹⁴ Orlando "Puntilla" Rios (1947-2008); Cuban master percussionist, batá player, and singer, came from Havana to the U.S.A. with the so-called *Mariel Boatlift* in 1980; he was perhaps the most influential, and also the most dominant, figure in the New York batá scene from his arrival to his untimely death.

¹⁵ John Amira & Steven Cornelius: *The Music of Santería. Traditional Rhythms of the Batá Drums*, book with CD featuring Amira, Orlando Fiol and Joe De León (White Cliffs Media, 1992).