

JIMMY DELGADO

These Are the Breaks



By Rudy Mangual Photo ©Latin Percussion

In the early 1980s, timbalero Jimmy Delgado came across his first gold record for his timbal solo on the Kurtis Blow hit These Are the Breaks. He shared a second gold record for his work on the Shaggy hit song Oh Carolina, but even more impressive (at least to me) was his participation in the recording that saved the salsa movement, as believed by many, from the onslaught of disco in the late 1970s: Willie Colón and Rubén Blades' Siembra. The following is a telephone interview with the veteran master percussionist, conducted from his home in New York City.

Rudy Mangual: Jimmy, are you a native New Yorker?

Jimmy Delgado: Yes, I was raised in the Lower East Side, the Bronx and El Barrio (Spanish Harlem).

RM: How would you describe your introduction into music?

JD: When I was growing up, my mother listened to the music of Trio Los Panchos, Carlos Pizarro, and the traditional and folkloric music of Puerto Rico. As a young kid, I also remember listening to an album by Richie Ray called *Jala Jala*, which triggered something in my brain that reacted to the beautiful rhythms and compositions with English lyrics in this recording. It was boogaloo; it was so cool. Then around the age of nine, my cousin in El Barrio turned me on to the music of Ray Barretto, via the album *Hard Hands*, and from there on, I was hooked on Latin music.

RM: When did you start playing percussion instruments?

JD: In my teen years, I was influenced by my cousin Little Johnny Roman, who had conga drums and bongoes in his home in El Barrio. I would visit him regularly just to listen to his albums and to mess around

with the drums. He always had friends come over to jam on the drums. Those rumbas, and listening to the albums of Barretto, Puente and Machito all contributed to my inclination to play percussion. But the instrument that really caught my attention was the timbal, especially in the hands of Orestes Vilató. By 1970, my family had relocated to El Barrio, which moved me closer to my cousin Little Johnny and drumming. By 1972, bandleader/musician Johnny Colón had opened the East Harlem Music School. I had just turned 13 and attended the school to learn the timbal under the tutelage of Nicky Marrero. The first year I learned to play bongó, as well as timbal. The following year I had Andy González as a teacher, and in 1974, Manny Oquendo started teaching, and I became his apprentice, helping him with new students. At the school, I met many of the working salsa musicians, including Johnny Colón, Mario Rivera, Sonny Bravo and Jerry González. Not only did I learn to be a professional Latin percussionist at the East Harlem School of Music, but I also developed a gift for teaching others how to play these amazing instruments and continue making this wonderful music.

RM: When did you start playing professionally?

JD: In 1973, Johnny Colón invited me to perform in El Barrio with his band, at a block party. I had just turned 15. That summer I performed several other times with the band. The following year, I joined Orquesta Cimarrón, led by trombonist Ron Davis, who happened to be the assistant principal at my Junior High School and also played in Johnny Colón's band. After Orquesta Cimarrón, Nicky Marrero called me to substitute for him with Típica Novel—the hottest charanga band in New York City at the time. Marrero was going on tour with Eddie Palmieri for about three weeks, so I replaced him with Típica Novel. I then joined the charanga Típica New York, under the musical direction of violinist Mike Pérez. From this point on, I started working with more bands around the city, including Conjunto Melao (featuring Ray de la Paz and Eddie Temporal). It was the first band I got to record with.

I also worked with Pupi Legarreta's charanga and Ismael Quintana's orchestra, and in 1976, I replaced Nicky Marrero permanently on Típica Novel after he left the band.

While working with Novel, one day I received a telephone call from Ralph Mercado, who told me that Ray Barretto wanted to talk to me. Barretto got on the phone and asked me to join his new band. He explained that he planned for the new band to do a lot of touring abroad in festivals and concerts, and not to work the local cuchifrito circuit (New York City's salsa circuit). He told me to think about it and call him back with my decision. I had just joined Típica Novel and we were working a lot, but on the other hand, this was a great opportunity and a chance to work with one of my musical idols. After talking with a friend about it, I met with Barretto and accepted his offer to join his band. Nine months later, Barretto dissolved that band and formed a Latin jazz band that featured a trap drummer. I joined Orquesta Guararé and continued subbing for Nicky Marrero in Eddie Palmieri's band. In 1977, I joined Willie Colón's band as a bongó player. The timbalero was Pablito Rosario, who by the way, was a well-known bongó player. Several months later, Rosario relocated to Puerto Rico and I moved to the timbal position in the band. My first gig as a timbalero with Willie Colón was for a concert in Puerto Rico at the Roberto Clemente Coliseum, featuring a stellar cast of artists such as Celia Cruz, Héctor Lavoe, Rubén Blades and Yomo Toro, among others. This was my first time performing in Puerto Rico and it was awesome. The next day we traveled to the Dominican Republic for several performances throughout the country.

RM: Was this around the time Willie Colón and Rubén Blades recorded *Siembra*?

JD: The concert in Puerto Rico took place in February of 1978 and we went into the studio to start working on the *Siembra* project in the summer of 1978.

RM: While recording the *Siembra* album, did you feel that you were working on something special?

JD: No, not really. At first, it was like working on any other record. Halfway through the recording it did start feeling a bit different. Rubén

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Blades' compositions were like short stories being told to the beat of salsa music. The whole project took a different approach due to the collaboration of Colón and Blades, and working with José Mangual Jr. and Eddie Montalvo in the rhythm section was great. But the impact of that album after it was released in New York, Puerto Rico and throughout Latin America blew me away. Every song had a heavy message, it spoke to the people in the streets, it called on Latinos to unite, rise above the poverty and fight for a better life. *Siembra* was a lot more than just a salsa album; it was a message of hope for Latinos and a new way for the world to perceive salsa. I must add that when I first heard the album at home in my stereo, I was a bit disappointed. The final mix and mastering in the album lacked the intensity and powerful force that I remember feeling and being a part of during the recording sessions.

RM: How was life after *Siembra* for you?

JD: Life went on as always! With Willie Colón I also recorded on the album *Solo* (in which he sang all the leads) and we also did an album with Héctor Lavoe called *Tributo a Felipe Pirela*. Soon thereafter, I left Colón's band to join Luis "Perico" Ortiz's band. After 3 1/2 years with Perico's band, I returned to play with Willie, and then returned to Ray Barretto's band.

RM: When did you start working as a bandleader?

JD: It was when I put together the show "Master Timbaleros." I brought together Orestes Vilató, Nicky Marrero and Endel Dueño, and together, we showcased these master percussionists playing this incredible percussion instrument. Originally, Tito Puente was the first timbalero that I approached for the show, and he agreed to be a part of it, but when the



Photo by Julio Costoso

time came to make it happen, it didn't. In Puerto Rico, the show was a big hit. In 2004, I self-produced my band and recorded *Salsa Con Dulzura*, featuring singer Renzo Padilla. Today I continue working with my band and hosting a Salsa Wednesdays in El Barrio at Julia de Burgos, featuring live salsa by some of the top bands in town. ■

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