In April 2012 I had the opportunity to travel to one of the drumming capitals of the world: CUBA. As a participant of the Australia-Cuba Friendship Society 2012 Cultural Exchange to Cuba my travels took me to all parts of this wonderful country and, as a guest of the Minister of Culture, we had the opportunity to share quality time with musicians of all ages. I naturally was keenly focussed on “All Things Percussion”.

Cuba is a country that abounds in folkloric music; a rich melting of African, Spanish, European and Caribbean cultures has ensured a wide variety of wonderful musical styles and tastes. More on this in future articles, especially on the wonderful world of Bata, the folkloric drumming steeped in African ritual and history.

No trip to Havana would be complete without spending time with one of Cuba’s most influential musicians: drummer, composer, producer and Artistic Director of the Havana Drum Festival, Giraldo Piloto Barreto.

Nephew of the great percussionist Guillermo Barreto, Giraldo Piloto has assumed the mantle as one of Cuba’s top musicians. When we met I was greeted with an infectious smile and warm, open heart. I had the pleasure of spending time with Giraldo Piloto in Bayamo (while he was on tour with his explosive 14-piece band, Klimax) as well as in the night clubs and at his home in Havana.

It is a great pleasure to meet with you in your wonderful city Havana. Can you please tell me about your background?

I started to learn drums in my family, my late uncles and aunt - Guillermo Barreto, Roberto Barreto, Alejandro Barreto and Lila Barreto - performed with all of the major orchestras in Havana, including the Orquesta Cabaret Tropicana, and numerous radio and television broadcasts in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, Roberto Barreto performed with the Orquesta Benny Moré - one of Cuba’s most famous musicians. My uncle Guillermo Barreto was considered one of the greatest drummers of Cuba in the last century. It is for this reason that I dedicate the Fiesta del Tambor (Havana Drum Festival) to him. I recall that on one occasion the Tommy Dorsey band was visiting Havana at the Cabaret Tropicana and the drummer, Buddy Rich, was ill. My uncle Guillermo actually filled in for Buddy on this occasion.

Naturally, I was interested in drums, also my mother was a piano teacher and my father was a composer. From the very beginning my mother insisted that I play with pens and pencils as drumsticks on various items around the kitchen. This was the signal that I was to be a drummer also.

I studied at Alejandro Garcia Cabrera Conservatorio here in Havana from 1969-1973. In 1973 I studied at the National School of Arts until 1980 when I graduated and was considered a professional. My first job, coincidentally, was with the band at the Tropicana. I stayed there until 1988 when I founded NG la Banda, one of Cuba’s most popular bands. Today I am director and founder of Klimax, a 14-piece band with full horn section, rhythm and 4 male singers that dance and interact with the crowd.

How did you come to be the director of one of the world’s largest drum festivals, the Fiesta del Tambor (Havana Drum Festival)?

The Fiesta del Tambor was founded in 2000. We started in very small Jazz clubs around Havana. The first festival had around 130 people in attendance. The 2012 Festival that just finished had 30,000 people attend and employed over 1,600 artists. Musicians performed in 11 different venues over 6 days. People travelled from all over the world to participate and attend including Canada, USA, Germany, Spain, United Kingdom, Mexico, Venezuela, Japan, Chile and more. This year’s artists included Rodrigo Itur from Chile, who was really amazing, as well as Mike del Ferro from the Netherlands. From the USA and Canada Dom Famularo, Aldo Mazza and Memo Acevedo also participated.

It was our mutual friend Aldo Mazza that actually encouraged me to find you once I landed in Cuba. Aldo, through his organization KOSA, certainly has done a great deal to promote percussion passion throughout the world.

Kosa Cuba, of course, is one of the major supporters of our Festival. Aldo Mazza has connected us with the Drummers and music industry throughout the world. We are very appreciative of Aldo’s warm generous support. Plans are already underway for the 2013 festival, and we hope to share our experience, tradition, culture and passion with the world.

Can you tell me about future plans for your amazing band Klimax?

We are in the process of mastering our latest album “Todo estå Bien” (Everything’s Alright). This album will also include a new mix of 9 tracks of Dance Music, one traditional Bolero, composed by my late father and sung by my mother and one Latin Jazz track, which is a tribute to Michel Legrand. I notice that more and more, percussionists are coming to Cuba for intensive programs in folkloric music and contemporary drumming. Can you please tell me about the programs that you are associated with?

Of course Aldo Mazza and Kosa Cuba, Chuck Silverman and his intensive courses. And sometimes various visiting groups who are interested in learning Cuban music.

I have had an amazing experience in Cuba “Drum Heaven” and am most impressed with the warm generous spirit that musicians all over our country have displayed. I look forward to sharing the Cuban experience with our readers and hope to meet up with you again soon.

For more info on the fiesta-del-tambor (Havana Drum and Dance Festival) please visit: www.timba.com/blog_posts/fiesta-del-tambor-2012

REFERENCES
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