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Alex Acuña: From Peru to U2

Master percussionist Alex Acuña has lent groove, color and texture to countless recordings in an astonishing array of styles. His list of performing and recording credits reads like a music dictionary: U2, Paul McCartney, Elvis Presley, Weather Report, Al Jarreau, Joni Mitchell, Yellowjackets, Ella Fitzgerald, Diana Ross, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Chucho Valdez, Plácido Domingo, Julio Iglesias, Whitney Houston, Seal—and we could keep going for a long, long time.

ALEX HAD AN ECLECTIC OUTLOOK EVEN WHILE HE WAS GROWING UP, PART OF A family of musicians in his small Peruvian hometown. “We had only one radio station,” he recalls, “but they’d play just about everything: Liszt, Chopin, Cuban music, Bill Haley and the Comets, Duke Ellington. I was listening to jazz, classical, popular music, all mixed together.”

Alex landed his first big break while gigging on a TV show in the capital city of Lima. Cuban Mambo King Pérez Prado passed through on tour, and local boy Alex filled in on drums. “I’d memorized his music from hearing it on the radio,” he recalls. “So I started playing, and after the first song Pérez said, ‘I’d like to bring you to the United States.’”

Acuña says he was recommended for the Prado slot because he could read music better than most percussionists. Alex continued to cultivate such skills via formal conservatory training, mastering music theory and classical percussion. “That’s still serving me today,” he notes, “because now I’m able to play on symphonic movie soundtracks in Los Angeles with people like John Williams. I’m still a Latin percussionist, but they call me because I can read and understand what the conductor is doing, which a lot of Latin percussionists can’t.” Acuña has also contributed to film scores by Dave Grusin, Alan Silvestri, Bill Conti, Mark Isham, Maurice Jarre, and other soundtrack greats.

Acuña balks when asked which sessions meant the most to him. (“There are so many!”) But when pressed, he singles out his tenure with the innovative jazz ensemble Weather Report, which included appearances on two of the group’s best-loved records, *Black Market* and *Heavy Weather*. “Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul were my idols when I was growing up,” says Alex, “and then there I was, actually playing with them—and Jaco Pastorius, too!”

Another unforgettable session was U2’s *Rattle and Hum*. “When they called, I asked, ‘What do you want me to play?’ They told me, ‘Whatever you feel, whatever you hear that can add something to our

music.’ So they played the songs for me, and I added things based on what I heard in the overtones of the tracks—the colors and sounds and the idea of the music.”

And of course, there was Acuña’s first key stateside gig, a Vegas stint with Elvis Presley. “That was pretty funny,” laughs Alex. “I liked Elvis’ personality a lot. I didn’t like the shows as much. He would do these three-hour shows, and I’d only get to play a little shaker and tambourine, and once in a while some congas. Of course, he had a great drummer—Ronnie Tutt.”

Acuña’s percussion arsenal includes a hefty number of Yamaha instruments, including a Birch Custom Absolute drum kit. Why birch? “Because when I hit the drums, I hit like a percussionist—and for that style, birch gives the best tone. I like drums that aren’t so brilliant-sounding, that have a round tone, and that’s what I get from that kit, especially from the toms.” But Alex adds that he sometimes opts for a Yamaha maple bass drum in the studio.

Alex also worked with Yamaha to produce a signature timbale. “They said they wanted to make me something,” recalls Alex, “and I said, ‘Sure!’ So they came up with this wooden timbale. Now, it doesn’t replace the traditional steel timbales, because you can’t do the cáscara with it [the traditional timbale rhythm clacked out on the drums’ metal shells], but I do keep using the wood timbale for its own sound. And it’s a great addition for a regular drummer’s kit. Yamahas are very versatile drums, and since I’m a versatile musician, I can get even more out of them. I use many different kinds of Yamaha drums, in different configurations, for different types of music.”

For all his musical globe-trotting, Acuña remains dedicated to promoting the musical culture of his homeland with the group Los Hijos del Sol (“Sons of the Sun”). The mostly Peruvian group blends traditional and modern sounds. “We embrace all the different sides of Peruvian music,” explains Alex. “We draw on criollo (creole) music, with its use of guitar and cajón [a wooden box on which the drummer sits, tapping and slapping complex polyrhythms]. We also draw from the rhythms of black Afro-Peruvian music and the music of the Andean mountains.”

“I feel very secure now in what I’m doing musically,” says Acuña. “It’s a great thing to share with the community and with the world.”