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# jazz



## Texas truth

**Defining musical geography with bassist Roberto Miranda**

**By Kirk Silsbee**

A rehearsal took place at the home of bassist Roberto Miranda in May of 1984. During a break he made a pronouncement. "You know," Miranda said with gravity, "the other day I had a revelation. And I'm going to tell this to everybody I play with from now on. If you're playing my music and you have two choices, pick the more subtle of the two."

It was a defining moment for a man who has followed his muse resolutely for most of his life. While Miranda has played many kinds of music — traditional Puerto Rican, rock, salsa, symphonic and Middle Eastern among them — he's known as one of the great jazz bassists in Los Angeles of the past 30 years. Miranda brings strength and creativity to any musical situation, be it in guitarist Kenny Burrell's mainstream quartet or the often-hellacious maelstrom of the late pianist Horace Tapscott's bands. For although Miranda often plays in musically intense and free situations, he can be counted on to find the small places that mean so much to a performance.

The son of a Puerto Rican musician (his father not only played but made some of his own drums and was a baritone singer), the 56-year-old Miranda was born in the Bronx and moved to Los Angeles when he was 4. His first instrument was the conga drum and Miranda didn't apply himself to the bass until he was 17. While he rarely plays conga in public these days, the powerful rhythmic current that runs through Miranda's bass playing is clearly rooted in the drum.

A formative period in Miranda's development was the six months he spent working in the kitchen at the old Shelly's Manne-Hole in Hollywood in the late 1960s.

"Shelly was so great to me," said Miranda, from his home in Sherman Oaks. "Sometimes for intermission they'd let me bring my bass out of the kitchen and play a solo set. Then, I got to sit in with a lot of people, including pianist Bill Evans. (Percussionist) Willie Bobo asked me to join his band while he was playing there so I'd learn the tunes by playing along in the kitchen. As you can imagine, that wasn't the best thing for running a kitchen. But even when (manager) Rudy Onderwyzer fired me, he was nice about it. I can't thank Shelly enough."

Miranda is unstinting in his praise of the three transplanted Texans who gave LA an avant-garde profile, beginning in the middle '60s: clarinetist John Carter, cornetist Bobby Bradford and Tapscott. Each recognized the desire and portent in the 19-year-old and they nurtured it. "I met them all at about the same time in my life," said Miranda, "and they all took me under their wings. I played with John and Horace up until they died and I still play with Bob."

Miranda's apprenticeship taught him some of the deeper meanings of music. "Up to that time," he recounts, "what I knew about the blues was that it was technically challenging up to a point; that it was music that worked on a folk level. But John and Bob showed me that the blues could be played on the level of fine art. They never allowed the numbers to get in the way of the love, but they allowed the love to be expressed at a very high level."



"One time," said Miranda, "John wrote a tune and said, 'Roberto, right here, I'd like you to sound like a Texas bullfrog.' I said, 'Uh...okay.' I tried a lot of different things to get this sound. They never told me I was wrong, but it was obvious I didn't have it and I kept on trying. A couple of years later we were out on the road. One day we were in a club and I played something in this particular spot and John turned around and said, 'That's it!' He gave me a problem and let me work out the answer on my own."

Miranda is stepping forward as a bandleader. This weekend he brings a quartet into the Branson Performing Space. His new CD, "With Groanings Too Deep For Words" (Miguel Music) uses a stellar ensemble of Burrell, Bradford, reedman Charles Owens, pianist Billy Childs, percussionist Don Littleton and the late trap drum master Billy Higgins.

Through it all, Miranda's bass courses like a serpentine river, defining the musical geography and nurturing all the areas that touch its banks.

Told that his long associations should qualify him for Honorary Texan status, the sincere Miranda breaks into a laugh and said, "That's the truth, brother!"

Miranda performs Friday and Saturday at Boston Court's Branson Performing Space, 70 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena. For information, call (626) 683-6883.













