

English translation: Luisito Ayala Interview/ Episode 1 of The Boricua en la Luna Podcast

R- is Ricardo (Interviewer)

L- is Luisito Ayala (Interviewee)

R: Good evening Luisito. It's a pleasure to meet you. My father and you are very good friends but through all this time I haven't had the pleasure to meet you until now. Really it's a great honor to meet you finally and that you have given me this opportunity to interview you. Thank you.

L: Thank you for giving me this opportunity to be part of your master's degree course, I am at your service.

I've had a very close relationship with both your father and grandfather for many years.

R: It seems like Humacao is the nexus of music in Puerto Rico. There have been so many artists that break out from there. Jerry Rivera, and your contemporary Tito Rojas, may he rest in peace, have all come from there. How was that dynamic to grow up in Humacao and how those relationships lead to becoming music professionals

L: Well this all has to do with the Humacao Municipal Band. We all started playing when we were very young. We took music classes with Maestro Nito Duclerk who was my first music teacher and Cheo Rios who was another teacher that gave me music classes in the municipality, and in High School, I had classes with Nito Duclerk. Nito Duclerk is Micky Duclerk y Jean Duclerk's grandfather Jean is currently one of the best trumpet players in Puerto Rico.

R: My father told me that guy was always on you trying to get you to improve and if you weren't doing well he was on you to fix it.

L: Later on we were lucky enough to have Maestro German Peña come to Humacao. He was the one who reorganized the Humacao Municipal Band in 1966. I was part of that group, your uncle Goyito was also part of the group as a clarinet player, and then later on your father also joined.

Peña came with new ideas, to reorganize the band and we learned a lot from him. He was a very young director. He was younger than Nito, his musical education was different from theirs and he was a little more up to date with Latin music. He came from the Pan-Americana Orchestra which belonged to his brother Lito Peña who is one of the most famous musicians from both Puerto Rico and Humacao.

We had the opportunity to develop ourselves in that band and to become the best municipal band in Puerto Rico and to have the opportunity to travel to places like Atlanta, New York, the Puerto Rican Day Parade, Florida, Venezuela, and many other countries to represent Puerto Rico.

It was there that I had the opportunity to meet your grandfather the great Binso. Because he was part of the organization that organized our trips. The airfare, the food, all transportation, and he was one of the best at dealing with that during that time.

R: I didn't know my grandfather was involved in that as well. I guess he really was involved in a lot of things in the town of Humacao.

L: Yes and he was part of... he was the right-hand man of the mayor at that time. Mayor Higgins was the mayor that revamped the band.

We started to participate at least in my case with musical groups as students. At that time I organized an Orchestra called Combo Tropical. What we did was play cover songs of the El Gran Combo band. I went to the Gran Combo dances with Maestro Harris Rosario, one of the most talented professors to come from the island. He played saxophone with the band and we went to the El Gran Combo Dances and paid our entrance fee. I would then talk to their director Rafael Ithier and he would let me transcribe their arrangements. And at that time our group had two trumpets and two saxophones which is the same composition of musicians that El Gran Combo had. And we played their music, Ojos Chinos, Acangana, we played all of those hits.

And that's how I started to develop as a musician. I went to San Juan to play with other groups until I finally arrived to play trumpet for the Puerto Rican Power. At that time the founder and director of the Puerto Rican Power was, or actually is because he is still alive, Chui Castro, now Dr. Jesus Castro. At the time that he was leading, we recorded two LPs. After those two albums, he left to study medicine in the Dominican Republic and the Orchestra broke up. Since everyone wanted to direct I wasn't able to take the group. But since as time passed no one did anything with the group. I approached Dr. Castro and said that I was interested in taking over the name of the band. That name has a lot of potential. It's just a matter of grabbing the reigns again and start to record again to start a musical career. And he gave me the rights to the Puerto Rican Power. And that is the beginning of the Puerto Rican Power.

R: How long was it between the first break up and when you asked him for the name?

L: It was about 5 - 6 years that the group was broken up. Then after he gave me the rights, I organized the orchestra and I had the opportunity that the Fania All-Star was looking for an Orchestra that would do backup for all their solo artists like Cheo Feliciano, Hector Lavoe, Celia Cruz, Ismael Miranda, Alberto Santiago, Cheo Feliciano, Ismael Quintana, Santos Colon, Tito Lare, Paquito Guzman, well all of the Fania soloists left their orchestras to go solo. And they gave us the task of doing backup for them.

R: How old were you when you took over that responsibility.

L: I think I was 20 something years old it was about 1978 so 20 something

R: I was barely a year old back then.

L: That's how things are. So then it was a spectacular time. I was the envy of many directors and bands at having the opportunity to learn and be the musical director for first-class artists. But I wanted something more than that because really the thing was you did backup for the best singing artists, but the singing artists took all the glory and the orchestra played second tier to them. Many times they would announce Ismael Miranda and his orchestra or Santos Colon and his orchestra, they didn't even acknowledge the orchestra. It was great economically, but I aspired to more. I wanted to reach what they were doing and maybe achieve more.

R: And now when they announce you on the internet they say Luisito Ayala but they didn't forget the orchestra because they say and the Puerto Rican Power.

L: There was a time that when I dedicated myself to my career with the Puerto Rican Power that's where we became known as Luisito Ayala and the Puerto Rican Power.

R: How did it come to be that the group went from making covers to doing original music. I know that through the times, Salsa has had its highs and lows and during the time that Rock took over pop culture, that salsa had to incorporate elements of rock like boogaloo, and with romantic ballads were popularized during the 80s and 90s salsa had to follow suit with romantic

adaptation. How has that adaptation taken place through the years because you are a very well-established musical institution?

L: First of all it was challenging because it wasn't just practicing the arrangements with the artists or just playing their musical arrangements. Now we had to grow the musical career of the Puerto Rican Power. Now we had to choose songs, the people in charge of arrangements, you had to give them the details of how you want the sound and which musical instrument combinations you like. I liked the combination of two trumpets and two trombones because that's what the Harlow Orchestra liked two trumpets and two trombones I liked that combo also, and that was the combination that I used to accompany all the artists because sometimes I always added a trumpet or a baritone, but that two trumpet and two trombone combo was always there.

We had the opportunity to start a cooperative. We would play a dance to raise funds to pay for arrangements and studios to record our first production. Our first production was called *Quiéreme tal como Soy*, *Noche de Boda*, *Amor de Mentira*, *Dile que no estoy...* it's been such a long time ago...

R: And you were a hit right away

L: With that, we had the opportunity to record a demo and present it to the Sonotone Music Corporation that was just starting out. We were chosen to sign with Sonotone and that's where the Puerto Rican Power international music career started out. Because we had recorded some LPs but they were local. The music did not go outside Puerto Rico. Or at least that's what I thought because I found out later that a lot of the numbers did go out and make it outside the market during a different time.

With this production, our music made it internationally. We became the orchestra 4 years in a row that traveled the most out of all groups in Puerto Rico. We traveled the most.

R: So you beat El Gran Combo? Because I know that they travel a lot.

L: But in those years I was traveling more than them. Imagine how much that is.

R: That's a lot because right now you find those people everywhere. You can find them in Philadelphia and other places right now

L: That group schools us all, but at that time we were traveling more than they all were. That was the impact that we had with all the hits we had.

We started with Tito Rojas who unfortunately we all received the bad news that he passed away. He was the singer for a lot of our hits and did incredibly as a soloist. I don't think he realized how big he was. He either didn't want to acknowledge it or did not know it. But he truly wrote history because he made a hit of anything he recorded and did that for years being one of the champions of salsa worldwide with so many hits.

R: And if there's something that makes me happy is that even though we just met I know your music and Tito's and Jerry's and I've traveled many places with the military even though I just retired I traveled the world and lived in Europe and Asia... I met my Korean wife in Korea dancing salsa, and I can tell everyone that the music that the group director for the music they're listening to is my father's friend.

L: We had the opportunity to visit many military bases in the United States. We've been to Killeen many times. Okinawa we went to that base in Japan. I remember that they let me stay in a Colonel's barracks room. I had a great time. We went to Manheim, Germany, and other military bases. But we've had that opportunity to work with the military as well.

R: How have those audiences looked like. I remember when I was younger there were some international audiences listening to salsa music. How have you seen that change? Now I've seen that there's a tremendous audience in Asia. Asians there love to listen to your music.

L: In our 42-year musical career the Puerto Rican Power had the opportunity to go there twice. We were the only orchestra that did a 12-day tour in Japan was us. We did 10 activities. The Japanese salsa dance schools came to us. They saw us in New York and contacted us. We went to Okinawa, Narita, Tokyo, Yokohama, Hiroshima.

R: When was that?

L: 2003

R: Did you get to see your Japanese counterparts La Orquesta de la Luz?

L: Yes, but the Orquesta de la Luz had broken up. We did get to alternate with them in Tokyo but they were playing under the name Los Borrachos (The Drunks). I don't know why they chose that name but it was all the musicians of the La Luz Orchestra including Nora.

After that two years later in 2005, we came back to Kyoto and Osaka. We were contracted by Sony but not the music but technology branch. They contracted us to do a party where we were representing all of Latin America and we did those parties in both Kyoto and Osaka.

R: I think that your career will continue to go far because in our conversations you told me that you are working on a new musical production. Can you tell us a little about it, when are we going to be able to hear it.

L: Soon it will come out. At least there will be a single that is coming out and then later we will release the CD. I want to tell you that after 42 years we have a musical career that includes about 30 CDs we've recorded. Now we're recording this newest one. Our last one was nominated for the Latin Grammy. We had a nomination that was very important for us. Being about 4,000 productions in this is a great achievement.

We have the hope that we can get another nomination in the future and we're working on a very interesting production with many romantic and hard-line salsa tracks and some mixes with rap and reggaeton to make it appealing to a younger crowd.

R: Is there any collaboration that you can talk about?

L: We are in negotiations which I can't say right now but I can't tell them right now because they are in the works with a few strong names. If it comes about we will let everyone know. We will let everyone know right away because we want everyone to know about it so they can look out for it. We have been talking with some strong names, but we'll see if we reach an agreement because we have to make sure we work out the royalties and sales.

But besides going to Japan like we were talking about we've toured all of Europe, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, the United States, France, England, Spain, Switzerland, Zurich Austria.

R: So you've been to all continents. I guess that Antarctica is the only continent that you still need to go to.

L: I've gone above the pole when going to Japan. When we've gone there we've gone over Alaska.

It's been interesting we've sold millions of albums, we have had many awards internationally, we've had over a hundred hits, and we have many that are hits internationally. We had a hit song called Tu Cariñito, which is a track that has sold millions of copies and was named as the Latino anthem by Spotify.

R: It definitely is one of the most recognizable tracks in salsa. I can tell you that my wife is not good at recognizing salsa songs but if I play that one she recognizes it.

L: I'm going to tell you a story and give a how do you say?

R: Exclusive?

L: Yep an exclusive. First of all this song, if you go into Tik Tok. Tik Tok is a platform for young people. Tik Tok has over 70,000 videos where they use the song Tu Cariñito. Well, the exclusive I'm giving you is that in the upcoming album, we are producing part two of Tu Cariñito.

R: Wow with that you already have a lot of people looking out for this album.

L: I hope that it goes as well as it did with the first version of Tu Cariñito. It was a challenge to try to reach what we did with Tu Cariñito, but we have the hopes that we can do it. It's a very youthful song, interpreted by the 3 singers that I have that have been with us for the last 10 years. Gasumi Jean, Joshua Marcel, and Luisito Ayala Jr. is my son and is the singer with the most time in the group.

R: And I see you have big plans and aspirations for now since this pandemic kept you from going on tour. Now that venues are starting to open up what are your plans if this situation keeps getting better.

L: We hope things keep getting better and while people keep getting vaccinated we will keep improving. Because we will get that herd immunity and when this happens we have better opportunities. Now there are many venues that are opening up. Columbia is opening contracts which is one of our most important locations, the US is calling for activities, I played in Florida, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco. There are new venues and in Puerto Rico, and they have given the approval to play at festivals. They've given the opportunities to start making private parties and activities as well. Because people are anxious to get back to normal and go out dancing and to see concerts. This has given us hope that things are getting back to normal soon.

R: Here in this area in Baltimore people are anxious to go out and dance. I just did a report about dance groups that are going back out to dance now that Baltimore and Washington D.C. restrictions are easing. A lot of people are going out and everyone is anxious to go out and dance and enjoy themselves. I know as soon as you come out to this area you will be well received.

L: I hope so. And I hope it happens soon because I am anxious myself. We went to Orlando and did a large concert and everything went very well. That is the first one we did like this for over a year. And in the upcoming days, we hope to keep on doing more activities.

R: Since this report also has something to do with my University Studies and since Full Sail University has a lot to do with music production. Do you have any advice for the young people that aspire to reach the level that you and your orchestra have reached?

L: Be persistent. Do everything as well as you can. Work in an organized fashion. Do things in a way without getting in trouble with anyone. Live a regular life. Place importance in your studies is paramount. The future lies in your studies. If you prepare yourself musically, 95% of the musicians that I have are young people. Our bass player just graduated from a music conservatory with a bachelor's degree and so did my piano player. They are preparing themselves not as we did in old times where we didn't have these opportunities. Now young people have a lot of opportunities to prepare themselves and go into their fields well prepared and that is very important. And be very responsible. This is a career like that of an engineer or a communicator or lawyer or doctor. All careers are important but education serves as the base for these careers and that is very important.

R: Live a balanced life don't give in to vice or excess...

L: You have to live life to the fullest but doing it the right way. We see that those that do things differently didn't make it or only made it halfway.

R: Well Luisito it's been a pleasure for me to speak with you and I wanted to give you the opportunity before I closed the program to tell us if someone wants to contact you for an activity to make that happen.

L: First we have our website www.puertoricanpower.com . There you can get your information. It's currently under maintenance for a few changes we're making. We also have LuisitoAyalaPuertoRicanPower on facebook and twitter. Also at 787-649-4490. Or at luisito.ayala@gmail.com.

R: Thank you and It's been a genuine pleasure and I hope it's not the last time.

L: I hope that we'll be in the Virginia, Baltimore, Washington D.C. area soon. I hope that I can be there soon and I can see your dad now that he's become a great bass player.

R: Now he's studying like what you said, he just waited until he was old to do it.

L: But it's never too late while the will good.

R: It's been a pleasure and thank you.