

Bobby Sanabria Reflects on His New Role at WBGO, And a Life of Advocacy For Latin Jazz

By [NATE CHINEN](#) · 8 HOURS AGO

[Latin Jazz Cruise](#)

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Bobby Sanabria, the new host of Latin Jazz Cruise, in the studio at WBGO.
NATE CHINEN /WBGO

Bobby Sanabria was a teenager, growing up in the Bronx, when he placed his first call to a radio station. The station was WRVR, a beacon of jazz in the New York area at the time, and he was calling to request a song by vibraphonist Cal Tjader.

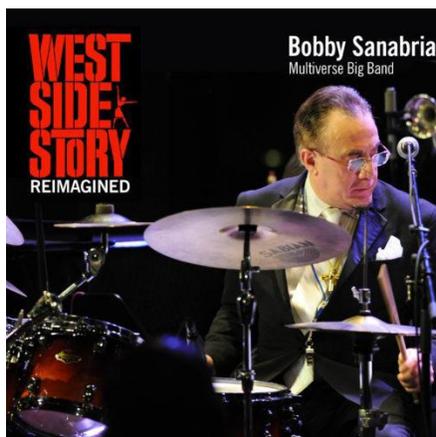
“I asked for ‘Cuban Fantasy’ — [the live version](#) from an album called *Concert on the Campus*,” Sanabria recalls. “Willie Bobo takes an incredible timbale solo on that track. As a percussionist, that was something I knew I needed to study.”

To his surprise and dismay, the DJ at the station brusquely replied that “Cuban Fantasy” was Latin music, and had no place on a jazz program. Then he hung up. Sanabria called back again, and again and again, until finally his

protestations got the song played on the air. But why had it been such a struggle?

“That was when I realized this branch of the music was not considered part of the mainstream by the jazz intelligentsia,” Sanabria says. “I guess you could call that my first ‘A-ha moment’ of being an advocate. I always remember that. And I always will be a champion for this art form.”

Sanabria is about to bring that passion to a new platform as the incoming host of Latin Jazz Cruise, which broadcasts on Fridays from 9 to 11 p.m. on WBGO 88.3FM and WBGO.org. He succeeds the program’s beloved host, Awilda Rivera, who was at the helm for 26 years. Sanabria and Rivera will enact a passing of the baton on the air this Friday; he hosts his first show on March 8.



As a drummer and percussionist, Sanabria has worked with some of the giants of Latin jazz, like Mongo Santamaría, Tito Puente and Mario Bauzá. As a bandleader and composer, he has garnered widespread acclaim — most recently for *West Side Story Reimagined*, a 2019 Grammy nominee for Best Latin Jazz Album. Sanabria is also a longtime educator, activist and documentary film producer, as well as co-artistic director of the [Bronx Music Heritage Center](#). He said he plans to bring the entirety of his experience to Latin Jazz Cruise.

“There’s so much history that WBGO is a part of, particularly with what we call Latin jazz,” Sanabria attests. “I take this very, very seriously. It’s not just another gig.”

We talked by phone about his relationship with the show, his respect for Awilda Rivera, and his ambitions as host. This is an edited excerpt of the conversation.

What are your initial feelings as you move into this new role?

What I’m most excited about is that, as a musician who has worked with basically everybody that helped to form this branch of the jazz continuum, I have an insider’s knowledge of the music — from both a visceral and a technical standpoint, and also a historical one. I hope to bring that to the table, with the things that I choose to play on the show. For me, it’s a chance to educate the public. Because that’s where it’s at, in terms of getting more listeners to jazz. We have to educate the public more, especially about this branch of jazz, which is so important to the American continuum. America is not just North America; it’s Central and South America. So Latin jazz is a big part of that. And it has always been. People tend to forget, or don’t know, that New Orleans is the northernmost city of the Caribbean.

Right, that perspective is vital.

And I have big shoes to fill. I remember when WBGO first went on the air in 1979, filling that void that WRVR left as the powerhouse jazz station in the New York area. I remember when Chico Mendoza was the original host, and his show was on at an ungodly hour, like four or five in the morning. As musicians, we used to listen to it when we were coming back from gigs. And I remember the transition when Alfredo Cruz took over the show, and it became more mainstream in an evening time slot. And then Awilda Rivera, who started out as a volunteer on the show. You can’t top what Awilda has

done over the years; it's just amazing, and so were her predecessors. I hope to equal their excellence.

How would you characterize Awilda's stewardship of this program, and the tone that she set? And how will you approach it differently?

I don't really see a difference, other than what I mentioned before about my insights as a musician. The tone that she set was fantastic, because when people talk about Latin jazz, most people think about Afro-Cuban jazz, which is the original foundational form. People don't realize that Afro-Cuban jazz was born here in New York City in 1939, with Machito and the Afro-Cubans under Mario Bauza's musical direction. I have a direct connection to that because I was Mario's drummer, and recorded all those Grammy-nominated albums with him. But when we talk about Latin jazz, we're really talking about all of the countries that are in Latin America. Awilda took that to heart and started to play not just Afro-Cuban jazz-oriented things, but also Brazilian-oriented jazz, and jazz produced by musicians in other Latin American countries. She exposed the audience to the complete gamut of what that term means. I'm going to continue that.



Bobby Sanabria with his band Quarteto Ache at a WBGO Free Lunchtime Concert at the Gateway Center, Nov. 7, 2018.

CREDIT ISAAH MCCLAIN / WBGO

You are very much an active participant on this scene. The benefits of that are obvious, as you noted; is there anything that's going to be tricky for you to navigate?

I'm sure that question will come up with certain listeners and with musicians on the scene. I see myself as an advocate for the music. So that means I'm an advocate for everyone. When I get into conversations with people, I'm always talking about my students: "Look out for this person, look out for that person." For me there's no awkwardness. In fact, I'll be playing things that most people would consider off the beaten track.

What would be an example of that?

In one of my first shows, I'm going to play something by an artist nobody really knows about, except for musicians in the Dominican Republic. That's the great alto saxophonist Tavito Vazquez. If you speak to people like Paquito D'Rivera and other saxophonists — David Sánchez, Miguel Zenón — they'll say "Oh yeah, the Charlie Parker of the Dominican Republic." Tavito rarely traveled; he came to New York City but didn't like it enough to make New York his home. Still, he was a big influence on people like Paquito, people like the late, great Mario Rivera. Any saxophone player from the Caribbean — be they Haitian, Trinidadian, Puerto Rican, obviously Dominican — has something of Tavito Vazquez in them, whether they know it or not. So I'll play him on the show. I hope to expose people to artists like that, who are noteworthy and part of the historical continuum, and who need to be heard.

That sounds like an excellent approach.

My only concern with the music is that it's done with passion, authentically, with excellence. That's the criteria of all the announcers on WBGO. And besides, there's a long history of musicians being DJs. I can point to

someone you know very well, Christian McBride, who is doing great things on the radio. I look at him not only as a virtuoso bassist and bandleader, but also as an advocate. We're advocates, all of us. And Lord knows, we need more advocates for this greatest of American art forms.

In addition to your focus on the history, you'll be featuring new music. How do you feel about the state of Latin Jazz today?

People sometimes ask me, "What's the future of jazz?" The future of jazz is in Latin America. It's incontrovertible. You have young people fervently studying jazz in Colombia, Ecuador Mexico, etcetera – they're all studying at places like Berklee, the Manhattan School of Music, the New School, and everywhere else. They're all incorporating their folklore with jazz harmony and arranging technique. So the future of jazz is in Latin America — which is ironic, in a way, because it's come full circle. It's going back to its Afro-Caribbean, Latin-American roots.

Listen to Latin Jazz Cruise on Fridays from 9 to 11 p.m. on WBGO 88.3FM, or stream it here at WBGO.org.

Link: <https://www.wbgo.org/post/bobby-sanabria-reflects-his-new-role-wbgo-and-life-advocacy-latin-jazz#stream/0>