

Timbalero Giant on the Clave! by Les Rivera

"Music is a universal language; it has no boundaries or restrictions; no race or creed. It is the only form of unity we have where two or more individuals from different ethnicities can communicate without speaking a word to each other & still know what each one is thinking. Even a person, who cannot hear, can feel the rhythm in their heart and soul. It is the only form of peace this world will ever know." Chino Nunez

On February 13, 2005, the Spanish Harlem Orchestra (S.H.O.) won the Grammy Awards for the best salsa album of 2004. Each and every band member of S.H.O. had equally contributed to receive that well deserved and coveted prize. The results of endless hard work had gradually culminated over time.



S.H.O.'s popular band member Chino Nunez had provided the drumming part of the team. The great bandleader Oscar Hernandez, with his always consummate gentleman-type personality expressed his genuine thanks to every one in his band. 2005 had provided a landmark for the S.H.O. musicians. For Pablo Chino Nunez, the year had barely begun. The Grammy Award also marked the official beginning of a strong increase in Chino's already busy schedule. Nearing the completion of his first CD as a bandleader of his own band, Chino is ready to launch yet another era that may propel him into new heights. We catch up with him as he is fresh out of a DVD recording session at Martin Cohen's famous LP studio:

Les Rivera:

Chino, we'd like to congratulate you on a milestone year in your artist career! This is all so great for the salsa world. How do you feel about the all this excitement?

Chino Nunez:

I am totally blown away with the outcome of everything. I keep asking my fiancé Elaine to pinch me to see if I'm dreaming, I just feel truly blessed and honored to be a part of something special and represent my music and culture through my music.

LR: You are now the bandleader of your own band. What's the name of your band?

CN: Simply, Chino Nunez & Friends! I have also been blessed with the friendships of many and of the many years. Not all are musicians; some are from my childhood, and they have given me the encouragement to continue when I have thought about quitting, But in the industry I have friends for over 30 years and this is my tribute to my friends.

LR: Who are some of the regular band members in your new band?

CN: Well as for regulars, I don't think that term exists; unless you're working your butt off with a particular band like Spanish Harlem Orchestra or Jimmy Bosch or Frankie Vazquez y Los Soneros del Barrio. But I will tell you this, when the band I put together takes the stage the bar will be raised one more time, and several notches up! And I welcome anyone to raise it after me as well for the betterment of our music and culture.

This is not a competition; it's what music is about. You saw it with Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez, a Timbalero/Arranger and a Singer/Crooner and not to mention Machito. What a time! I could only imagine how the adrenaline must have been pumping in each musician when they took stage. It's an awesome feeling!

LR: You are close to releasing your new CD. Tell us about the CD.

CN: I didn't know in which direction I wanted to go, but I got together with my best friend, mentor, and partner in crime, Willie Ruiz, as well as the Executive Producer William Melendez. We worked several different ideas as to what should be done, and we went with the following: Some vocalists who are indeed a part of this industry were brought in, and they were reintroduced to their respected fans. They were vocalists Ray Sepulveda and Van Lester, who through unfortunate circumstances have not had an opportunity for air play or a chance to do a solid new project. The very popular Frankie Vazquez was brought in, as well as a young new talent with sonero qualities, Hector Luis Pagan. Pagan currently sings with Conjunto Classico. They are coupled with musicians like Raul Agraz, Willie Ruiz, Pete Nater, Willie Torres, Marcos Bermudes, Oscar Hernandez, Bobby Allende, Marc Quinones, and Mitch Frohman, just to name a few. But there will be other surprises, especially if you love to dance or want to learn to dance! By the way, the title of this production is something I love and forever hold in my heart: Chino Nunez & Friends "It's S.H.O. Time"! I just thought it would be appropriate, since Spanish Harlem Orchestra's abbreviation is S.H.O. Kind a cool, huh (laughing)?

LR: Will you continue playing for S.H.O. as a band member?

CN: Absolutely, unless I'm called into the Board Room and Oscar says "You're fired" (laughing). Just kidding; I have no intentions of leaving S.H.O. at all!

LR: Many people are comparing you to the likes of Tito Puente and other greats. Each artist has his or her own unique style and you have yours. How would you describe the Chino Nunez style of drumming?

CN: A cynical but yet diverse, beyond reason, and temporarily insane musician. Does that give you the full spectrum of my drumming style? Just kidding; I am just being myself. I just love to play man, I love to watch great players and bad ones alike, and you learn from everyone. I'm not into the rudiment thing, or the speed, though I think I hold my own in that department. I am just into my music and the properties needed to make it happen. My idol is Orestes Vilato. My mentor is the Great Tito Puente, and the Late Louie Ramirez, who wasn't a flashy player but was one of my favorites. Some other favorites are Manny Oquendo, Mike Collazo, and Nicky Marrero, whom I owe so much because of their contributions to salsa and the influence on my playing. My colleagues that I par take with and sometimes interchange ideas with are Marc Quinones, Ralph Irizarry, Chago Martinez, Luisito Quintero, Tito Degracias, Karl Perrazo, Bobby Allende, and Bobby Sanabria. But as for putting me into the likes of Tito Puente, I'd like to speak to that person, because I have a bridge I can sell him or her; for cheap too!

Again, just kidding, I am truly humbled by that comparison. But, there will never be another Tito Puente, at least not in my lifetime. He is The King and he will forever be "El Rey Del Timbal". I'll just be the Court Jester, if you don't mind (great laughter).

LR: Do you play other genres of music, such as Latin jazz, jazz, or yet other styles?

CN: I have worked in the Latin jazz & jazz scene here in New York City. I've worked with different artists, such as Randy Brecker, Chris Washburn, Luis Bonilla, Dave Valentine, Patato Valdez, and many more. As for other genres of music most recently I played with Cindy Lauper.

LR: Elaine, your other half, appears to be a great help for you in juggling your busy schedule. Artist-wise, what does she do for you?

CN: Wow, what can I say, Les, I have hit the lottery with this woman! I have been blessed in every sense of the word with Elaine. She is a God sent angel. Elaine has taken me into the world of the internet and has marketed Chino Nunez & Friends; she is my publicist, my website manager, my secretary (pause) with all the benefits, if you know what I mean (laughing). She does it all. Les. She has her day job, she gets home, she cooks, and she cleans. We have two teenaged girls at home, Keisha and Maggie. Keisha is graduating from high school this year, and

she got a full ride to Toledo University. Maggie will also graduate and head for college next year. Lisette is the eldest and she is married with two beautiful children, Sabrina and Raymond Jr. Then Elaine has the task of taking care of me, which is no walk in the park to say so myself. Elaine is the super woman I've always dreamed of having, and I thank God for her everyday.

LR: You are wearing many hats. You are the Musical Director for Ray Sepulveda and Johnny Rivera, you are endorsed by LP, and it appears that you are about to come out with a signature line of sticks for Unigrip. How do you find the time to fulfill all your responsibilities?

CN: It's simple. I drink Café Bustelo (laughing), and I just do what I love and I love what I do! Sleep is an option after the parade; not before.

LR: Your "Rhythmic Construction of a Salsa Tune" video is used by many aspiring artists to learn their trade. You are a drumming instructor at many other capacities as well; one significant one coming up being the West Coast Salsa Congress. There you are scheduled to be an instructor at the Musician's Seminar. How does one become a great drummer?

CN: Practice, practice, practice. As a child I would practice every day, and in the summer time when school was out, I would practice all day. I remember my father would leave to go to work at about 6:30 a.m., and since we owned the house I would be up by like 7 a.m., practice for a half hour and then go to school. When I got home from school I'd practice some more until my father got home from work. After that I would do my homework. The way I see it, it's the same with anything you want to be or want to do (pause) "You must practice to perfect it and nobody is perfect"!

LR: Where were you born and where did you grow up?

CN: I was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico. My biological parents are Andres and Lydia Pena. Adopted by Pablo Nunez Sr. and Margarita Nunez I was raised in Brooklyn, New York, in the Sunset Park Section. Just a little shout-out to all my peeps in Brooklyn!

LR: How did you get started on the drums?

CN: Hitting my mom's pots and pans and then getting hit for it when I broke them. Lesson number one: "Do not hit the pots with a hammer stick"! Lesson number two: Don't break the hammer stick! Now, you just tee'd off your mom and your dad, and that's a lesson well taught. My butt still aches!

LR: What are some milestones for Chino Nunez from humble beginnings as an artist until today?

CN: Playing with Ray Barretto, Tito Puente, Hector Lavoe, Johnny Pacheco, Willie Colon, Oscar DeLeon, Adalberto Santiago, Luis Perico Ortiz, Mon Rivera, Ray Sepulveda, Johnny Rivera, and now Spanish Harlem Orchestra. But my biggest accomplishments were my training grounds with local acts like Conjunto Acere, Caesar y La Ritmica, Amaury y su Tipica Latina, Orchestra Realidad, and many more.

LR: Salsarican.com is a free publication to the service of the salsa world. Every day the salsarican staff gets hundreds of e-mails from worldwide salsa fans, turning to us for answers to about anything and everything salsa. Recently we received an e-mail, inquiring about "that drummer in the S.H.O. band, who was considered by many Japanese as being the greatest drummer in the world today, regardless of any musical genre". This e-mail was kind of "different", as the sender wanted to know if Chino Nunez was Chinese. "Chino" in Spanish means "Chinese". How did you get the nickname "Chino"?

CN: When my mom and dad purchased the house I grew up in, I made friends rather quickly. One in particular by the name of Louie Lamboy looked at me and said "we need to give you a nickname". He looked at me for seconds, and I mean maybe 15 seconds. He made me laugh with his stare, and at that moment he said, "Chino!" From that day on I was Chino.

LR: You have a new website. Tell us about your site, how people can book your band, and how people can contract you.

CN: Well, Elaine my better half designed it and did it for me. And I must say it's awesome. I just love it, especially that song that comes on when you log onto the site. My website address is www.chinonunez.com.

As for booking the band, there is a button called "Bands to Book". In that section (of the website) you will see Ray Sepulveda, Johnny Rivera, Spanish Harlem Orchestra, George Delgado and Chino Nunez & Friends. More bands will be added as we progress with its construction. The "Cool Links Page" also contains the links to a multitude of information from Dance to Merchandise and Performers. The photo gallery is awesome. It has a selection of friends, musicians and family, with links to many more. You can contact me directly for anything ranging from musician's clinics to productions.

LR: Chino, it has been a true pleasure speaking with you. We wish you the best of luck in your new endeavors. We're looking forward to your contributions to the salsa world for many more years to come!

CN: Les, thank you for the contributions you are making to salsa and its culture. It's a true honor to have spent this beautiful moment with you as well as your readers. Thank you! God bless you all, "Y QUE VIVA LA SALSA"!