

Paquito D'Rivera

By Robert McGuire

Paquito D'Rivera, a jazz musician who defected from Cuba several years ago, is known in the musical community for his outspokenness against Fidel Castro. But this reporter hoped to keep a recent interview focused on what jazz fans need to know about D'Rivera's upcoming performance in Milwaukee.

It wasn't a good day to keep art and politics separate, however. Pope John Paul was due to land in Cuba in a few hours, and the world's attention, including D'Rivera's, was focused on the visit.

A Spanish-language news station blared in the background as D'Rivera joked, "I hope this pope helps a little bit with this

(unprintable description of Castro.)"

It all relates to jazz, though, and to the musical freedom D'Rivera sought out when he defected from Cuba in the first place.

His father, a saxophonist, played classical music, but he loved Duke Ellington, Lester Young and Benny Goodman. He played their records on the turntable when D'Rivera was a child. Later, when Castro came to power, D'Rivera listened to jazz programs on the Voice of America radio.

Early interest

About his early interest in studying jazz, D'Rivera said, "We got in trouble for that some years ago. In Cuba, jazz was a

four-letter word. They call it imperialist music.

"It was the same thing in Maoist China and in the Soviet Union. Stalin sent so many jazz people to prison. The same thing happened in Cuba. Now, it's a little more relaxed."

In any case, Cuban jazz appears to be enjoying increased popularity in this country. *Jazziz* magazine devoted most of a recent issue to Cuban musicians, and the Lincoln Center for the Arts in New York held special programs last month in tribute to the music.

Several high-profile American musicians that have made trips to Cuba in recent years have contributed to some of last year's most acclaimed albums. (Notably, "Habana" by Roy Hargrove's *Crisol* and "The Buena Vista Social Club" by an impromptu band of Havana musicians formed when guitarist Ry Cooder traveled to Cuba.)

But when D'Rivera plays next month as part of the annual Hal Leonard Jazz Series at the Pabst Theater, he won't be bringing Cuban jazz to Milwaukee. He'll be bringing what he calls the music for the new world, a blend of many musical styles of the Latin American and Caribbean regions.

A band of all nations

He'll be leading the United Nation Orchestra, a 13-piece ensemble formed in the late 1980s by Dizzy Gillespie. D'Rivera joined the group after his defection. It features musicians from several countries, including the U.S., Cuba and Puerto Rico. After Gillespie's death in 1993, D'Rivera

inherited leadership of the band.

"Dizzy is one of my heroes, and I miss him a lot," D'Rivera said. "When he died, I decided to keep the format (of the United Nation Orchestra) to do it once in awhile. I decided to keep something he was involved in.

"So many people don't know what Latin American music is. I call it the Carmen Miranda syndrome. So many musicians say, 'I play Latin American,' and they don't know what they're talking about. The values of the music have been misrepresented.

"The music of Latin America and the U.S., we all have things in common like a family. We have the same second name, but there are differences between each. A samba and a mambo are different. It's like a hot dog and hamburger. They're both

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common American foods, but they're different."

The latest release

The United Nation Orchestra's latest CD, "Live at the Manchester Craftsman's Guild," which includes much of the music that will be performed the Milwaukee concert, adds Argentinean music to the mix, D'Rivera said.

It also includes more clarinet playing from him. Though he is known as a sax player, his recent albums have increasingly featured him on clarinet.

"It's not a very useful instrument in jazz anymore, so I'm trying to bring it back some," he said.

There's room for clarinet in part because the Milwaukee concert will include saxophonist David Sanchez as a special guest. Sanchez is frequently acclaimed as one of the brightest young lights in the jazz world, and D'Rivera agrees.

"In my opinion, he's one of the best young players around these days," D'Rivera said. "He's good, isn't he? I hope he doesn't play too good, because it's my band."