

*Bo Östen Svensson*

# *An Artist's Bio*

*Bo Östen Svensson Musik 2013*

## **Background**

I was born October 4th 1937 in Växjö, an old city in the south of Sweden.

Since 1954 Uppsala, another old and at the same time very modern city – with a brand new mosque as well as a medieval cathedral\*, with the Ångström Laboratory as well as Carl Linnaeus' own botanic garden, with annual short film, electronic music and guitar festivals as well as three royal mounts\*\* from heathen times – is the base and starting point for my acts and moves. Since 1966 I am totally blind.

1955 I heard for the first time the famous recording of “Manteca” with Dizzy Gillespie, his big band and the Cuban conga-drummer Chano Pozo. Bewitched by the sound from Chano Pozo's drum I went to the local music store, and begged the owner to try to get a conga drum for me. Half a year later I was the enthusiastic owner of a wooden conga drum, with palm trees painted on the side, manufactured in Germany (!). My enthusiasm, however, soon turned into disappointment, when I found out there was no one in Sweden at that time, who could show me how to play it.

1959 I got hold of an LP with the Haitian drum virtuoso TiRoro. With only one drum TiRoro filled a whole LP, from beginning to end, with the most fantastic rhythms. I was bewitched once again.

The following years I kept busy with theatre, playing trap drums in jazz combos, and studying literature and philosophy at Uppsala University – the oldest university in Sweden, founded in 1477.

## **Learning**

1967 – at last – Sabu Martínez entered Sweden. I made him my teacher. He remained so for seven years. He taught me the authentic conga drum technique, the basics of Latin music, and how to play the conga drum in jazz, rock and pop music. Sabu knew Chano Pozo, and when Chano Pozo in the end of 1948 was murdered, it was Sabu who replaced him in Dizzy Gillespie's big band. I could not have come closer to my original inspiration, than I did through Sabu, and Sabu himself became a great inspiration to me, with all his enthusiasm, skill and knowledge, and his experience from having worked with Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey, Max Roach and all the others.

A grant from the Uppsala City made it 1976 possible for me to go to Haiti. I went there together with the internationally known Swedish anthropologist Tore Håkansson\*\*\*. The first morning in Port-au-Prince we visited Sharon Lavinia Yarborough, dancer and drummer, in the dance studio she had taken over from her mother, Lavinia Williams from the Katherine Dunham dance company. While Sharon and I were trading rhythms with each other, someone, suddenly and heavily banged on the front door. Sharon stepped up and opened the door – and there stood: TiRoro! While passing by TiRoro had heard our drumming, and wanted to find out what was going on. From TiRoro I learned a lot of Haitian drumming, and during my second stay in Haiti (1978) also from Gérard Émile, another skilled master drummer. I attended many voodoo ceremonies, and was once even invited to play the sacred drums of the houmfort (voodoo temple).

On my second trip to Haiti I made a stop for six weeks in Brazil, in Salvador, the capital of Bahia, and in Rio de Janeiro. In Salvador I attended the carnival, and studied Afro-Brazilian percussion for Vicente dos Santos\*\*\*\*, at the time Zeze Mota's percussionist, and for the drummers working at the dance department at Bahia's federal university. In Salvador I also attended a candomblé ceremony. During these six weeks I was fortunate to meet many of the top artists in Brazilian music: Zeze Mota, Nana Caymí, Elise Regina, Gilberto Gil, Francis Hymes and Morais Moreira. The "tropicalismo" has ever since deeply influenced my music philosophy.

The summers 1981, 1984 and 1986 I studied at Drummer's Collective in New York – conga drums for Little Ray Romero and Frankie Malabe, bongo drums for Little Ray Romero, Steve Beríos and Pablo Rosario, timbales for Jimmy Iglesias, Pablo Rosario and Mario Grillo (Machito's son), the art of playing five conga drums for Eddie Bobe, and Brazilian percussion for Manuel Monteiro and Cyro Baptista.

Later I have taken some lessons from Miguel "Angá" Díaz, to broaden my knowledge of Afro-Cuban rhythms, and some from Mestre Jorge Martín, to get the basics of maracatu, a carnival rhythm from the north-east of Brazil.

## **Playing**

1973 Sabu Martínez formed a group called Afro Temple. I was one of the members. We opened in March with recording an LP and closed in December by giving a live performance broadcast by the Swedish radio. The musicians were enthusiastic, but the audience and the media were mostly confused – they didn't know what to listen for. Nothing happened until twenty years later, when Sabu had been dead for more than ten years – then the LP/CD became a cult album in London and Japan.

2008-2009 Stefan Dimle, the owner of Mellotronen, released four cd:s with previously unreleased recordings with Sabu. I played on two of these cd:s – Burned Sugar and The Dalecarlia Recordings. The release party for The Dalecarlia Recordings took place December 12<sup>th</sup> 2009, at night club Bolange in Borlänge, a dalecarlian city, exactly 30 years after Sabu's last recording session. At this release party some of the musicians who had played with Sabu – organ player Pierre Swärd, drummers John Haglund, Conny Lundström, René Martínez (Sabu's youngest son) and myself – performed.

1973-1992 I worked as an accompanist in dance studios in Uppsala, Stockholm and Port-au-Prince, some periods part time, some periods full time. This work gave me a steady income. One of the dance teachers I worked for in Uppsala was Richardena Swallow, known as Richardena Jackson in the Katherine Dunham dance company, a good friend of Lavinia Williams'. Once Richardena choreographed a voodoo ceremony. Without telling me, until afterwards, she changed some of the original steps, not to provoke the gods. Without telling her, until afterwards, I changed some of the original beats, not to provoke the gods.

1977 and 1979-80 I was a member of Saudade, a sextet with musicians from my home city. In our repertoire we combined contemporary jazz and funk with ethnic material I had brought with me from Haiti and Brazil.

1983 I formed my own samba group: Império do Gustavo Wasa. I started with twelve percussionists, taking care of the rhythm, and three trumpets, two trombones and a tuba, taking care of the melodies. When I, a couple of years later, managed to get a cavaquinho, a Brazilian mini-guitar common in samba, I let a lead singer and a vocal duo take over the melodies. During the Swedish samba boom in the end of the 1980s, we were sometimes up to fifty percussionists, and we were the first samba group in Sweden using a mobile PA system in the street parades. These years we often collaborated with Carlos Heleno da Silva, originally from Rio de Janeiro, and his samba group Bananas. 1988 I was awarded by Uppsala County Council for my work with Império do Gustavo Wasa, and given the title “Sambassador”.

1993-1994 I also led the Swedish Choro Ensemble, and was 1996-1997 a member of Silvia Gonçalves de Souza’s Capimsanto. Choro is a Brazilian instrumental music – born in the middle of the nineteenth century in the meeting European polka and African lundu. Capimsanto played folk music from the north east of Brazil. In Império do Gustavo Wasa I mostly play the surdo, the huge bass drum, the heart beat of the samba. In the Swedish Choro Ensemble and Capimsanto I got an opportunity to exercise some of the minor percussion instruments I have studied – pandeiro, agogo, reco-reco and so on.

1994-2003 I played the conga drums in Orquesta Vásquez, a thirteen-piece salsa band led by the Colombian band leader Rodrigo Vásquez, and mostly performing for the many Latin communities which nowadays exists all over Sweden.

2006 I performed twice with Ulf Johansson Werre and his Tellus Music Ensemble, in which he has assembled musicians from various parts of the world, playing music he has written especially for this ensemble. The ensemble made its debut the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, on Sweden’s national commemoration day, participating in the official ceremony, in which Uppsala City greeted those who had become Swedish citizens during the last year.

Three times I have performed in presence of the *King and Queen of Sweden*. Last time was 1993 in Uppsala Cathedral, when the Church of Sweden celebrated its 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

## **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Afro Temple**

1999 I had found enough many musicians interested in the ideas behind Sabu Martínez Afro Temple, to make it possible to form the 2<sup>nd</sup> Afro Temple: A new music on an old foundation, new rhythm patterns and new melodies built on the Afro-Cuban, Afro-Haitian, and Afro-Brazilian traditions, where the connection between rhythm and melody is as important as the connection between harmony and melody. We have mostly performed in art galleries, museums and theatres.

## **Ensemble Dakar**

Ensemble Dakar was in the beginning a smaller group within The 2<sup>nd</sup> Afro Temple. Today it is an ensemble with its own repertoire consisting of soprano saxophone, balafon, marimbula and udo-drum.

## **Big Bands**

My *big band* experience is limited. 1973 I substituted one day for Sabu Martínez in Peter Herbolzheimer's Rhythm Combination & Brass. That was the day RC & B recorded jingles for German TV, which should finance the LP "Wide Open", that was recorded the following days. That was in Hilversum, Holland. 1983 I toured one week with Omnibus Big Band – including a French horn as well as a tuba, and led by trombonist, composer and arranger Runo Ericksson. We played music by Chick Corea and (!) Peter Herbolzheimer. Omnibus Big Band was one of four orchestras employed by Uppsala County Council. 1998-2003 I appeared a dozen times with Basic Big Band and various choirs performing Duke Ellington's "Sacred Concert". I was featured soloist in "David danced before the Lord", where my conga drums replaced the original tap dancer. We performed mostly in and around Stockholm - always in churches.

## **Duos**

I have twice experimented with the *duo format*, first time (1982) with pianist Anders Bromander, playing compositions by Abdullah Ibrahim and Anders himself, second time (1988-1989) with vibraphonist Peter Reinholdsson, mostly playing compositions by Mongo Santamaría.

## **Solo performances**

I now and then do *solo performances*, giving a survey of Afro-Cuban, Afro-Haitian and Afro-Brazilian drums and drumming.

2011 I did two solo performances, both at the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, playing authentic voodoo rhythms on my haitian petro drum in the tradition of TiRoro.

## **Crossover**

The most fascinating *crossover project* I have participated in, was initiated by Tore Håkansson. It was a series of concerts pianists Solveig and Bertil Wikman and I gave in 1980 in Stockholm with music by Louis Moreau Gottschalk\*\*\*\*\*. We chose those pieces for piano in which his musical background is most obvious. I realized the drum patterns that are implied in the music.

## **Poetry and jazz**

My interest in literature – especially poetry – and my interest in music, met in *poetry & jazz*, that was developed in the 1950s. 1971 and 1991 I collaborated with actors from Uppsala City Theatre in two performances with poetry and drums from the Caribbean. On one of the tracks on Sabu Martínez' LP/CD "Afro Temple" bassist Red Mitchell is doing his poem "Wounded Knee", accompanied by five drummers. 2005 the whole 2nd Afro Temple was involved in three performances at the Regina Theatre in Uppsala with poems by famous African writers and music by me, reflecting the history, landscapes and music of Africa – from Carthago to Cape Town.

## **Composing**

I have written music since 1957, mostly for theatre and dance performances, mostly for various combinations of percussion instruments, mostly in a minimalistic style.

2002 I wrote and arranged music for William Shakespeare's "A Midsummernight's Dream", put on stage by Daniel Cramér with Theatre Monsun. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Afro Temple, in the centre of the stage, was both the orchestra playing the music, and the forest in which the young couples got lost.

These last years I have concentrated on writing a new repertoire for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Afro Temple, that suites this ensembles instrumentation. This music is based on scales, like traditional Oriental and African music, and not on chord progressions like Western music. It includes not only melody and bass lines, but also percussion lines, and lines for three, four or five conga drums, where the pitch and melody harmonize with the melody lines and the bass lines.

## **Teaching**

Since 1979 I have taught Latin percussion and lectured on the African heritage in the Americas, all over Sweden, and in Haiti and Brazil. For a couple of years in the 1980s I was also a teacher at the Royal Music Academy in Stockholm.

## **Business and politics**

1990 I started my own firm: Bo Östen Svensson Musik. 2004 I started my own record label: Estheticon.

1993-1994 I was a member of the board for Uppsala Art Museum. Since 1995 I am a member of Uppsala City Cultural Affairs' Board.

Uppsala, in January 2013

*Bo Östen Svensson*

## **Selected discography**

"The Dalecarlia Recordings", Sabu Martínez (2009)

"Burned Sugar", Sabu Martínez (2008)

"Deserts of Africa", Bo Östen Svensson & The 2<sup>nd</sup> Afro Temple (2005)

“WildOscar n d Kraazy F’s”, WildOscar n d Kraazy F’s (2003)  
“Latin beats. A tribute to Tito Puente”, track 1. (2000)  
“Oi Mamme”, Katarina Hellgren (2000)  
“Här är en Samba till Dej”, Samba group Bananas with Eleonor (1986)  
”Afro Temple”, Sabu Martínez (1973)

See also:

[www.boostensvenssonmusik.se](http://www.boostensvenssonmusik.se) (only in Swedish)

[www.afrotemple.com](http://www.afrotemple.com)

## Notes

\* All musicians performing at Uppsala International Reggae Festival use to visit this cathedral to have a look at the chandelier, that Haile Selassie donated to the cathedral, when he visited Uppsala and Sweden in 1924.

\*\* The three Royal mounts was a place of pilgrimage for Moondog, “The Viking of the Sixth Avenue”.

\*\*\* Tore Håkansson has mentioned this visit in his autobiography “Mina första nittio år” (My first ninety years). Skellefteå 2005.

\*\*\*\* The year before I visited Salvador, Vicente dos Santos guided the Austrian musicologist Gerhard Kubik in Afro-Brazilian music. See “Angolan traits in Black music, games and dances of Brazil: a study of African cultural extensions overseas” by Gerhard Kubik. Lisboa 1979.

\*\*\*\*\* Louis Moreau Gottschalk was born 1829 in New Orleans, and died 1869 in Rio de Janeiro. When he was fourteen, his family sent him to Paris, where he was supposed to receive musical education. The “directeur” of the conservatory however, did not admit him, stating that “a person from the new world” could not possibly be musically gifted. Young Louis, never the less, remained in Paris for several years, made friends with Chopin, Liszt and Bérlioz, and became an admired piano virtuoso. Inspired by Chopin and Liszt, who utilized the musical heritage of their home countries, Poland and Hungary, as material for their composing, Louis began to utilize the musical heritage of his home region, Louisiana and the Caribbean. From Bérlioz he got the taste for mega big orchestras. Shortly before he died, he organized a street parade in Rio de Janeiro with more than a thousand musicians. Since this happened only a little more than a decade before the samba – rhythm and dance – came to Rio from Bahia, it is not unlikely that Bérlioz through Louis Moreau Gottschalk, has had an impact on the samba carnival in Rio.