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# JazzTimes

AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

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**TISZJI MUÑOZ**  
The Guru of Jazz Guitar

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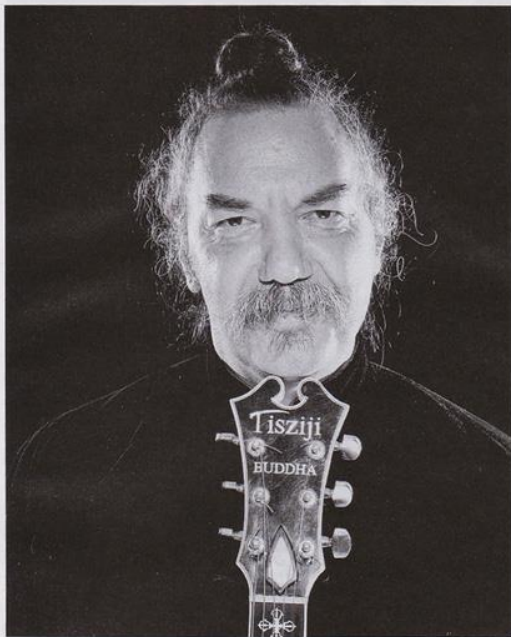
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**Miles at Newport**  
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By Brad Farberman



## TISZIJI MUÑOZ

AT PEACE, BUT NEVER AT REST

Here's something funny: In the early '60s, the guitarist Tisziji Muñoz sang in a doo-wop outfit called the Arrogants. This isn't humorous for any musical reason; vocal groups aren't chuckle-worthy, and there's nothing inherently comical about a teenage baritone who evolves into jazz guitar's best answer to John Coltrane. Instead, the laughs are generated by the ensemble's moniker in relation to everything Muñoz stands for. In 1984, after a decade on the New York jazz scene, working primarily in the employ of saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, Muñoz retreated upstate to live a monk-like existence. His song titles include "No Self, No Thought, No Mind" and "Gracious," and he quietly self-releases his music on a label called Anami, which means "nameless" in Sanskrit. This is a man who sees himself as one with the universe, not the center of it.

That's not to say he's timid, or unambitious. In addition to Sanders, Muñoz has worked with jazz greats like Rashied Ali, Ravi Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, John Medeski, Marilyn Crispell and Dave Liebman. And he clearly feels his music is worth hearing. Obsessively prolific, he has released nearly 60 albums as a leader or co-leader. So far, he's put out four albums this year: the rowdy *The Paradox of Friendship*, featuring bassist Don Pate, drummers Adam Benham and Tony Falco and former *Late Show With David Letterman* pianist and musical director Paul Shaffer, a frequent collaborator over the years; *Spirit First and Last*, a blis-

tering live date from 2004 with Pate, Falco, pianist Greg Murphy and second drummer Ra-Kalam Bob Moses; the peacefully chaotic *Genius Awakening*, with Pate, Moses and pianist Chris Caswell; and the full-tilt *Space of Fire*, a collaboration with the Canadian musicians Bernie Senensky (piano), George Koller (bass) and Greg Pilo (drums). So Muñoz is a fascinating contradiction: as giving as they come yet constantly pushing his unique spiritual vision, rooted in his devotion to Eastern religion. He is at peace, but never at rest.

Muñoz, 68, was born and raised in a Puerto Rican family in Brooklyn, not always peacefully. Almost from the start, life and music required tremendous determination and inner-strength. At age 5, Muñoz was pushed through a ground-floor window by a roughhousing cousin. While climbing back inside, a piece of glass severed an artery in his left wrist—an injury from which he has never fully recovered. "I had to be brought to a certain threshold of pain and suffering for me to come to terms with the fact that whatever I played was painful, was heart-related and had to be important; it had to be meaningful to me," says Muñoz, seated in a barn on his property in New York's Hudson Valley.

"[Everything I played] had to count; it wasn't casual," he continues. "It was intense, because even now I can only play a little bit—even now, after all these years of this chronic pain condition and nerve damage." His injury made chordal playing tortuous, so to compensate Muñoz developed his trademarked style: soaring, overdriven single-note lines—even single-string lines—most often deployed over modal forms.

Despite the pain, Muñoz persevered. Under his father's tutelage he became an adept Latin percussionist as a boy. In his teens he sang (and played ukulele) in the Arrogants, touring California and recording. In 1968, after four years in the Army, he was asked to play guitar in the Army band, essentially learning the instrument on the job. He left the Army altogether a year later, settling in Canada for the next half-decade—Toronto first, then Vancouver—and it was there that things started to happen. One gig found him playing drums for guitarist Sonny Greenwich at the famed Massey Hall, on a bill with Miles Davis. Another day saw him join Joe Henderson's band for two shows. Stanley Clarke and Lenny White, then sidemen with Henderson, stumbled upon an R&B gig Muñoz was on and promptly dragged the guitarist to their matinee. Muñoz played the evening show, too, in a band completed by pianist George Cables. "[Stanley and Lenny] were doing the rounds, and they heard me playing," remembers Muñoz. "They said, 'You gotta stop. You're coming with us.' And I didn't know who they were. They said, 'No, you're coming with us. Unplug him. Let's go. Get him out. Let's get in the cab.'"

It was also in Canada that Muñoz encountered Shaffer, then

### Recommended Listening:

Pharoah Sanders  
*Pharoah* (India Navigation, 1977)

Tisziji Muñoz  
*Spirit World* (Anami, 1998)

Tisziji Muñoz/Lam-Sobo John Medeski  
*Songs of Soundlessness* (Anami, 2014)

Tisziji Muñoz  
*Spirit First and Last* (Anami, 2015)

a student at the University of Toronto, and became a mentor to the budding pianist. "I wanted him to play more," says Muñoz. "I recognized a gift in him, because he had a very profound need to play, because he was suffering. He was really hurtin'. He said he was confused and lost. He was ripe for what I was doing. When I introduced him to my music, he said, 'I can't play it, but I gotta play it.' I saw in him a light."

In 1974, Muñoz left Canada to return home to New York City—"I knew there was more for me," he says—and fell in with Sanders. Bassist Calvin Hill introduced Muñoz to Sanders at the Village Vanguard, and the saxophonist invited the guitarist to sit in. Muñoz went back to Brooklyn, grabbed his ax and got onstage: "So the main test there was, he brought me up to the bandstand and he played some changes," remembers Muñoz. "And he says, 'Can you put a melody on this at the beginning of the next set?' And I said, 'Yeah, I can.' He had [pianist] Joe Bonner play the chords and he said, 'You're on.' I put a melody on it, and he says, 'You're in.'"

At first Muñoz declined the offer—he had three children to take care of—but after two more gigs he accepted. The guitarist found a champion in Sanders, and the pair can be heard together on what Muñoz thinks must be his only record as a sideman, Sanders' 1977 LP *Pharoah*. Sanders has appeared on more than a half-dozen albums by Muñoz, highlighted by 1998's *Spirit World* and last year's *Mountain Peak*. "I enabled him to do things that he did with Trane," says Muñoz. "We could keep it that open forever. And he said it was fresh, it was always fresh. It was creative. Often when

we'd play, when I was in his band, he'd sit in the front and he'd say, 'Yeah, I wanna hear you play, man.' So he was really a fan of mine."

Muñoz has paid that kindness and enthusiasm back through his relationship with keyboardist John Medeski. The two first played together while Medeski was a student at New England Conservatory, years before Medeski Martin & Wood would form. (The trio covered Muñoz's "God-Fire" on its 2008 album *Radiolarians I*.) Muñoz and Medeski have recorded as a duo and co-led a number of dates, the most recent of which, last year's *Songs of Soundlessness*—a quartet disc billed to Muñoz and "Lam-Sobo John Medeski"—is sensitive and slow-burning. "It's been inspiring in terms of getting deeper into my own music and my own voice as a musician," says Medeski. "Just feeling freer to do that. ... So many musicians are just caricatures of themselves as they get older. That's never been what I've wanted to do or what's important to me. I'm not really worried about maintaining anything. For me, it's always about the music and wanting to keep the music growing and getting better and going deeper: That's what Tisziji likes to do and what he does. I'm just inspired to connect deeper in my own music and my own life. It's been encouraging."

More than just a guitarist or an advocate for other musicians, Muñoz sees himself as a force for good. But that's just part of the job description. "We wonder. We have to wonder," he says at the mention of the police brutality that has caused so much turmoil in the U.S. over the past year. "It's up to the artist to hold their light, hold it up and add to the light that's needed out here. The politics aside, we need more light out here." **JT**