

Flying into Rotterdam, you might easily mistake it for Venice. Water flows in all directions before pointing to the sea. Thirteenth century dams protect the intricate labyrinth of canals that have shaped the city's dynamic history as one of the busiest ports in the world. Nothing feels stationary in Rotterdam. Culture flows like its water ways - a constant catalyst for adventurers like the Dutch multi-percussionist Steven Brezet, and music like his new album *World Traveler*.

Powered for centuries by Dutch colonial enterprise, contemporary Rotterdam maintains one of the most diverse populations in Europe. Known as the "*Dutch Brooklyn*," this elegant and gritty place is the product of a unique confluence of African, Arab, Asian and European influences. Culturally celebrated for its concert halls, orchestras, festivals, and vibrant experimental music scene, Rotterdam is also home to a remarkably rich tradition of nurturing all things salsa.

Joined at the hip, drummers and dancers live to engage in an ancient tug-o-war; the blending of sound and motion accentuating musical stories that can be hundreds of years in the making. In my own childhood, that took the shape of exhilarating battles between the wit of the darkuba drum, and the fluid response from mischievous belly dancers. In Brezet's early years, it was watching his mother embrace the power and elegance of Senegalese dance, eventually taking djembe lessons from master percussionist Aly Ndiaye Rose.

Classes grounded an early desire to make everything percussive. "When I was a kid, I was already hitting things, and it was terrible for everybody," Brezet remembers, "but in school, there was one teacher that said to me I was only allowed to hit the table and not the others, because he liked it so much." Gifted and perpetually curious, he branched out to discover and eventually master a variety of instruments including congas, bongos, timbales, timbau, quinto and sabar, the traditional drum from Senegal. Traveling to Guinea, Senegal, Maroc, Curacao and extended time in Brazil during Carnival, Brezet sought to connect sacred rhythms to the communities that have cultivated their survival for generations.

"The breaking thing was my travel," Brezet told me. "Then I felt for the first time what was happening there. I saw the poverty of the people, but also I saw the parties in the streets and the playing there, and that was life changing." Living and playing music in these neighborhoods galvanized the humility Brezet brings to his craft, and the preeminence of Latin, Brazilian and Africa musical traditions are to his music. By high school he landed in the band Koffie (Dutch for coffee) and quickly realized that music and dance were central to his life's work: exploring and celebrating the percussive quality of "*levenskracht*," the Dutch philosophy of life power, and spreading this tranquil state of joy to audiences around the world.



Playing with Koffie, and groups like Banda Magda, The Re:Freshed Orchestra, The Bill Laurance Group, and the super-band Snarky Puppy, Brezet developed his skills mastering the authenticity of various rhythms and integrating them into cutting edge fusion. Mixing funk with Afrobeat, Brezet's first album *The Arrival* is a perfect example of that. "Everything you do, if you want to touch people in their

hearts, must be super clear," Brezet's fond of saying, as well as that percussion in salsa "should be as clear as a clarinet," as the popular Cuban adage goes. To that end, Steven Brezet has worked hard to make himself very, very clear, crafting *World Traveler* into a phenomenal salsa album that will keep you dancing and your soul refreshed for days on end.

World Traveler launches into this *salsa dura* joyride with Brezet's anthem *Callejeros Del Tambor* (Warriors of the Drum). Percussive volleys introduce a tune that uses the "wrong" side of the clave within a traditional Guaguancó,

adding a hint of tension to the melodic opening before settling into a dynamic simmer of horns, Irving Manuel's vocal invocations and sparkling solos by Brezet and *timbalero* Luisito Quintero. Swinging old school with some new school flare, *El Nuevo Sabor* (The New Flavor) is a slow rumba flirting with a Boogaloo beat, the perfect mid range tempo for dancers seeking to flaunt their agility.

Esta Es Mi Rumba (This is My Rumba) is pure ear candy, an addictive tune highlighted by the lyrical partnership of Angel Vallenilla and Oscar Cordero. Steering the song through its nimble arrangement, vocalist Marcial Isturiz surfs the energy behind the fiery enthusiasm of horns and percussion, all grounded by the steady hand of bassist Samuel Ruiz and the melodic punctuation of baritone saxophonist Felipe Castro. Good luck getting this one out of your head. But honestly, you won't want to.

Next up is the percussive tour de force *Lo Que Traigo Pa Ti Es Descarga* (What I Bring For You Is This Jam), Brezet's nod to the musicality guest artists bring to *World Traveler*. Solos by percussionists Little Johnny Rivero, Weedie Braimah, Orlando Poleo, Pedrito Martinez and Nate Werth percolate the track with bari-sax specialist Sylvester Uzoma Onyejiaka II having his say before the tune slides to a halt. Before you can catch your breath, *Verlos Bailar* (See Them Dance) leaps out to keep you dancing; the chorus "*With my swing and with my taste, let's dance!*," Brezet's inside joke about being Dutch but still knowing how to swing within Latin music.

"Thank you, simply thank you, for the Latin music in my heart!" begins the chorus that speaks to the core of *My Teacher*, Brezet's tribute to all those who have supported his musical education and consider him a European

"ambassador" for their cultures. If it takes a village to produce an outstanding percussionist, then this song honors that by incorporating rhythms from San Millán and Puerto Cabello in Venezuela, and Brasil's Salvador Da Bahia region.

Briefly slowing to make light of Cuba's lovely *songo* beat, *Sentir Tu Piel* (Feel Your Skin) is another homage to Brezet's love of Latin music and how it helped him through a global pandemic that brought live performance to a standstill. Oscar Cordero arranged the song as a "montage" transcribed from stories Brezet shared about his life long musical journey. Celebrating Latin culture in Rotterdam in a fashion legendary salsa dura bassist and bandleader Bobby Valentine would appreciate, the album closes with *La Holandesa*, featuring the rich and uniquely percussive style of Venezuelan vocalist Elvin Vivencias.

Salsa is an extraordinarily disciplined and rigorous musical genre revered worldwide by faithful audiences that often know every band, musician and song that makes up their musical universe. What makes salsa unique, and at

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times transcendent, is the miracle of managing all the components that make great bands swing. Sophisticated arrangements, stellar percussive unity, brilliant instrumentalists, and powerful soneros, all propelled by the raw energy of Afro-Latin artistry. Artists balance salsa's styles with their inherent flexibility, understanding that while sacred traditions are open to interpretation, that happens only through respect, mastery and thoughtful collaboration.

World Traveler deserves repeat spins on your turntable not just because it swings so hard that you might have to bolt your speakers to the floor, but because Brezet has encrypted this music with subtle innovations that speak to more great things to come. Believing "music needs innovation and to be refreshed but with respect for the tradition," is why you'll find *World Traveler* so meticulously designed, sprinkled with djembe and timbau solos, and Brezet working with veteran Venezuelan musician Oscar "*Chucky*" Cordero to charge maximum wattage into every composition.

What a quintessentially Dutch thing to do. Build something new by becoming a catalyst for rhythmic traditions that all share the same source. Speaking four languages, and many more musically, Brezet sees himself as "a kind of connector of genres," someone keenly aware "of how to mix languages and styles." Humble, sincere and gifted, Brezet is committed to deciphering the morse code of African Diasporic spirituality using rhythmic devices that have endured hundreds of years to create *World Traveler*, a glorious celebration of drumming, dance and *levenskracht* for us all.



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