

## What a Difference a Day Makes - My Day With Gato Barbieri

By William F. Greenhalgh

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On May 15, 2004, I was accorded a rare and wonderful opportunity to spend a day with one of the all-time greats in jazz, Gato Barbieri, in conjunction with a performance he and his band gave that evening at the Uptown Theatre in Washington, Pennsylvania. The Uptown is owned and operated by my former college roommate and close friend, Dan Dye. It is a beautiful 500 seat theater recently restored and redecorated by Dan with fine acoustics for live music. Dan had invited me to fill the role of Gato's personal assistant that day per the terms of Gato's performance contract. It was a job I was more than happy to accept.

By way of background, I am a 50 year old attorney living about 40 miles Northwest of Madison, Wisconsin. I am married with four sons, one of whom is six years old, the same age as Christian Barbieri. More on that later. I attended college in the early 1970's at Princeton University where I met Dan. While in college, my one extracurricular activity was participating as a staff member of WPRB-FM, Princeton University's 50,000 watt radio station. I was a disc jockey for all four years of my undergraduate career, and on my show I played the gamut of progressive rock and jazz music of the day.

One day in early 1972, the station's chief of programming, Chuck Mitchell, tipped me off to a Gato concert that was going to be held that evening at a very small theater on campus. I had not heard of Gato before then, but Chuck said it would be very good and that I should definitely go. I went to the second show that evening which started around 11:30. I'll always be grateful for Chuck's tip. That evening I saw Gato perform with his band, featuring Lonnie Liston Smith on acoustic and electric pianos, Stanley Clarke on acoustic bass, Airto Moriera on drums and percussion, and James M'tume on congas. They were awesome, playing about two hours of absolutely enthralling, cooking jazz numbers which I later learned could be found on Gato's *Fenix* and *El Pampero* albums.

From that night on, I was hooked. I collected many of Gato's albums and saw him perform as often as I could, including several performances in New York at the Bottom Line and one especially memorable show at Carnegie Hall featuring the large ensemble Gato had put together for his *Chapter One: Latin America* album. I played his records often on my radio shows, and I enjoyed turning all my friends on to his music, both at Princeton and at home in Wisconsin.

In May of 1975, I was winding up my senior year in college. Dan was now station manager of WPRB, and I was one of the prime-time evening DJs. We decided to book a Gato concert as a fundraiser for the station. The show was held at Alexander Hall on the Princeton campus, which seated in those days about 1,000. I was the MC, and I got to meet Gato then along with his wife, Michelle. It was a little intimidating; Gato was all

aloof coolness and not easy to communicate with, but his show was great. He even did an encore which was rare for him in those days. After the show, he told me the music sounded beautiful to him.

The last time I saw him perform was at the Santa Monica Civic Center in California in about 1977. I was attending law school at UCLA. *Caliente* had made Gato a big star in the jazz world by then. I remember being disappointed with his show, however. He was playing too much “smooth jazz” with little of the fire that made him so special, and his band didn’t have any stars in it anymore.

Six years after law school, I returned to Wisconsin to raise a family. As the years passed by, I lost track of Gato. To be honest, I thought I would probably never hear him perform again. Now I know he went through a long period of inactivity following the death of Michelle and his subsequent heart attack. In 1998, a friend of mine turned me on to Gato’s first new disc in many years, *Que Pasa*. It was great to hear Gato’s sweet sax again.

In January 2002, my dear friend Dan suffered a major heart attack from which he was lucky to survive. This forced him make a lot of changes, including retirement from a very successful career in venture capital. To “have something to do,” Dan took on a very ambitious project, acquiring and refurbishing the Uptown Theatre, which had been closed for many years, in downtown Washington, PA. Since September of last year, Dan’s theater has played host to over 120 live performances of all types of music, including jazz, gospel, rock, reggae, and Western swing.

In February, I got an excited phone call at home from Dan. He had just booked Gato Barbieri for a show at the Uptown on May 15. He implored me to come, telling me he needed someone as Gato’s “assistant” under the contract. It took me all of about three seconds to say yes, of course I would come and help.

I flew into Pittsburgh on May 14 and stayed at my mother-in-law’s house that evening. On Saturday, May 15, I arrived at the Uptown around 11:30 that morning with my brother-in-law, Jay Closser, also a huge Gato fan, to meet with Dan. We were soon off to the limo service where we received hilariously detailed instructions on how to pick up Gato and his band at the airport and get them to their hotel. Actually all that was involved was just meeting them at the baggage claim area, getting them out to the curb, and calling for the limo and van, but you would have thought we had signed on to some top-secret complex government assignment.

Next, Jay and I were off in the chauffeured limo for the airport. The limo was for me, Jay, and Gato. A chauffeured van for the band members followed close behind. We arrived at the Pittsburgh International Airport about twenty minutes ahead of Gato’s scheduled arrival time of about 1:30. After grabbing a quick sandwich, we waited for a few minutes at the bottom of the escalators by the baggage claim area for our guests. Jay was off at one escalator out of my sight. By luck of the draw, Gato and his band soon descended down the escalator where I was waiting. He was easy to spot with his

trademark hat, long scarf and glasses. He was surrounded by his young and very pleasant band members, Roberto, the percussionist, Mario Rodriguez, the bass player, Mark Soskin, the keyboard player, and Diego, his drummer.

I had been boning up on my Spanish for a couple weeks prior to the show so I could converse a little with Gato in his native tongue. Dan had been told Gato always appreciated that. I approached everyone, and my carefully rehearsed introduction went flying out the window in the excitement of seeing Gato and being greeted warmly by him and the other musicians. Gato was much more diminutive than I remembered him to be, but he looked directly at me and introduced himself in a very friendly manner, saying “I am Gato” (as if I didn’t already know).

Regaining a little of my composure, I began speaking in Spanish with him, explaining that I was a friend of the owner of the theater, and that I was here to help take him to the hotel. I must have done a good job, because Gato, thinking I could speak fluently, then launched into a conversation with me entirely in Spanish. Fortunately, my recent brush-up in Spanish actually allowed me to understand most of what he was saying. He told me how he had recently returned from playing in Milan, Italy, but that he and his band had just performed even better shows the last few days in New York. By now we were at the baggage claim area, and Gato asked me a question in Spanish I did not understand. At that point, I confessed, “Gato, yo no habla espanol muy bien,” to which he very warmly responded in English, “That’s OK, we mix,” meaning that for the rest of the day we would converse in a blend of English and Spanish.

By now, I was pleasantly surprised and grateful at how warm and friendly Gato was. Knowing about Gato’s young son, Christian, I mentioned to him that we had something in common. We both had six-year old sons. He was very intrigued at that and immediately pulled out his wallet to show me a couple very beautiful professional black and white photo portraits of Christian. What a handsome boy! I got out photos of my sons from my wallet, and all of a sudden there we were, two proud Dads showing off their boys to each other. Gato had to chuckle a little saying this made him feel like he was in his thirties again. I showed him the photo of my youngest son, and he asked what his name was. I told him Jeffrey, and Gato exclaimed, “Jeffrey!” much like I would imagine my late father would have done.

The band members, having gotten their bags by now, went off with Jay to the curbside. Mario had mentioned to me discreetly that Gato sometimes appreciated others carrying his saxophone case. I eagerly followed his suggestion, taking up Gato’s green saxophone case and walking out with Gato a little behind the others. By now, I was telling Gato that I had seen him perform many times and that I had always loved his music. Gato told me how happy he was to perform again these days, declaring that he was not going to make any more records. Pointing to his chest, he said that what he loved about performing was that in concert, HE was in control, and that he got to play what HE wanted to play, not what someone else wanted. That evening, I got to see what he meant.

Once we were in the limo, Jay, Gato, and I relaxed and embarked on a wide-ranging conversation that covered among other things, Gato's childhood and musical training, career highlights, his physical setbacks and current limitations, and his love of professional basketball and baseball. We talked about his life as the father of a six-year old boy living in a high-rise New York apartment looking out over Central Park, and about many of the musicians he has performed with over the years. He shared with us his philosophy on his art and described one of his latest compositions, "*Life and Death*." We talked about the movies, including "*Last Tango in Paris*," and about visiting Argentina these days.

Fortunately for me, our limo and van drivers had been told by police at the airport not to take the freeway back down to the hotel because of a major backup caused by an accident. So instead, they attempted to navigate some back roads. At this they were hopelessly inept and soon became lost. The result was what should have been about a forty-five minute ride turned into a two-hour limo cruise through the hills and valleys of rural Western Pennsylvania with me, one of my best friends in all the world, Jay, and Gato Barbieri! It was an experience that was somewhat hard to believe was really happening, but I loved every minute.

Gato told us his father wanted him to be a lawyer, but young Leandro Barbieri showed promise as a musician at a very early age. When he was about ten, Gato told his father he wanted to be a musician when he grew up. His father wept at the news, but the family then pulled Gato out of school in Argentina after sixth grade so he could concentrate on his musical studies. Gato said he first trained on the clarinet, but then studied the saxophone. He said he was very fortunate to have a tremendous saxophone teacher in Buenos Aires; he said the man was absolutely fantastic and taught him very well. One of the things he taught Gato was how to maintain his saxophone, emphasizing how important this was and that he should be the only one to ever work on his own instrument. Gato said he follows this advice to this day, that no one touches his saxophone except him, and that is why it always sounds just right. He confessed, however, that his macular degenerative disease is making it more difficult for him to do that.

Gato was very upfront about his current health problems. He said his eyesight is failing, and that he could no longer read text or write music. Sitting across from him about four feet in the limo, Gato said I was a big blur, but that he could clearly see Jay, who was sitting next to him on his right. He also told us he had a major heart attack about a month after his first wife's death which resulted in a triple bypass operation. This left him very depressed for a long time. He said eventually he came out of that, but that he suffers from memory loss and some loss of hearing.

He clearly still has a passion for his art, however, and I sensed this is what keeps him going along with his family life. In a declaration he later repeated to the audience that evening, he told us, "I can play jazz, but I don't play jazz; I can play Latin music, but I don't play Latin music; I play LIFE." He then explained once of his most recent compositions, "*Life and Death*." The song is in two parts; the first part is happy and

festive, then after a two beat break, the music becomes somber. It is about a group of friends who get together to talk about a good friend who has recently died. He later performed the song at the concert that evening. It was a very interesting composition, made much more enjoyable for me by Gato's explanation.

At about that point, I made the only mistake in questioning him that day when I asked him what he usually plays these days in his shows. Ever the artist, he quickly veered off the topic, saying he played whatever the mood of the evening dictated.

What fun it was to talk with Gato about some of his key performances and the musicians he has known and played with! At one point, he brought up the magical night in Montreux when he performed the "Swiss Suite" under the direction of Oliver Nelson and the "El Pampero" set much later that evening. He told me how another tenor sax player, Lucky Thompson, told Oliver Nelson that if Gato was on the stage for "Swiss Suite," Thompson wouldn't play. Nelson told him to take a hike. We talked about the band he had when I first saw him perform. At the mention of Stanley Clarke, Gato put his left hand to his mouth and blew a kiss in admiration of Clarke's abilities. He did the same with Lonnie Liston Smith. He told us Smith now lives near Washington, D.C. and is 65 years old but still somewhat active. I told Gato how much I loved Smith's playing, how he would spread out the entire sound of the keyboard in shimmering cascades of beautiful notes. Gato knew just what I was trying to express, exclaiming "Yes! Yes!" and how much he loved Smith's playing too. He said he was always grateful that Smith visited him in the hospital when he was recovering from his heart surgery.

Gato expressed several times during the day how hard it was to find really good musicians these days because they no longer all reside in and around New York. Instead, they live everywhere. He said his current band, while much younger than him, follows him well in concerts. They do indeed, as I was able to experience that evening. He said the one enhancement he would like is a guitarist who could play both electric and acoustic. "Like John Abercrombie?" I asked, referring to the fine jazz/rock guitarist who accompanied him on *Under Fire*. "Yes," said Gato with a gleam in his eye.

Gato was also very upfront about the music recording industry. He stated it was very difficult nowadays to record in this country because the producers and engineers are so much younger than him and don't understand his sound. I had read an interview in the Washington Observer-Reporter the previous day promoting Saturday's concert in which Gato was quoted as saying he hated his current release, *The Eye of the Cat*, even though it had won a Grammy for the 2003 best Latin jazz album. While he did not mention that disc in our conversation, he did reiterate his dislike of American record producers and said that if he ever records again it will be in Europe where the studios just let you come in and play what you want and focus on recording your music as precisely as they can.

Having said that, however, he did recommend I get the re-release of *Bolivia* and *Under Fire* which have recently been remastered and put out together on a single CD. Again putting his hand to his lips and blowing a kiss, he said the sound on the new CD

was excellent. I have since acquired this CD, and I agree, the music sounds great, especially the *Bolivia* tracks which sound a lot like a live performance.

Gato also remains up on what is happening in the jazz world. When I started to discuss with him the recent reissue of the Elvin Jones Blue Note albums, he told me he learned in Italy that Elvin Jones had just died. I thought it also was interesting that he mentioned John Coltrane and accurately estimated what his age would be if he were still alive.

Gato could also be quite funny in a self-deprecating way. Summing up his career as a musician, he said it was a good life and that the money was good. “But of course, I am not like Frank Sinatra,” he said, throwing up his hands.

Eventually we made our way to the hotel. Gato and his band quickly checked in, and Jay and I returned to the Uptown in the limo. About an hour and a half later, the band arrived for their sound check. Gato stayed at the hotel to rest up for the concert. I enjoyed very much the band’s warm-up, especially Mark’s impromptu keyboard version of *Giant Steps*. It was obvious they were all crack musicians.

My next assignment was to get Gato and the band through the stage door and to the dressing rooms when they arrived for the concert. They showed up together about twenty minutes before the show was set to start at 9 pm. Since the lighting was dim and there were steps, my main concern was to make sure Gato got around safely. This turned out to be no problem. I enjoyed watching Gato take out his saxophone, put it together, and warm up. As soon as he started to blow, beautiful melodic phrases immediately flowed from his horn. Bob Studebaker, a jazz disc jockey from Pittsburgh, had been brought in to serve as emcee. I introduced him to Gato. They chatted for a bit, and then Gato gave him some simple instructions on how to introduce him.

By now the band was coming on to the stage and starting to play. Mario gave me a big hug before going on and whispered in my ear to please help Gato get on stage safely. The emcee went next and melliflously introduced Gato and the group. With my hand on Gato’s shoulder, I guided him up the couple of dark steps to the stage. Then I retired to the auditorium to enjoy the show.

As soon as Gato hit the stage, he seemed to grow a foot taller and look 25 years younger. He staked out a position to stage left by Diego, his drummer, and began to play, the band having eased into an exotic introduction for a minute or two before. Gato ended up playing two sets of four songs each and an encore, each set lasting about 45 minutes. In the first set, I could not recognize the first few tunes although they sounded like some of his familiar melodies with new arrangements.

What was clear to me, however, was that Gato was BACK! Not dwelling in the “smooth jazz” trough any longer, he had gone back to his own unique sound of scorching sax and driving, uncompromising rhythms. He and his band really cooked, and they ended the first set with a scorching version of Gershwin’s *Summertime*, which Gato made

completely his own with a very upbeat Latin tempo. At that point, Gato said he would reluctantly have to take a break. The audience of about 300 gave him a loud round of applause and cheers.

When he got back to the dressing room area, I complimented Gato on his version of *Summertime*. Ever the self-critical analyst of his own art, he said nonchalantly, “It was OK.” I had to chuckle. I also told him I was really enjoying the reworking of his earlier material. By now others were in the dressing room also complimenting him. Gato looked up and said, “I am like fine wine. I am only getting better with age.” Again I had to laugh. He said he would probably have to play *Europa* sometime that evening, “because if I don’t they will kill me.” Sure enough, Bob Studebaker poked his head in as if on cue to ask if Gato would play what is probably his song most familiar to radio audiences.

After about ten minutes, Gato got up and said he was ready to get back to work. He asked me to check on the other band members. Diego was in the next antechamber of the dressing rooms. I asked him if he was ready to go. He said “Sure” and bounded up onto the stage. Gato followed soon after. Mark and Mario were still out in the front lobby of the theater when they heard Diego, Roberto and Gato starting in. They quickly raced down the aisles, jumped on stage and joined in.

The second set was simply awesome. Gato started out with *Europa*, as if to get that annoyance out of the way so he could play what he wanted to after that. But it was beautiful. Throughout the evening, and particularly on this song, Gato showed absolutely effortless and flawless control of his sax, moving from a slight tremolo to a full but controlled scream at will. He was a sight to behold.

The next number was *Last Tango in Paris*. I have always loved that tune, but I had never seen Gato perform it in concert before. After playing through the melody a couple times, Gato and his band took off on what were probably eight or ten improvisational verses. It was tremendous. As I rocked out in my seat to the rhythms, I thought to myself that this was about as good as live jazz ever gets. The thought also occurred to me about that time that I wished I could have had a film crew with me today, because we surely would have had in the can by now a pretty incredible documentary of Gato and his art.

Next, Gato played his new composition, *Life and Death*, introducing the song to the audience with an explanation much like what he had told me during our ride in the limo that afternoon. A very interesting and beautiful addition to his repertoire.

Gato concluded with a hot rearrangement of *Viva Emiliano Zapata*, in which he sang the title between verses. By now the audience was all his, and they gave him a standing ovation as he and the band attempted to leave the stage. Quickly reconsidering their exit, they favored us with a mellow encore number and then finished to loud and sustained applause.

As soon as he got back to the dressing room, Gato said “I must have a cigarette.” Reminding me a little of Dexter Gordon in the film *Round Midnight*, Gato took off down one of the aisles of the theater with a lit cigarette, not caring what would come next. Some of the departing patrons quickly noticed him, and soon he had a crowd around him asking for autographs. He eventually made his way to a seat where he obligingly signed autographs for all comers. The ladies loved it, showering him with kisses on his cheeks. The last autograph he signed was on my copy of *Que Pasa*, quickly drawing his cat and signing simply “Gato.” I thanked him very much, but by now my obsequiousness must have come off as mildly irritating to him because he waved me off saying, “Come on, come on,” as he walked back with me to the dressing room. Again, I had to chuckle.

After chasing out a couple of young girls from the chair near his saxophone, Gato repacked his instrument and was ready to leave. Dan had already let me know the limousine was ready outside to take him back to the hotel. As Gato walked out with me, he caught sight of Dan’s comely young stage manager, who had been schmoozing with Gato throughout the evening. “Darling, I am leaving!” he called to her. Giving her a couple of pecks on the cheeks, he said goodbye. I accompanied him out to the waiting limo and opened the door. As he settled in, I said “Vaya con Dios, Gato” and closed the door. The last word he said to me was “Gracias,” and off he went into the fog shrouded Pennsylvania night.

Gato’s show that night was nothing less than consummate artistry by a true master of the jazz idiom. If this is what his performances are like these days, then everyone should see him while he still has the energy to play like this. His concert was the aural equivalent of touring an art exhibition by Van Gogh, Manet, or Cezanne in a fine art museum. He is one of the rarest musicians in any style because he has created a sound unique to himself that is timeless. His music sounds every bit as powerful, vital, and refreshing as it did in 1972. His attitude remains that of the uncompromising artist who does not curry much to your favor but instead invites you to unhesitatingly take a walk with him into his own world for a couple of hours once he starts to play. And what a beautiful world it is.

