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Barretto gives congas ability to speak

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NEW YORK -- The renowned conga drummer and bandleader Ray Barretto sat at his four blue congas on Thursday night at the Blue Note and used his hands to make his drums talk.

He hit them softly with flattened palms, evoking a deep sound like a murmur. He slapped them and they almost yelped. He walked across them with his fingertips and they whispered. He banged them with the heel of his hand and they grunted. He scurried among them all, the drums like a family at the dinner table, everybody talking back and forth.

Barretto has been one of the premier conga drummers in jazz since the early '50s. He's performed with Charlie Parker, Tito Puente and Herbie Mann, and has appeared on hundreds of albums with such notables as Dizzy Gillespie, Art Blakey and Coleman Hawkins. He's led several bands, including his current first-rate band comprising trumpeter and flugelhornist Joe Magnarelli, alto saxophonist Myron Walden, pianist Robert Rodriguez, bassist Sean Conley and drummer Vince Cherico.

The Bronx native, who turned 75 on April 29 and is belatedly celebrating his birthday through Sunday at the Blue Note, is equally taken by Latin music and modern jazz, affinities evident in all he offered in his first set Thursday. While most of the numbers were Latin, each had a substantial straight-ahead feel in the solo content. On Monk's "I Mean You," Barretto often eschewed any Latin beat, and just leaned back and listened. He always seemed to be listening intently, especially when playing - his eyes closed, his head tilted back or swaying, often an intense, pleasure-driven grimace on his face.

There was a lot to listen to. "Drume Negrita" started softly, with just piano, bass and Cherico's drum taps. Then Magnarelli, cup mute in, and Walden stated the

theme. As Walden soloed, going from brief spurts to lines that doubled back on themselves to longer strands with a semi-sweet tone, the leader moved relaxedly among his drums, creating a subtle sonic babble. Later, Magnarelli scored in a powerhouse solo, his distinctive tone warm at the center, a tail of breath at the edge.

On Conley's delicate bolero, "Aires de Guajira," Rodriguez used ringing trills, short runs à la McCoy Tyner and lines chock full of choice notes in his improvisation. The theme of "I Mean You" went from medium loud to soft in setting up Conley's solo, where he plucked some notes hard, played two or three notes at once and inserted slivers of the theme. As Magnarelli soloed, some ideas framed like questions and answers, Cherico added spirited chatter. Later, Barretto soloed, creating colors as he played steady, flat-handed hits, fast rips, and darts between two or three drums, offbeat whaps and more.

Flutist Dave Valentin and conga drummer Francisco Aguabella guested on two tunes. On "Equinox," Valentin played bass flute, offering fat, buoyant notes. Aguabella dropped in a stirring solo filled with a variety of hard, yet musical hits. Then Barretto joined, his lower-toned, subtler expressions in pleasing contrast to his colleague's.

Barretto's birthday bash at the Blue Note continues tonight with his band, sans guests, and Sunday, when famed drummer Candido is on tap.

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