

Maurizio Ravalico

A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms



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Adventurous percussionist Maurizio Ravalico pushes the boundaries of conga drums on his new album **'A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms'**, an eloquent and surprisingly articulated investigation into new ways of making music with the Cuban drum.

Generally not associated with cutting edge experimentation and contemporary composition, conga drums are the protagonists of **'A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms'** by the Italian-born and London-based musician Maurizio Ravalico who, after consolidating his lifelong love affair with found objects and creative multi-percussion music on his 2018 solo album **'Nobody's Husband, Nobody's Dad'**, is now turning his attention back to his first instrument, the conga drum.

Maurizio is not new to daring forays into uncharted musical territories. During the course of a surprisingly varied career spanning from the late eighties to today, he has constantly shown a restlessness and a desire to cross-pollinate and draw original and unexpected connections between genres and styles. His signature creative output is marked by frequent departures from safe and established comfort zones, and interspersed with collaborations in fields as diverse as salsa, free-form improvisation, funk, electro-acoustic experimentation, afrobeat, jazz and contemporary dance.

Congas are an unusual instrument to feature on their own, save for the occasional flashy solo within a larger ensemble set. And even on percussion-based styles traditionally centred on congas they are almost invariably aided by woods, metals and shakers of one sort or another. Forcibly deprived of these anchoring aids, and liberated from their customary time-keeping obligations, congas reveal an unexpected range of sonic possibilities, making **'A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms'** the first ever full scale work to be composed, orchestrated and performed exclusively on congas.

Each track on **'A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms'** tells a different tale, and although Maurizio is the only player on the album, the orchestration is extremely varied. Some tracks are solo pieces, like the three **'Interludes'**, short improvisations restricted to very specific and usually marginal areas of the congas' sound palette. Some are duos, notably the album's opening track and first single **'A Cheaper Love Letter'**; others are pieces for larger congas ensembles, like the epic title track **'A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms'**, a choral piece reminiscent of a birds' murmuration, which requires a conductor for its live performance.

But what all the tracks have in common is a keen avoidance of any of the roles that are generally associated to (and expected from) this particular instrument, and a desire to expand its lexicon and aesthetic scope. There's nothing 'Latin', or 'African' in **'A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms'**, and each track points towards some new, previously unexplored direction.

Maurizio says about the album:

“My intention was to create ‘music for congas’ in the widest and least restrictive sense. My only self-imposed limitations were that no instrument other than congas can be used, and that nothing else than bare hands should be employed to play them. No ‘preparations’ with additional material were allowed either, nor electronic sound manipulations. Within these given restrictions, any way of creating music was allowed.

‘A Cheaper Love Letter (for Egberto Gismonti)’ is the first single from the album and it is released as an EP containing three different edits: the 7’35” full-length album version, a more concise radio edit and an even shorter 7” edit. It’s a duet for two conga players, playing a set of five drums each, and it’s loosely inspired by some of Egberto Gismonti’s guitar music, hence the dedication. Gismonti’s music has inspired me as a whole over the years and, however indirectly, has informed a lot of my solo conga playing.

‘Norwegian Wood’, the second single, is the 7th track on the album, and it is the only tune in the album where I sing. It is also the only cover. The vocal track that you hear in the final mix was recorded in my bedroom with a Zoom recorder, while I was sketching a couple of takes just to get a feel before going back to the studio and record the vocal properly. Turned out the clean studio take didn’t work, and I ended up using the bedroom demo in the end. There’s an informality about it, almost a sort of singing-in-the-shower vibe, which I thought fits perfectly with the scope of the whole album - which is after all an album of music for congas only. The voice just happen to be there, but it’s incidental, not dominant.”

‘No Comparsa Today’ and ‘Drag Spin Swing Read Pluck Clash Read’ have been recorded respectively in a London train station and at Trinity Laban Centre’s insanely reverberating fire escape staircase, both tracks re-using the extreme recording techniques employed in one of Maurizio’s previous works, the situationist tour-de-force ‘In Thunder Rise’.

In the album’s extensive liner notes, Maurizio outlines a manifesto for his work and the album’s broader meaning:

“The last thirty years have seen a formidable evolution in congas technique, thanks to the seminal examples of Changuito, Giovanni Hidalgo and the legacy that followed in their steps. Yet not much has been added in terms of content during the same period. It is my opinion that congas have a lot of untapped potential, in the realm of composition and improvisation, but also in their basic lexicon. I like to think of this album as a collection of seeds, bound to grow in many different and unexpected directions. The best reward for me would be to know that this small effort of mine has been a source of inspiration for other conga players, instigating them to venture into new areas that I haven’t even imagined myself.

What we have here is a musical instrument which originated in the American continent, and it is the Americas that have always been the reference and the prime mover of both the tradition and any innovation at all stages of its history. The UK and the rest of Europe (which are certainly not short of excellent players) have until now mainly been cultural importers of the art of congas playing. What I’m aiming at with this project, in all its differentiable outputs, is to shift this balance, by bringing the late XX Century European experience into the equation, and turn what is now a unidirectional cultural flow into a two-way conversation.”

Maurizio’s quest for redefining the conga drum is also manifest in a parallel, more academically oriented project, **The New Conga Lab**, an online collection of new studies for conga drums, which is gathering around itself a growing community of keen conga players, students and composers.

Tracklist & Credits

- 1 - A Cheaper Love Letter (for Egberto Gismonti)
- 2 - Interlude 1 - Thump
- 3 - A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms
- 4 - Interlude 2 - Hiss
- 5 - No Comparsa Today
- 6 - Interlude 3 - Tap
- 7 - Norwegian Wood
- 8 - Drag Spin Swing Read Pluck Clash Read

All tracks composed and performed by **Maurizio Ravalico**, except “Norwegian Wood”, written by **Lennon/McCartney**

Recorded at **St. Mary's Road Basement Studios**, Ealing, London
Engineered by **Chico Santarosa**, except where indicated

Hither Green train station additional recording on “No Comparsa Today”: **Isambard Khroustaliou**

“Drag Spin Swing Read Pluck Clash Read”:

Pt. 1 and 3 recorded at **Trinity Laban's fire escape staircase**, London, by **Isambard Khroustaliou**

Pt. 2 and 4 recorded at **CodaToCoda Studios**, London, engineered by **Maurizio Ravalico**

Produced by **Maurizio Ravalico**

Mixed and by **Will Worsley** at **CodaToCoda studio**, London
Mastered by **Stefano Amerio** at **Artesuono Recording Studios**, Udine, Italy

Front cover: large format analog portrait by **Gui Süsseskind**

Digital finishing: **Ario Drioli**

All other photos and album design: **Maurizio Ravalico**

Graphic layout: **Giulia Cavallini**

About Maurizio Ravalico

Italian-born percussionist, composer, producer and sound-explorer **MAURIZIO RAVALICO** is a multifaceted character whose broad span of specialisations and compulsive drive for styles cross-pollination is manifest in genre-defying acts like his trio **Fiiium Shaarrk**, Tamar Osborn's **Collocutor** and **Phil Dawson's Quintet**, as well as a long list of collaborations in fields as diverse as afrobeat, pop, contemporary composition, jazz, improvised music, salsa, electronic experimental music, theatre and contemporary dance.

Maurizio studied Afrocuban percussion in La Havana between 1988 and 1991, before moving permanently to London in 1991, and quickly becoming a high-in-demand conga player in the salsa and Afrocuban UK scene and a reference name in the British funk resurgence of the '90s, collaborating with names like **Jamiroquai** and the **James Taylor Quartet**, plus virtually every salsa and Cuban related acts to come out of London in the same period. His long list of collaborations over the years includes afrobeat giant **Dele Sosimi**, **Paul McCartney**, **Attawalpa**, **Paul Young**, **Oren Marshall**, **Steve Beresford**, **Pat Thomas**, **John Edwards**, **Kaidi Tatham**, **Fred Thomas**, **Noga Ritter**, **Eska Mtungwazi** and the **Phaedra Ensemble**.

After touring and recording with **Jamiroquai** during the '**Emergency on Planet Earth**' and '**Space Cowboy**' years, Maurizio's first signature release was '**Accommodating Gods**' (1998), with his duo **Afroshock**: a little known album of creative revisitations of traditional Afro-Cuban liturgies which has gained a bit of a cult status among a niche of aficionados, and is still talked about as one of the most important works for percussion music to come out of the UK in that decade.

With the coming of the new millenium, following a series of experiences with improvised music, theatre, visual art, installation art and electronic experimental music, he developed a very personal approach to percussion instruments, as well as expanding the language and possibilities of his conga playing.

In a way, '**A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms**' could be seen as the completion of a cycle which was started with **Accommodating Gods**, and centres around the quest for bringing the late XX Century experience into the Afro-Cuban legacy, and turn what is now a unidirectional cultural flow into a two-way conversation.

'**A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms**' also marks Maurizio's return to the **Not Applicable** label and collective, and a welcome reconnection with his long term creative partner **Isambard Khroustaliov** (aka **Sam Britton**) from the legendary laptop duo **Icarus**. After cementing their creative bond with two duo albums in the second half of the 2000s ('**Five Loose Plans**' and '**The Resurfacing of an Atavistic Trait**') Isambard and Maurizio, together with Austrian drummer **Rudi Fischerlehner**, founded the trio **Fiiium Shaarrk**, whose second album '**We Are Astonishingly Lifelike**' was included in **BBC3 Late Junction's 12 Best Albums of 2017** list. In between, Isambard was also integral in Maurizio's first extensive exploration of the uncharted potential of conga drums, the album '**In Thunder Rise**' with tuba player **Oren Marshall**, in 2010.

Maurizio's last release before '**A Thousand Rawhide Diaphragms**' is the solo percussion album '**Nobody's Husband, Nobody's Dad**' (2018), in his own words "the most eloquent synthesis to date of my lifelong love affair with percussion music". In the years preceding and following the release of '**Nobody's Husband, Nobody's Dad**' Maurizio has toured his solo percussion act extensively across the UK, Germany and Italy.