

Ed Calle is one of Miami's most accomplished yet modest musicians

By Fernando Gonzalez
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Chances are you haven't heard of Ed Calle. But if you've listened to artists such as Gloria Estefan, Frank Sinatra, Julio Iglesias, Rihanna, Chick Corea or Arturo Sandoval, you've probably heard him play.

The Venezuelan-born, South Florida-based Calle is a two-time Latin Grammy nominee and first-call saxophone player, a musician who has played on more than 1,200 albums and 8,500 singles. He's also a member of popular local Afro-Cuban funk band [Palo!](#) and has a doctorate in higher education leadership from Nova Southeastern University.

Saxophonist Ed Calle, one of Miami's most in-demand musicians, is releasing two albums and appearing in concert. | PATRICK FARRELL
MIAMI HERALD STAFF

"By now, I don't remember everything I've played on," Calle says. "It's impossible."

Despite his prodigious experience, he remains relentlessly demanding about his work. On the tenor sax, Calle has an expressive, full-bodied sound, almost vocal in the middle and upper registers, cello-like at the bottom. As a soloist, he can be deceptively brilliant. He has an impressive, fluid technique and uses it to explore the material at hand with logic and purpose.

That, however, is not necessarily what he hears.

"It has happened that I hear something and I think, 'Hmmm, OK, I like this,' and then I realize *why* it sounded familiar — and then I start to hear every single thing that I did wrong," he says, laughing.

Producers and fellow musicians find little fault with Calle's playing, however.

"My relationship with Ed goes back 30 years," says 19-time Grammy winner Emilio Estefan, producer and husband of singer Gloria Estefan. "I believe he's been in every single album by Gloria. He always brings something special to the music. Whatever you write for him, he makes it better. He has the sound, he has the technique, and he has the soul."

By the end of this week Calle, 55, will have two new records out. On Tuesday, with his quintet World Music 5, he released *America*, an album of arrangements of Latin American classic songs. On Friday, Calle will release his seventh album under his own name, *Mambu*, featuring over 100 South Florida musicians in what he calls "a tribute to Miami, its people, and its music."

And on Sunday, Calle appears in concert with a 30-piece orchestra and the jazz group Negroni's Trio at Miami-Dade County Auditorium. The program includes pieces from the recording *Charlie Parker with Strings*, original compositions and arrangements of music by Burt Bacharach, Antonio Carlos Jobim and Armando Manzanero.



Colleagues praise Calle's devotion to music and lack of ego. Among them are veteran South Florida-based producer and composer Joe Galdo, who has worked with artists ranging from Betty Wright and KC and the Sunshine Band to David Byrne and Prince. Galdo has championed Calle's talent since he discovered the saxophonist on a community cable show in the early '80s, and he remains an unabashed admirer.

"He's never satisfied. He plays his part and says, 'Hey, man, can I do this one more time? I can do it better,'" says Galdo. "Meanwhile you are picking your jaw off the floor because you've just heard a perfect solo and you are thinking, 'What are you *talking* about?' Whatever I'm producing, if I need a horn, I call Ed, and I know it will sound major-league and it will sound *real*. He is thoughtful *and* soulful. He always makes me look better than I am."

Eduardo Joaquín Calle was born in Caracas, Venezuela, to Spanish parents. His mother, a homemaker, passed away last year. His father, who played the piano, spoke five languages and "was good with numbers," died when Calle was 16. Both remain powerful presences in his life.

"The music and my love of math come from my father's side," Calle says.

At home, he grew up listening to *zarzuela* (Spanish light opera), pop, classical and Venezuelan traditional music.

"In Caracas at the time, we had a lot of live music on television. That was my first contact with music. I had no jazz influence. I didn't play music. That came much later," he says.

Instead, he focused on math and science. He recalls making a game of reciting the multiplication table from the back of the family car. When he visited his grandmother in Spain, she would drill him in math exercises. The family moved to Miami in 1968, where Calle dreamed of a career in science.

"I really liked the space program, so I really thought I would go into NASA," he says.

Education remains a central concern for Calle, who has taught music business and production at Miami Dade College since 2001. It also helps explain why he favors the title "Dr. Ed Calle," a curious formality for a working musician.

"I do it for a couple of reasons," he says. "It's important for people to understand that musicians also think, and it's important to make some people aware that Hispanics in America also have doctorate degrees. I don't want to see my people only wearing aprons and hairnets. I want them to come here and also become doctors and lawyers and accountants, and study and be able to do all the great things we can all do."

He is studying for a master's degree in math, which remains one of his passions.

"Math is for me what music is for other people," he says. "I go home and I read books on physics and string theory."

But he also finds a practical side to this abstract field.

"For me, life is about 'solving for x,'" he says. "We are always 'solving for x,' be it in music or parking your car."

Calle discovered music at Rockway Middle School in Westchester, after he brought home a form to register for extracurricular activities to his father.

"As he was checking the boxes he would ask me, 'Would you be interested in the band? What instrument would you like? How about the saxophone?' I said 'OK,' and that was that. That's how it started. It was completely by chance."

Still, he quickly formed a bond with the saxophone.

"From the very first day there was a connection with that instrument that was something I had never felt before," he says. "I was very shy. I was a nerd. I was a little fat. The saxophone became my voice."

The day he played his first solo with the school jazz band, the audience gave him a standing ovation. Calle, startled,

looked at the band director and broke down crying.

“I thought I had done something wrong,” Calle says. “And he said, ‘No, no, no. They *liked* it.’ I had no idea what it meant. I remember I played *Misty*, and that was the only time my father saw me play. He had two jobs, he couldn’t come to hear me play. That’s why I often play *Misty* in my concerts.”

Although he’s gotten used to applause by now, Calle remains humble.

“The better musicians are interested in having everything sound good, not just their part,” he says. “You can’t have an ego when a John Coltrane also played saxophone. There is nothing I’m going to do that is going to surpass what he’s done. And you have Charlie Parker, Michael Brecker, Stan Getz, Sonny Rollins, Bob Berg. It’s a long list. If you find a cure for cancer you can have an ego. The rest of us, we just hope we have something to say and that when we say it, people like it.”

If you go

What: Ed Calle Sinfónico with Negroni’s Trio and orchestra conducted by Albert Bade.

Where: Miami Dade County Auditorium, 2901 West Flagler St, Miami.

When: 5 p.m. Sunday.

Cost: \$25 to \$40.

Information: (305) 547-5414 or [ticketmaster.com](https://www.ticketmaster.com)