The influence of this Texas legend, who worked with Woody Herman and Stan Kenton and was a close colleague of Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, and Shelly Manne, is still being felt today. Noted Latin-jazz drummer and former Guerrero student Victor Rendón tells the story.

As an educator, Paul Guerrero was integral in shaping the careers of drumming greats such as Peter Erskine, Steve Houghton, and John Riley. As a player, he’s named alongside the other world-renowned drummers who played with the Woody Herman band—including Riley, Dave Tough, Roy Burns, Jeff Hamilton, Don Lamond, Ed Soph, Chuck Flores, Ron Zito, Jake Hanna, and Dave Ratajczak.

Guerrero was born in New Braunfels, Texas, on November 5, 1931, to Mexican-American parents Margarita and Paul Guerrero Sr. During World War II, all six Guerrero children played with their parents in the family band. Headed by Paul’s father on trumpet and valve trombone, the group played popular dance-band music and Mexican boleros. Paul Sr. also played with many of the African-American bands, including Cab Calloway’s, that visited San Antonio in the ‘20s and ‘30s. (This was due to the Jim Crow laws of the time, which prevented black bands from having white subs but not Hispanic ones.) Paul Sr., who in his eighties was still going strong playing guitarrón, or six-string bass, in local mariachi bands, taught all his children to play an instrument and to sight-read. He urged them to practice, and he instilled in them the importance of education.

Paul Jr. started playing drums at the age of ten, emulating the drummers he’d see at big band concerts and at the movies. At around twelve, after attending a Benny Goodman performance with his father, he began studying with Goodman drummer Ed Hagan, who taught the youngster to read big band music. Eventually Guerrero became one of the best sight-readers around.

“When Paul was in high school,” recalls his widow, Celeste, “he listened to Stan Kenton and was greatly influenced by Shelly Manne as well as by the West Coast drummer/percussionist Frank ‘Chico’ Guerrero. Paul had admired Chico as a youngster. Later Chico heard Paul at a drum clinic in Los Angeles and rushed over to meet him. They became close friends, keeping correspondence and exchanging clinic material. Paul also became friends with Shelly Manne, who often used Paul’s materials in his own clinics.”

At fourteen, Guerrero took his first job, with the Marcelino Marceleno Orchestra. He also played live radio broadcasts with the actress and recording star Judy Canova. Upon graduating from Sunset High School in Dallas (the family had moved there in the mid-‘40s), Paul had a great desire to play professionally, but he also recognized the necessity of having a plan for when his time on the road ended. Possessing a strong interest in education—in terms of his own continued learning as well as teaching others—he enrolled at North Texas State University (now called the University of North Texas). Under the direction of Dr. Gene Hall, he started working toward a bachelor of arts degree, which would allow him to teach. While in college, however, Guerrero was drafted into the army.

The interruption in Paul’s studies wasn’t as disruptive to his career path as he feared it would be. As a member of the 4th Army Band at Fort Sam Houston, Guerrero played with many great musicians, including Vic Damone and Carl Fontana, and formed a lifelong friendship with drummer Jake Hanna.

He also produced and starred in an audition tape that he sent to Arlene Francis’s NBC Talent Patrol show in New York. He was selected to play on the show and was held over for a month. In 1955, after the army, he went back to North Texas State—but it was not long before he had another interruption in his formal studies.

At the time, Musicians Local 147 had a private club, Artists of Dallas, which catered to local players and brought in big-name artists. One evening in 1958, several members of the Woody Herman band heard Guerrero and longtime friend Peyton Park play and were so impressed that they asked him to join the group. Guerrero immediately married a North Texas music student named Celeste Roberts and took his bride on the road. The next two years provided the drummer with his first road experience in an internationally renowned orchestra.

“On those long bus rides,” Celeste recalls, “Woody gave Paul some great advice: Surround yourself with talented young jazz players, and you’ll never grow old. Paul always followed that advice.” The Guerreros remained close to Herman, who would occasionally sing with Paul’s group at the Bagatelle Lounge in Dallas. “People would stop by for a nightcap,” Celeste says, “and be surprised to hear Woody Herman, Louie Bellson, Buddy Rich, Brasil ‘66, Bill Chase, and other groups that passed through town.”

In 1960, after touring with Herman for two years, Guerrero re-registered at North Texas and became a member of the famed One O’Clock Lab Band, under the direction of Leon Breeden. At the Collegiate Jazz Festival at the University of Notre Dame, the band placed first and Guerrero was named the...
number-one college stage drummer in the U.S., a distinction he received a second time in 1961—the only Lab Band player to be so honored. One of the festival judges was Stan Kenton, who invited Guerrero to teach at his band camp and to tour with him. Paul stayed for eight months but once again returned to North Texas State, where he eventually earned a doctorate degree.

In 1962 Guerrero settled in Dallas, becoming an in-demand player in the city’s booming commercial industry while teaching at North Texas State in Denton. John Riley, who studied with Guerrero in the ’70s, remembers Paul as being very organized and inspiring. “We worked through his handwritten odd-time coordination exercises,” Riley recalls, “as well as up-tempo exercises that he learned from Shelly Manne—which I cite in Beyond Bop Drumming—and Afro-Cuban grooves from Frank ‘Chico’ Guerrero’s book.”

As a percussion instructor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Guerrero was instrumental in developing the school’s first stage band program, and he expanded on the typical big band/jazz-rock curriculum by covering traditional and progressive Latin styles. In 1975 he joined the faculty of Richland College, where he directed the jazz band and percussion ensemble, taught music theory, and attracted heavyweight friends like Buddy Rich to advise students.

Among Guerrero’s other close drummer friends were Gene Krupa and Louie Bellson; Paul conducted drum clinics with both.

Though Guerrero continued playing at an extremely high level with top artists like Henry Mancini, the 5th Dimension, Vikki Carr, Dean Martin, Sonny & Cher, Danny Kaye, Charlie Barnet, Chet Baker, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, and Chico O’Farrill, and being active in Dallas’s radio and TV jingle factories, his profound contributions to his community and to music education might be his greatest legacy. In addition to facilitating clinics with jazz legends such as Dave Brubeck, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, and members of their groups, he provided a stepping-stone for many of his sidemen by running the band known as the WGM Trio, leading to gigs with Herman, Buddy Rich, and Louie Bellson.

A visible and positive example for minority students, Guerrero was the first Hispanic member of the Delta Sigma Phi fraternity. In addition, he designed the jazz curriculum for the Dallas Arts Magnet High School and served on the school’s advisory board for several years. He also served on the board of the Shakespeare Festival of Dallas, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, and the National Hispanic Scholarship Fund.


On March 28, 1989, the Texas State House of Representatives passed a resolution in honor of Guerrero’s life as a professional musician, educator, and friend and promoter of young jazz players. Recognizing his role as a prime mover in the Hispanic musical community, a room was named in his honor at the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas. The Paul Guerrero Jr. Scholarship Endowment Fund at Richland College and the Paul Guerrero Jr. Scholarship Endowment Fund at the University of North Texas were established to help assist young musicians aspiring to study percussion and jazz. And November 5, Paul’s birthday, became Guerrero Day in the state of Texas, in Dallas County, and in the city of Dallas.

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**RECORDINGS**