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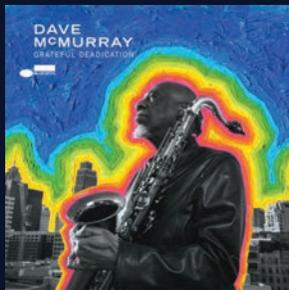
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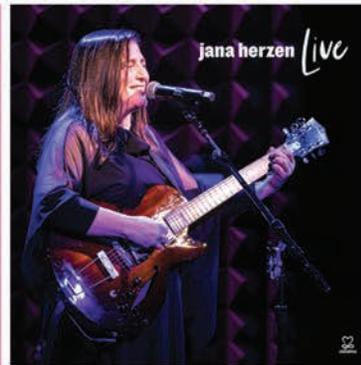
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## STOLEN moment



A beloved entertainer in her native Cuba, Omara Portuondo reached audiences worldwide with her performance on the *Buena Vista Social Club* recording in 1996 and subsequent film in 1999. Portuondo has charmed audiences since she sang and danced at Havana's Cabaret Tropicana in the 1950s and later became a breakout singer in the film style. Having recently turned 91, Portuondo was nominated for a Latin Grammy Award for her song "Bolero a la Vida," a duet with Guatemalan singer Gaby Moreno. She's pictured here during a 2014 tour with the Buena Vista Social Club, winning over Greek concertgoers at the Forest Theatre in Thessaloniki. ■



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## KEYBOARD SAVANT AND TRIBAL TECH VETERAN SCOTT KINSEY HAS DEVELOPED A NEW MUSICAL INTEREST IN VOCAL DISCOVERY MER SAL.

*Adjustments* is a vocal recording within a fusion instrumental soundtrack. Says Kinsey, “After working for years with lots of guitarists and saxophonists, I’ve come to realize that the voice is in many ways the most expressive instrument of all.”

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The album offers a collection of timely originals, while the duo also reimagines rock classics like “Feel Flows” (The Beach Boys), “Time Out of Mind” (Steely Dan) and “Down to You” (Joni Mitchell), as well as “Jungle Book,” an iconic Weather Report track penned by Joe Zawinul.

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- OZ NOY: guitar
- NIR FELDER: guitar
- ALEX MACHACEK: guitar
- JOSH SMITH: guitar
- PEDRO MARTINS: acoustic & electric guitars, cavaquinho
- SHARANAM ANANDAMA: dulcimer, vocals
- JIMMY HASLIP: electric bass
- TIM LEFEBVRE: electric bass
- HADRIEN FERAUD: electric bass
- MICHAEL JANISCH: acoustic bass
- GARY NOVAK: drums
- GERGŐ BORLAI: drums
- BRAD DUTZ: percussion and others

### Produced by SCOTT KINSEY

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# The Spanish Tinge

Here in South Florida, we're somewhat spoiled when it comes to Latin music. As the Gateway to the Americas, our region has long attracted musicians from Latin America and the Caribbean, from the mambo craze of the 1940s and '50s to the Latin-pop explosion spearheaded by Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine in the '80s. Artists such as Tito Puente and Celia Cruz found adoring audiences here, the latter of whom, following her death in 2003, had her body brought to Miami for a public viewing before she was buried in New York City. Quite naturally, due to our proximity to the island 90 miles due south, Cubans — many of them forced into exile by the Castro regime — have contributed enormously to the cultural tapestry of our area.

Hard-won triumphs are woven into the stories of South Florida-based Cuban pianists Chucho Valdés and Gonzalo Rubalcaba, both of whom are profiled in this issue. Valdés' father, pioneering Cuban jazz pianist Bebo Valdés, lived in exile in Sweden for decades, leaving behind a family and a home he loved dearly. Nearly 20 years would pass before he had the opportunity to reunite with Chucho, when the younger Valdés' band Irakere performed in New York. Their moving reunion is chronicled in a chapter from an unpublished memoir written by Chucho Valdés with former *JAZZIZ* editor Fernando González. González also spoke to the maestro, who recently turned 80, about a new work he was about to premiere at the Adrienne Arsht Center in Miami and other cities around the world.

Rubalcaba's journey was equally fraught. In Cuba, jazz was all but forbidden, deemed the music of the "enemy" (i.e., the United States). And yet, Rubalcaba's talents would not be

denied, as he caught the ears of American jazz giants Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Haden, who endeavored to bring him to the U.S. despite political blowback from both countries. The pianist finally managed to wrangle a work visa and exhilarated audiences in the States, even as Cuban exiles protested outside his concerts in the early '90s. Eventually, the furor died down and Rubalcaba, a Grammy winner and critical favorite, put down roots in South Florida, raising three kids in suburban Coral Springs. In this issue's Traditions column, Rubalcaba talks about reuniting with longtime friends and champions, Ron Carter and Jack DeJohnette, with whom he recently released a trio album.

Since its inception, jazz has embraced what Jelly Roll Morton called "the Spanish tinge," which was particularly pronounced in New Orleans. A favorite son of the Crescent City, Wynton Marsalis has long realized the importance of Latin music in the fabric of jazz, and he leans on bassist Carlos Henriquez to make sure the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra plays it correctly. Henriquez, also profiled in this issue, shows love for his Nuyorican upbringing on his recent album, *The South Bronx Story*. And, expanding our reach into South America, Peruvian vocal legend Susana Baca discusses the cultural and political passions fueling her latest recording, *Palabras Urgentes*.

A multifarious mural comprising many cultures and colors, jazz is difficult to imagine without the signature contributions of Spanish-speaking peoples. Nor would we want to.

— Michael Fagien



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# PRELUDE



# Elias Through the Looking Glass

**Eliane Elias** puts her best foot forward on duets with Chick Corea and Chucho Valdés.

The timeworn adage “the show must go on” was Eliane Elias’ watchword at her September 15th concert at Manhattan’s City Winery in support of *Mirror Mirror* (Candid), a new release on which she performs an exhilarating suite of piano duets with Chick Corea and Chucho Valdés.

“Two weeks ago, I canceled the date,” Elias says the morning after, from her Long Island home. During the summer, she explains, she’d ruptured the Lisfranc ligament in her right foot, breaking all seven bones that it supports, necessitating a seven-hour surgery that entailed bone grafts and other implantations, followed by a protracted recovery period.

“The doctor told me I wasn’t ready to press the pedal or keep my foot unelevated,” Elias continues. “But I didn’t sleep the whole night after I’d canceled, and in the morning I called my agent and said: ‘I’m not ill. I’m recovering from an accident. I’ll play without a pedal if I have to. I can use my legato by hand.’ I was supposed to go onstage with a scooter, but that felt weird. I said, ‘Guys, help me; let’s do the crutches.’ And it worked.”

Some 20 minutes in, after Elias sang the iconic lyric of “Chega de Saudade,” she and her “guys” — bassist (and spouse) Marc Johnson and fellow Brazilians Rubens de la Corte on guitar and Rafael Barrata on drums — switched from gentle samba flow to an up-tempo, swinging section where she showcased her efflorescent chops with long, fluidly executed melodic lines. After the final note, Elias smiled gamely as she rubbed her foot. “I forgot I wasn’t supposed to hit the pedal — that hurt,” she told the crowd.

Buying time, Elias instructed the house engineer to run a seven-minute video clip of her and Corea interacting on the late maestro’s “Armando’s Rhumba,” which leads off the CD edition of *Mirror Mirror*. Then she returned to the piano to caress the haunting melody of Armando Manzanero’s boléro “Esta Tarde Vi Llover,” which she explores with Valdés on the second CD track.

Throughout *Mirror Mirror*, Elias functions fully as a peer to Corea and Valdés, as she does with Herbie Hancock on several no-holds-barred improvisations on the 1995 recording, *Solos and*

*Duos* (Blue Note). Her bold, unfettered pianistic derring-do may surprise fans of the highly curated, vocal-oriented sessions that comprise much of Elias’ 21st-century discography, though not if they’ve heard dates like 2012’s *Swept Away* (ECM), a nuanced Elias-Johnson duo, or 2008’s *Something for You* (Blue Note), on which she interprets 17 songs associated with Bill Evans, an influence since childhood.

Elias traces her sure-footedness in the duo space to studies during formative São Paulo years with Amilton Godoy, who led Brazil’s pathbreaking Zimbo Trio. “We played a lot of piano duets, accompanying one another, which taught me to tune into the other pianist,” she says. “With Chick and Chucho we were improvising and creating — we kept the form of the tunes, but traveled into different paths within the form.”

As a ’70s teenager, Elias, already a pro, “liked the musical diversity on Chick’s projects — playing straightahead acoustic, keyboards with electric groups, solo piano works; I also liked his compositions.” Corea, who died in February, heard an 18-year-old Elias in Brazil and they remained in touch after she moved to New York in the early ’80s, when she joined the popular Steps Ahead band before embarking on a leader career mid-decade. They periodically discussed a duo project until schedules aligned in late 2018.

“Our affinity was obvious, harmonically, rhythmically — we were completely on the same wavelength, talking the same language,” Elias says. “We didn’t even count off the tunes; we sat down and started playing. There are no other takes.”

Similar chemistry marks the Elias-Valdés connection on the three iconic, Elias-selected Latin hits, which entered her DNA early on through her mother’s eclectic record collection. “He’s got a beautiful rhythm and groove, he’s very sensitive, with a lot of heart, and lots of chops,” she says. “He can fly on the piano, and he chose just the right moments to do that.

“To me, the title reflects the image of two pianos mirroring each other, the music coming from one to the other and bouncing back — the interchange we had.” — **Ted Panken**

prelude



From left, José Negroni, Josh Allen and Nomar Negroni



# A Spark in the Dark

Negroni's Trio generates light, heat and hope for better days ahead.

In whatever language you speak, *esperanza* — “hope” in English — has been in distressingly short supply of late, between the turmoil of political divisiveness and the tragedy of a rampaging global virus. But that’s precisely why Negroni’s Trio decided to christen their vibrant 11th album *Esperanzas* (Sony Latin).

“We started recording this album in the middle of this pandemic,” explains drummer Nomar Negroni over Skype from his home in Miami. “We were recording the music with a mix of emotions. Of course we were happy to be back together doing what we love. At the same time, we were in the middle of the apocalypse. So our goal with this album was [conceived] in the same spirit that we make all our music, which is bringing love and happiness.”

*Esperanzas* arrives as the three-time Latin Grammy-nominated trio prepare to celebrate their 20th anniversary as a band. The trio’s central relationship dates back even further — a lifetime, in fact, as pianist-composer José Negroni and drummer Nomar are father and son. The latest album is their fifth with bassist Josh Allen, who Nomar considers an honorary brother.

“A lot of people want to be next to my dad and to gain knowledge from him,” Nomar says. “I’ve gotten that since I was a little kid, and I don’t take that for granted.”

“It’s a blessing,” adds José, speaking from San Juan, in his native Puerto Rico, with Nomar translating. “Musically speaking, I feel safe in the trio. Why safe? Because we’ve been playing together for more than 20 years, and I know that wherever I go, Nomar is going to be there because we have such a deep connection musically and spiritually.”

The evidence of that feeling runs throughout *Esperanzas*, which goes to a staggering number of places while retaining the buoyant feel and exhilarating chemistry of the trio. Opener “Qué Felicidad,” one of five José Negroni compositions on the album, is a dazzling showcase for the trio’s ability to navigate sudden shifts in tempo and mood. Beginning with a stormy solo piano intro, the title

track takes on a jauntier tone with the melodic pairing of the elder Negroni’s piano and guest Ismael Vergara’s serpentine clarinet.

Spanish vocalist María Toledo brings a smoldering huskiness to the classic boléro “Encadenados,” while Edgar Omar’s wordless harmonies add rich layers to José’s silky keyboards for a contemporary twist on Clare Fischer’s “Morning/Una Mañana.” Joined by tenor saxophonist Ed Calle, a frequent collaborator, the trio utterly transform the familiar standard “How High the Moon,” with synth sounds providing a cosmic feel to the intro before the tune swerves into a bustling Latin feel.

Despite the vivid and wide-ranging imagination on display, along with the passionate performances captured on the album, José insists that he’s more of a journeyman composer than a divinely inspired artist.

“I consider myself a worker,” he says. “When it’s time to make an album, I know I have to go to the piano and start working and composing. Then the inspiration will come, but I look at it as a job.”

It’s a job that José Negroni had been doing long before forming the trio, as a sideman or musical director for pop singers as well as a teacher in Puerto Rico. He’d never considered forming his own band until Nomar made the suggestion while home for summer vacation from Berklee. They recorded a three-song demo and booked a few club

dates in their hometown of Miami, where they happened to be heard — and signed — by the president of Universal Music Latino.

“The rest is history,” Nomar concludes. “My dad had always composed and arranged, but I think he finally discovered his passion and his gifts when we started the trio.”

— Shaun Brady





Stephen Anderson

# So Far So Good

Personal loss and physical separation couldn't dim the spirit of **The Dominican Jazz Project**.

Every bit as remarkable as the vibrant, passionate music on *Desde Lejos* (Summit), the latest recording by the Dominican Jazz Project, is the mere fact of its existence. The myriad challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic were daunting enough, especially given that assorted participants lived in different countries and couldn't travel. But the crew was also beset by multiple health-related crises, including the death of beloved bassist and bandmate Jeffry Eckels.

"I was in shock — we all were," says Dr. Stephen Anderson, a gifted pianist whose 2014 trip to the Jazzomania Jazz Festival in Santo Domingo provided the spark that led to the Dominican Jazz Project's formation. "That was a big tragedy."

The original idea for *Desde Lejos* (in English, "from afar") came from a much happier place. "I've been wanting to do another project with this band for a long time," says Anderson, who serves as director of jazz studies at the University of North Carolina. "This is my favorite band to work with on the planet."

In March 2020, Anderson and his cohorts in the Dominican Republic, including drummer Guy Frómata, saxophonist Sandy Gabriel, guitarist-vocalist Carlos Luis and percussionist-vocalist David Almengod, were getting ready to cut a sequel to the unit's self-titled 2016 debut when COVID-19 struck the music business full force. Initially, Anderson used this period to write new material that would supplement a pair of gorgeous Luis-penned ballads,

"Como un Rayo Ciego" and "Una Más," already earmarked for inclusion. But in May, Eckels' mother died of natural causes. This loss, in combination with the isolation and financial problems caused by the pandemic, exacerbated mental-health issues with which Eckels had long struggled. He lost his battle on July 3.

In the days that followed, Anderson processed his grief by creating the roiling "Sin Palabras" (in English,

"speechless"). "I wrote it out of pure emotion," he says. Additionally, the group cut the rhythmically tricky "Siempre Adelante," one of Eckels' compositions, as another tribute to him.

Meanwhile, more heartbreaking complications followed — among them the August 2020 death of Gabriel's father, revered Dominican musician Sócrates Gabriel, and an extended illness suffered by the mother of Ramón Vázquez Martirena, a Cuban bassist now living in Puerto Rico, who'd agreed to play on the recording after Eckels' passing. Martirena eventually contributed to six tracks, with Craig Butterfield and Jason Foureman, both close friends of Eckels', also pitching in. Other key guests included renowned Cuban trumpeter Mayquel González and Dominican clavietta legend Guillo Carias.

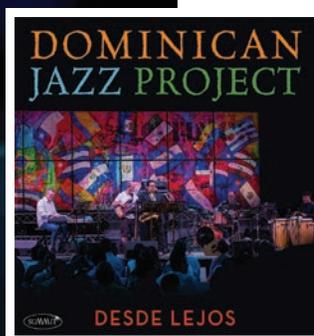
The process of assembling the songs required a significant learning curve for Anderson. "I would never have recorded remotely," he admits, "but Guy [Frómata] is very comfortable with that. By early fall, we were sending tracks back and forth daily. I recorded all my parts, then sent out the charts, and one by one, everyone started filling them in."

Doing so wasn't easy. "Normally in rehearsal, you might say, 'That's cool, but maybe let's do it a little more this way,'" Anderson explains. "But instead, the musicians would have to record something and upload it, and we'd have to download it and then say that in a message sent over WhatsApp. That took forever. It was like an ongoing studio session that lasted six months."

Somehow, though, songs such as the exuberant opener "Fuera de la Oscuridad" and the strutting "Un Cambio de Ritmo" sound as spontaneous as if the players had all been in the same room together. "I was surprised, actually," Anderson admits. "And delighted."

Still, the performers are most excited about being on the same stage again. A mini-tour is in the planning stages, and Anderson says, "We all can't wait."

— **Michael Roberts**





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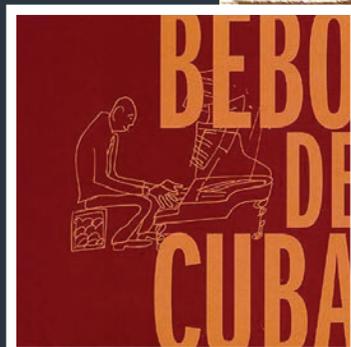
**Bebo Valdés**

*Bebo de Cuba* (Calle 54), 2005

A titan of Cuban jazz, Bebo Valdés had been living in exile in Sweden for decades when he came to New York in November 2002 to record the music on this sprawling two-disc collection. The first disc features the pianist, composer and arranger's *Suite Cubana*, a joyous big-band romp through original compositions that affectionately salute his old friend and compadre Israel "Cachao" López (credited as the "creator of the mambo") as well as Bebo's wife, Rose Marie; son Chuco Valdés; and a beloved friend of his grandfather's, Cecilio, who looked after Bebo's family as if it were his own. The second disc, dubbed *El Solar de Bebo*, comprises laid-back jams on equally personal, completely captivating melodies utilizing many of the same musicians from the big band. (The package also includes a 22-minute DVD chronicling the event.)

Producers Fernando Trueba and Nat Chediak surrounded Valdés with some of the best players available, including saxophonists Paquito D'Rivera (who doubles on clarinet), Bobby Porcelli and Mario Rivera; trumpeters Diego Urcola, Michael Phillip Mossman and Ray Vega; and trombonists Juan Pablo Torres, Luis Bonilla and Papo Vázquez. The big band is anchored by drummer Dafnis Prieto, the jam sessions by Steve Berrios. A veritable encyclopedia of Latin rhythms, the program delves into mambo, *bembé*, *son*, *montuno*, *batanga* (Bebo's own invention) and *joropo*, and congas, timbales, *güiro* and *tres* conjure a pre-Revolution golden era of Cuban jazz.

Valdés, 84 at the time, is an elegant and understated presence on piano, exuding warmth, passion and nostalgia — never melancholy — for the home and the life he was forced to leave behind in exchange for artistic and personal freedom. — **Bob Weinberg**





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# CRITICS' PICKS

2021

**A**

nother challenging year in the jazz world has concluded, and once again, we've asked *JAZZIZ* writers and editors to list their top 10 recordings of the past 12 months (roughly from September 15, 2020 to October 15, 2021). As ever, it's a highly subjective

exercise, one limited by the albums we've had a chance to hear and digest during this time period, as well as by our own personal and critical biases. Our critics' number-one selections appear at the top of their lists, accompanied by a brief explanation of why they chose it. Despite a second year of COVID restrictions, jazz artists responded brilliantly, as evidenced by the album titles that follow.

## HRAYR ATTARIAN

**ANNA WEBBER** *Idiom* (Pi)

Anna Webber showcases her innovative spirit and unique style on the brilliant two-disc *Idiom*. On the first disc, the saxophonist, flutist and composer performs in a trio with pianist Matt Mitchell and drummer John Hollenbeck. All three musicians push the creative boundaries of their respective instruments while improvising in sublime synergy. The second disc consists of a single piece interpreted by a 12-member ensemble. Webber deftly leads the large group in a dynamic and densely layered performance that crackles with spontaneity and exhilarates with its unexpected twists and turns. *Idiom* is the apogee of Webber's singular and uniformly superlative output.

**Gustavo Cortinas** *Desafio Candente* (Woolgathering)

**Sons of Kemet** *Black to the Future* (Impulse!)

**Dr. Lonnie Smith** *Breathe* (Blue Note)

**Ivo Perelman** *The Purity of Desire* (Not Two)

**Flatland Quartet** *Songs From the Urban Forest* (Gold Lion)

**Kenny Garrett** *Sounds From the Ancestors* (Mack Avenue)

**William Parker** *Migration of Silence Into and Out of the Tone World* (AUM Fidelity)

**María Grand** *Reciprocity* (Biophilia)

**James Brandon Lewis Red Lily Quintet** *Jesup Wagon* (Tao Forms)

## LARRY BLUMENFELD

**HASAAN IBN ALI** *Metaphysics: The Lost Atlantic Album* (Omnivore)

Every now and then, forgotten music surfaces to fill in a gap in jazz history, highlight an overlooked name or showcase a key moment of transition. This release does all those things. Ali, a Philadelphia-based pianist, was influential to, among others, McCoy Tyner, and he extended the language of Thelonious Monk's pianism in singular fashion. In 1964, the release of *The Max Roach Trio Featuring the Legendary Hasaan* brought him to broader attention. The drummer gave Ali featured billing to argue for the pianist's own Atlantic Records contract. It worked, but Ali faded from the spotlight owing to personal problems. The master tapes of his planned debut, leading a quartet, were lost in a fire. He became little more than a footnote. The brilliance of this recently discovered copy of those tapes solves a historical mystery while opening our ears to fresh musical ones.

**James Brandon Lewis Red Lily Quintet** *Jesup Wagon* (Tao Forms)

**Roy Hargrove & Mulgrew Miller** *In Harmony* (Resonance)

**Anna Webber** *Idiom* (Pi)

**Steven Bernstein's Millennial Territory Orchestra** *Tinctures in Time* (*Community Music, Vol. 1*) (Royal Potato Family)

**William Parker** *Migration of Silence Into and Out of the Tone World* (AUM Fidelity)

**Hank Roberts Sextet** *Science of Love* (Sunnyside)

**Jen Shyu** *Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses* (Pi)

**Nicholas Payton/Sasha Masakowski/Cliff Hines** *Quarantined With Nick* (Paytone)

**Henry Threadgill** *Zooid Poof* (Pi)

## LISSETTE CORSA

### **GUSTAVO CORTIÑAS** *Desafío Candente* (Woolgathering)

On his third release as a leader, Chicago-based drummer-composer Gustavo Cortiñas draws inspiration from Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano's canonical anti-colonialism/capitalism tome *Open Veins of Latin America* in a two-disc opus as sprawling and fiery as the text itself. A vast array of instrumentalists and spoken-word artists from 11 countries accompanies Cortiñas' supple sextet across 14 sublime originals. The ambitious instrumental narrative — divided in chapters and stitched together by horn-laced rhythms and words spoken in the staccato of Indigenous languages and the cadence of Spanish — is a resounding sonic condemnation of the exploitative power structure that has long held sway over Latin America since Europeans set foot.

**Lady Blackbird** *Black Acid Soul* (BMG)

**Makaya McCraven** *Deciphering the Message* (Blue Note)

**Malnoia** *Hello Future* (Outside in Music)

**Rob Mazurek Exploding Star Orchestra** *Dimensional Stardust* (International Anthem/Nonesuch)

**Esperanza Spalding** *Triangle* (Concord)

**Jahari Massamba Unit** *Pardon My French* (Madlib Invazion)

**Dafnis Prieto Sextet** *Transparency* (Dafnison Music)

**Roxana Amed** *Ontology* (Sony Music Latin)

**Antônio Neves** *A Pegada Agora É Essa* (Far Out)

## MARK HOLSTON

### **CARLOS HENRIQUEZ** *The South Bronx Story* (Tiger Turn)

Bassist, composer and arranger Henriquez, a son of the New York City borough of the Bronx, explores culturally distinctive traits of the neighborhood's Puerto Rican heritage through 10 rhythmically seething tracks. *Sonero* (vocalist) Jeremy Bosch is a revelation, and Henriquez makes a bold choice in personnel, staffing the small horn section with musicians not associated with the Latin jazz genre: saxophonist Melissa Aldana, trumpeter Terell Stafford, and trombonist Marshall Gilkes. They nail the ensemble turns while bringing fresh perspectives to their solo outings.

**Doug Beavers** *Sol* (Circle 9)

**Jon Gordon** *Stranger Than Fiction* (ArtistShare)

**Wayne Coniglio & Scott Whitfield** *Faster Friends* (Summit)

**Aaron Germain** *Bell Projections* (self-released)

**Gabriel Vicéns** *The Way We Are Created* (Inner Circle Music)

**Reggie Quinerly** *New York Nowhere* (Redefinition Music)

**Grant Richards** *Ballyhoo* (self-released)

**Gerry Gibbs Thrasher Dream Trios** *Songs From My Father* (Whaling City Sound)

**Victor Rendón & Bronx Conexión Latin Jazz Big Band** *Mambo Boulevard* (self-released)

## JOHN FREDERICK MOORE

### **MILFORD GRAVES/JASON MORAN** *Live at Big Ears* (YES)

This is one of those live recordings where you immediately think: I wish I could've been there. Pianist Jason Moran and drummer Milford Graves recorded this improvised performance in 2018. Graves, who died shortly before the record's release, was devoted to studying the rhythms of the human heart. There's plenty of blood flowing throughout these duets, and even the quieter moments radiate a warm intensity. It's all about the vibrations Graves and Moran create, which, in this case, are singular and exhilarating.

**Vijay Iyer/Linda May Han Oh/Tyshawn Sorey** *UnEasy* (ECM)

**Hafez Modirzadeh** *Facets* (Pi)

**Floating Points & Pharoah Sanders** (feat. **The London Symphony Orchestra**) *Promises* (Luaka Bop)

**Jason Moran** *The Sound Will Tell You* (YES)

**Thumbscrew** *Never Is Enough* (Cuneiform)

**Henry Threadgill Zooid** *Poof* (Pi)

**Alexa Tarantino** *Firefly* (Posi-Tone)

**Various artists** *Kimbrough* (Newvelle)

**María Grand** *Reciprocity* (Biophilia)

## ERIC SNIDER

### **ERIC HOFBAUER/DYLAN JACK** *Period Pieces* (Creative Nation Music)

Think of this collection by the Boston-based quartet as free-ish jazz. The players — guitarist Hofbauer, drummer Jack, trumpeter Jerry Sabatini and Tony Leva on bass and electronics — weave together a polyglot flow of ideas, often working their way into tight grooves and melodies that seamlessly move in and out of free improvisation. The heady combination of sonic textures and feels — agile drumming, warped solo trumpet, scratchy acoustic guitar licks, out-of-the-blue synth eruptions, well-placed collective paroxysms — constantly delights the ear as the band travels down surprising avenues and alleys, not to mention sidewalks and backyards. A rewarding journey, indeed.

**Steven Bernstein's Millennial Territory Orchestra** *Tinctures in Time* (*Community Music, Vol. 1*) (Royal Potato Family)

**Cochemea** *Vol II: Baca Sewa* (Daptone)

**Fire!** *Defeat* (Rune Grammofon)

**Jeff Lederer Sunwatcher Quartet** *Eightfold Path* (Little (i) Music)

**James Brandon Lewis Red Lily Quintet** *Jesup Wagon* (Tao Forms)

**Russ Lossing** *Metamorphism* (Sunnyside)

**Chuck Owen & The Jazz Surge** *Within Us* (Summit)

**Ches Smith & We All Break** *Path of Seven Colors* (Pyroclastic)

**Tani Tabbal Trio** *Now Then* (Tao Forms)

## BOB WEINBERG

### **JAMES BRANDON LEWIS RED LILY QUINTET**

#### ***Jesup Wagon* (Tao Forms)**

Echoes of Albert Ayler and Ornette Coleman resound through tenor saxophonist and composer James Brandon Lewis' *Jesup Wagon*. A salute to Lewis' lifelong hero, George Washington Carver, the song cycle celebrates the brilliant, multi-faceted man of science with impassioned performances that evoke a time (late-19th/early-20th century), a place (the Deep South) and a fierce intellect tempered by humanism. While Americana is woven throughout, the music sounds quite modern, thanks to Lewis' on-the-same-page collaborators: cornetist Kirk Knuffke, bassist William Parker, cellist Chris Hoffman and drummer Chad Taylor. Lewis' vision is vividly realized in this powerful, personal portrait of an extraordinary Black man who triumphed against the odds.

#### **Blue Reality Quartet** *Love Exists Everywhere* (Mahakala)

#### **Dopolarians** *The Bond* (Mahakala)

#### **George Cables** *Too Close for Comfort* (HighNote)

#### **Mehmet Ali Sanlikol** *An Elegant Ritual* (Dünya)

#### **Ches Smith & We All Break** *Path of Seven Colors* (Pyroclastic)

#### **Sachal Vasandani/Romain Collin** *Midnight Shelter* (Edition)

#### **Eliane Elias** *Mirror Mirror* (Candid)

#### **Jane Ira Bloom/Mark Helias** *Some Kind of Tomorrow* (self-released)

#### **Henry Threadgill Zooid** *Poof* (Pi)

## JONATHAN WIDRAN

### **MARK WINKLER/DAVID BENOIT** *Old Friends* (Café Pacific)

For jazz fans, the pandemic lockdown had its upside, none more hipster, engaging, elegant yet playfully swinging than *Old Friends*, the first full-on duet album in the 37-year personal and professional friendship of vocalist-songwriter Mark Winkler and pianist-composer David Benoit. In addition to finding socially distanced freshness in some well and lesser known standards, the contemporary jazz vets engage in colorful re-workings of a few of their own gems — including a first time ever vocal twist on Benoit's signature "Kei's Song," presented here as "In a Quiet Place."

#### **Andy Snitzer** *Higher* (Goose Song Music)

#### **Brian Bromberg** *A Little Driving Music* (Artistry Music)

#### **Dave Koz/Cory Wong** *The Golden Hour* (Just Koz Entertainment)

#### **Mark Jaimes** *Hear at Last* (Trippin 'N' Rhythm)

#### **Larry Carlton & Paul Brown** *Soul Searchin'* (Shanachie)

#### **Jeff Ryan** *Duality* (Woodward Avenue)

#### **Judy Wexler** *Back to the Garden* (Jewel City Jazz)

#### **Cathy Segal-Garcia** *Social Anthems, Volume 1* (Origin)

#### **Chris Standring** *Wonderful World* (Ultimate Vibe)

## BRIAN ZIMMERMAN

### **KENNY GARRETT** *Sounds From the Ancestors* (Mack Avenue)

Saxophonist Kenny Garrett has long been praised as a premier architect of groove. As well he should be. Among his many musical gifts is his uncanny ability to expand the dimensions of a repeated phrase — working new harmonies into the crevices of a single chord, or using novel rhythmic patterns to change the shape of a recurring motif — until even the most confining musical space is suffused with new light. The former Miles Davis sideman, now 61, looks to musical frameworks past and present to buttress his latest disc, which neatly bridges the rhythms of West Africa ("It's Time To Come Home" and the spirited title track) to the hard-bop swing of Art Blakey and Tony Allen ("For Art's Sake") and the neo-soul stylings of Roy Hargrove ("Hargrove"). It's a marvel of complexity and nuance, but Garrett's tone — full-throated and fearless — reminds us of this music's great humanity.

#### **Roy Hargrove & Mulgrew Miller** *In Harmony* (Resonance)

#### **Julian Lage** *Squint* (Blue Note)

#### **Roxana Amed** *Ontology* (Sony Latin Music)

#### **Archie Shepp & Jason Moran** *Let My People Go* (Archieball)

#### **Yoko Miwa Trio** *Songs of Joy* (Ubuntu)

#### **Orrin Evans** *The Magic of Now* (Smoke Sessions)

#### **Chris Potter** *Sunrise Reprise* (Edition)

#### **Helen Sung** *Quartet +* (Sunnyside)

#### **Butcher Brown** *#KingButch* (Concord)

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## DISC 1: PASSION

1. **Will Vinson** “Desolation Tango” *Perfectly Out of Place* (5Passion)
2. **Seamus Blake** “Last Continent” *Superconductor* (5Passion)
3. **Alex Sipiagin** “With the Tide” *From Reality and Back* (5Passion)
4. **Yosvanny Terry** “New Throned King” *New Throned King* (5Passion)
5. **Esperanza Fernández/Gonzalo Rubalcaba** “Tu Me Sabes Comprender” *Oh Vida* (5Passion)
6. **Ignacio Berroa** “When Will the Blues Leave/Vine Pa’ echar Candela” *Heritage and Passion* (5Passion)
7. **Gonzalo Rubalcaba** “Bay City” *Charlie* (5Passion)
8. **Gonzalo Rubalcaba** “Santa Meta” *Caminos* (5Passion)
9. **Gonzalo Rubalcaba** “Silver Hollow” *Skyline* (5Passion)
10. **Armando Gola** “Remember November” *Gola Elektrik* (5Passion)
11. **Gonzalo Rubalcaba** “Con Alma” *Fe* (5Passion)

## DISC 2: PURPOSE

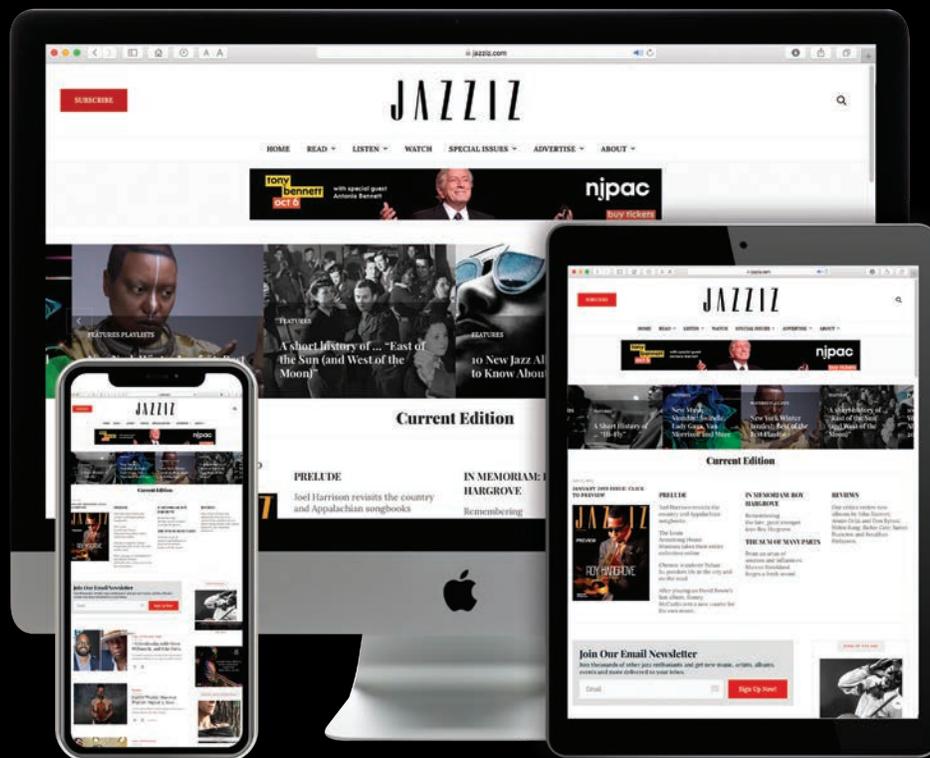
1. **Carlos Henriquez** “Hydrants Love All” *The South Bronx Story* (Tiger Turn)
2. **Rubén Blades y Roberto Delgado & Orquesta** “Pennies From Heaven” *SALSWING!* (Rubén Blades Productions)
3. **Ali Bello** “Heartbeat” *Inheritance: Venezuelan Jazz Fusion* (Tiger Turn)
4. **Edward Simon** “Lush Life” *Solo Live* (Ridgeway)
5. **Mike Eckroth Group** “And So It Goes” *Plena* (Truth Revolution)
6. **Miguel Zenón & Luis Perdomo** “Ese Hastío” *El Arte del Bolero* (Miel Music)
7. **Grant Richards** “Ballyhoo” *Ballyhoo* (self-released)
8. **Alex Brown** “Anthem” *The Dark Fire Sessions* (self-released)
9. **Itai Kriss & Telavana** “Taurus” *Supermoon* (self-released)
10. **Ches Smith & We All Break** “Women of Iron” *Path of Seven Colors* (Pyroclastic)



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Superconductor



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From Reality and Back



**YOSVANNY TERRY**  
New Throned King



**ESPERANZA FERNÁNDEZ / GONZALO RUBALCABA**  
Oh Vida



**IGNACIO BERROA**  
Heritage and Passion



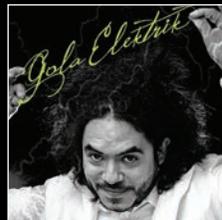
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Charlie



**GONZALO RUBALCABA**  
Caminos



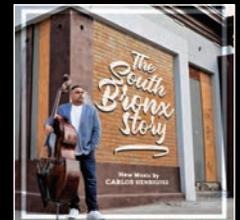
**GONZALO RUBALCABA**  
Skyline



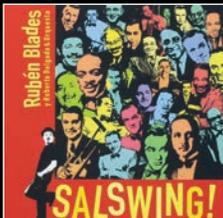
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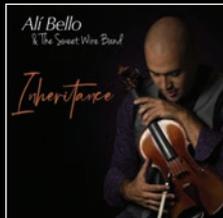
**GONZALO RUBALCABA**  
Fe



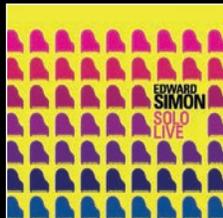
**CARLOS HENRIQUEZ**  
The South Bronx Story



**RUBÉN BLADES Y ROBERTO DELGADO & ORQUESTA**  
SALSWING!



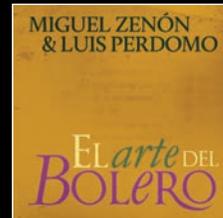
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Inheritance: Venezuelan Jazz Fusion



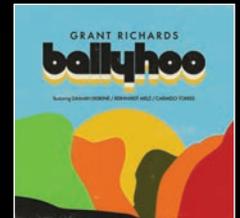
**EDWARD SIMON**  
Solo Live



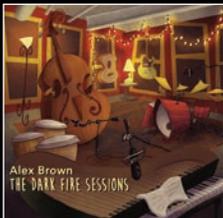
**MIKE ECKROTH GROUP**  
Plena



**MIGUEL ZENÓN & LUIS PERDOMO**  
El Arte del Bolero



**GRANT RICHARDS**  
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# Manhattan Island Serenade

**Gonzalo Rubalcaba reconnects with the colleagues, and the city, that helped him realize his dream.** By Bob Weinberg

Gonzalo Rubalcaba first glimpsed the New York City skyline in 1993, when he was granted permission to travel from his native Cuba to attend a memorial service for Dizzy Gillespie. Ironically, Gillespie had been angling to bring the young pianist to the U.S. to tour with him, but had been repeatedly denied the proper permits. A year later, Rubalcaba received a work visa and an invitation to play Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall with his Cuban quartet, as well as with two more of his jazz-world champions, Charlie Haden and Jack DeJohnette.

"That was, to me, a moment that I dreamed of, to see myself in New York," says Rubalcaba, who has reunited with drummer DeJohnette and another early supporter, bassist Ron Carter, on his recent release *Skyline* (5Passion). The 2018 session took place at New York's Power Station studios with another longtime friend and associate, recording engineer Jim Anderson.

Of course, Rubalcaba's situation has improved dramatically since his first forays in the Big Apple. The pianist and his wife, Maria, live in an airy, spacious house in the South Florida suburb of Coral Springs, where they raised three now-grown children. He's performed all over the world, earned Grammys for his own recordings, as well as for his contributions to others', and has operated his 5Passion record label for a decade.

The couple greet me from the open garage door of their home in this quiet gated community, its winding streets named for trees. Gonzalo and I settle into white-cushioned seats in the high-ceilinged living room, with one wall handsomely

appointed in stone, another containing a sliding-glass door that leads to a patio and pool. Fit and trim at 58, wearing a loose-fitting button-down shirt, skinny jeans and sneakers and sporting blue-framed eyeglasses, Rubalcaba looks very much like a hip, suburban dad who might be seen walking and biking the neighborhood.

"The album, as I see it, is a reunion," Rubalcaba says of *Skyline*. "And also it's an homage, it's a tribute from me to Jack and Ron. They were, and still are, some of my heroes. They helped me a lot when I just arrived here, even before I arrived here to live."

Rubalcaba is delighted to be working with his old colleagues again and had been searching for an opportunity to do so. Thirty years have passed since the pianist recorded *The Blessing*, a breakthrough trio album with DeJohnette and Haden, and it's been nearly that long since 1993's *Diz*, a tribute album to Gillespie, featuring (and co-produced by) Carter. "I was looking for a point where I could call them back again to the studio or stage and play together 30 years later," Rubalcaba says. "Just to say, through the music, thank you."

For that same reason, Rubalcaba requested his colleagues bring some particular songs of their own to the session. Threaded through the album, which also includes a couple of traditional Cuban pieces and Rubalcaba originals — and one lively group improv, captured by Anderson who wisely left the tape rolling during a break — are compositions by Carter and

DeJohnette that date back decades: “A Quiet Place,” from Carter’s 1978 recording *Songs for You*, and “Gypsy” from his 1979 release *Parade*; and DeJohnette’s “Silver Hollow” from 1978’s *New Directions* (and reprised on *The Blessing*) and “Ahmad the Terrible” from 1984’s *Album Album*.

Rubalcaba was in his teens and early 20s when this music was first released. Living in Cuba, he had no access to the recordings, which were forbidden by the government. Still, foreign musicians would smuggle in cassettes, which were eagerly copied and passed around by Rubalcaba and his friends, and a half-hour radio broadcast (hosted by Horacio “El Negro” Hernandez’s dad) supplied a limited but soul-sustaining weekday infusion of jazz. Rubalcaba certainly knew of Carter and DeJohnette, especially from their work with Miles Davis, but he didn’t hear their own recordings until years later, while touring outside of Cuba. “When I had the ability to start buying music for myself and traveling around the world, I tried to get as much information as I could,” he says. “Then I discovered a lot of stuff.”

The pianist culled a couple of tunes from his own songbook, as well, both of which are close to his heart: “Siempre Maria,” which he wrote for his wife back in the ‘80s, and “Promenade,” which he dedicated to Carter. “I don’t know why I had that image of Ron Carter, just walking,” he says of his inspiration for the latter, which first appeared on his 1999 release *Inner Voyage*. “He’s elegant, a kind of classic gentleman. The way he dresses, the way he communicates, the way he plays is connected always with elegance. And this is what I tried to put inside [the song], that kind of movement.”

**“I don’t pretend to compete with anybody else, to believe what I do is Cuban or not Cuban. To me, the most important thing is to move people spiritually, emotionally. After that, if you think of this as English music or Cuban music or Afro-Cuban music, or whatever, at the end, it’s not relevant.”**

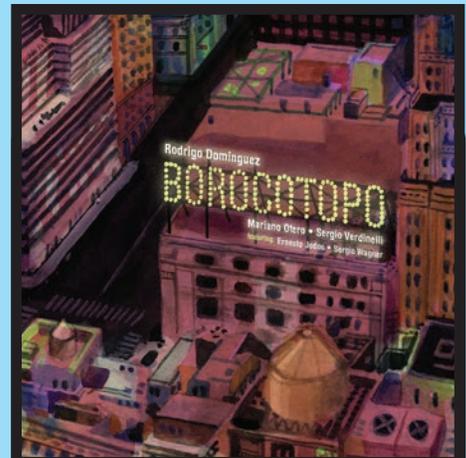
Photo by Pachy Lopez

He selected the traditional pieces with equal intention. Miguel Matamoros’ beloved “Lagrimas Negras” and José Antonio Méndez’s “Novia Mia” represent distinct eras in the history of Cuban music. Rubalcaba challenged himself to find new expression in songs he’d been listening to since childhood and was aided by his bandmates, who approached the material with fresh ears. “I just said, ‘OK, I would like to do this Cuban piece, it’s very well known,’” he says. “But what I want you to do is just to add what you think should be in there. So you play what you want to play.’ And this is what happened. Three or four takes. And then we decide, ‘That one.’”

Years ago, Rubalcaba was stung by criticism that his music wasn’t “Latin enough.” However, the pianist’s stature, among critics, audiences and fellow musicians, has grown exponentially as many have caught up with his wide-ranging approach. Cuban music laces his DNA — his culture, his training, his life on the island inform so many of his aesthetic choices — as far from it as he may venture.

“When you say ‘Cuban music,’ there are still some people who need the stereotype, some mode that tells them you are Cuban, that what you are doing is Cuban or not,” he says. “And to me it’s impossible. I don’t pretend to compete with anybody else, to believe what I do is Cuban or not Cuban. To me, the most important thing is to move people spiritually, emotionally. After that, if you think of this as English music or Cuban music or Afro-Cuban music, or whatever, at the end, it’s not relevant.”

Such concerns were far from his mind as Rubalcaba convened with Carter and DeJohnette for this pre-



**Rodrigo Domínguez**  
***Borocotopo* (ears&eyes)**

A pillar of the Buenos Aires jazz scene, alto saxophonist Domínguez leads a hard-charging trio on a set of frequently funky, ear-friendly yet challenging original tunes. He also welcomes Ernesto Jodos, whose Fender Rhodes sparkles celestially on the opening and closing numbers, and the excellent cornetist Sergio Wagner on a couple more. Bassist Martiano Otero and drummer Sergio Verdinelli ratchet up the excitement throughout, conversing with and supporting Domínguez’s probing, lush-toned lines. The saxophonist describes the title track as “Ornette + Jarrett + cartoon music,” an onomatopoeic salute to things he loves.

**NOW PLAYING**

COVID session. As someone who’s never really comfortable in the studio, he nonetheless enjoyed the experience. “It was very relaxing. Everybody was in a very good mood,” Rubalcaba says. “Jack is always telling me stories about everything he loves, boxing, Muhammad Ali. And Ron has a very particular humor. I love to see when he laughs; he’s normally very serious. And when you see him laugh, it’s a sign that he’s comfortable, that he’s in a great environment. It was a reunion that I think everyone wanted to happen. We were there to make music, but also to laugh, to eat together, to talk, to enjoy the moment.” ■

# Mambo Suave

Guitarist **Ray Obiedo** returns with another helping of sultry Latin grooves. By Jonathan Widran

Even back when he was a Billboard charting artist, Ray Obiedo's music was too eclectic to fit snugly into any single genre. In 1989, as the radio format that would eventually evolve into smooth jazz was exploding, the veteran Bay Area guitarist signed to Windham Hill and launched a prolific decade of recording that included two Top 10 albums on the Contemporary Jazz charts (*Iguana, Sticks & Stones*), and two others (*Sweet Summer Days, Zulaya*) that reached the Top 40 on the Jazz Albums chart.

"I enjoyed making those records, but I was never a smooth jazz artist," says Obiedo, who launched his solo career after a decade recording and/or touring with the disparate likes of Herbie Hancock, Harvey Mason, Julian Priester, Pete Escovedo, Sheila E., The Whispers and George Duke. "My band played a lot of festivals where we were always the odd bird, not the typical guitarist jumping around and smiling up front with a sax player. We did Weather Report, took a super funky, jazzier approach to soloing. My keyboard player, Peter Horvath, had played trio jazz and done records with Lenny White and Billy Cobham and wrote tunes that could be smooth but inspired us to play our butts off. We would always add a Latin beat, some cha cha cha, mambo, and make sure the rhythm section did some hip chord changes."

That's exactly the freewheeling, stylistically, harmonically and rhythmically expansive spirit that Obiedo and a mix-and-match

ensemble of more than 25 Bay Area jazz stalwarts bring to his latest album (and fourth on his indie label Rhythmus Records), *Latin Jazz Project Vol. 2*. Five years in the making, the album provides a sequel to his highly regarded 2016 date, *Latin Jazz Project Vol. 1*.

From its sensual, increasingly boisterous and percussive opener "Still Life" — a cha cha Obiedo originally penned for Pete Escovedo's orchestra in the mid-'80s — through "Big World," a silky 6/8 seduction featuring a Mike Olmos flugelhorn solo and a fiery percussion outro by Sheila E. — the eight-song set fully reflects and embraces just about everything Obiedo's been up to since he took a 15-year break from recording (1999-2014), in part to raise his kids.

In addition to contributing funky, James Brownesque grooves to the Pete Escovedo Orchestra, a "cool, classy affair" that has been part of his live performance résumé since 1975, the guitarist leads a variety of regional Bay Area bands focused on different genres: Ray Obiedo and Misturafina (Brazilian), Sugar Cane Sweet (reggae, Caribbean and soca) and Mambo Caribe (Latin jazz). The size and scope of the ensemble depends on whether he's playing a festival (he's popular at Monterey Jazz and San Jose Jazz) or a more intimate club setting.

"It's fun to do something completely outside the realm of contemporary jazz, like reggae, and I love the variety of situations and lineups and the challenges they create for me and my

**“My keyboard player, Peter Horvath, wrote tunes that could be smooth but inspired us to play our butts off. We would always add a Latin beat, some cha cha cha, mambo, and make sure the rhythm section did some hip chord changes.”**

ensembles,” Obiedo says. “For the release party for *Latin Jazz Vol. 2* at the Sound Room in Oakland, I took what I call the Ray Obiedo Group, a six-piece band that plays all the genres I have written in — from samba to smooth jazz. I can use those same guys in bigger bands like Mambo Caribe. Since the event was at a club, I didn’t use the five horns, but we created a big sound so I don’t think the audience was missing the brass or the other percussionists they’ve seen me with. On the other hand, I do love playing festivals when I can add extra musicians.”

Though the number of contributing musicians makes it seem like *Latin Jazz Project Vol. 2* was a massive logistical endeavor, Obiedo insists that the foundations of the recording were very simple. His core rhythm sections (bass, drums and keys), all recorded pre-COVID, included bassists David Belove, Dewayne Pate and Marc van Wageningen (of Tower of Power); drummers Phil Hawkins, Billy Johnson and David Garibaldi (also from TOP); and keyboardist, pianist and organist David K. Mathews (of Santana).

Overdubs, including Obiedo’s guitar parts, percussion (by Sheila E., Peter Michael Escovedo, Karl Perazzo and others), horn section (led by trombonist and arranger Jeff Cressman) and solos were recorded during the pandemic (using social distance measures, of course) at his home studio, including sessions for percussion and horns in his garage. Like many projects created or completed during this crazy time, the album also includes tracks that were recorded remotely, digitally transferred and mixed in.

Beyond the expansive Bay Area contingent, prominent guests include saxophonist Bob Mintzer (on the sly, funky,

cha-cha-tinged “Beatnik” and the mambo fusion jam “Uno Dos”) and flutist Norbert Stachel (on the high-octane, horn-fired mambo “Criss Cross” and the danceable, island-flavored soca romp “Santa Lucia”).

“Criss Cross” and “Santa Lucia” are notable inclusions for several reasons, starting with the fact that they’re re-imaginings of tracks originally recorded on Obiedo albums in the ’90s. The new versions were originally recorded in 2010, years before the guitarist conceived of Latin jazz ensemble projects, founded his label and returned from his long recording hiatus. The songs’ resurrection from Obiedo’s files not only made stylistic/thematic sense, but also served a sentimental purpose — the drummer on those tracks, Paul van Wageningen (brother of Marc), passed away from cancer in 2012.

The Dutch-born musician became one of the Bay Area’s premier multicultural drummers, receiving three Grammy nominations and performing with everyone from the Escovedos, Andy Narell and Gonzalo Rubalcaba to Paquito D’Rivera, Nestor Torres and Dori Caymmi. “He was a phenomenal talent and I was blown away when he left us,” says Obiedo. “I loved the way he played, and when I found the tracks I knew I wanted to include them. It was a way to get both brothers on the album. I completed the tunes with a few more percussion parts. What’s weird is when I rediscovered them, I had recorded Paul counting the tune off. Marc appreciated hearing his brother’s voice after so many years.”

Though “Beatnik” rose quickly on the JazzWeek radio chart, Obiedo’s creative intentions for *Latin Jazz Project Vol. 2* were focused more on camaraderie among longtime friends and cohorts

than airplay considerations. “Playing with these brilliant musicians, whether in the studio or Yoshi’s, I still feel in my late 60s the same butterflies and excitement I felt when I was on the freeway heading to my first gigs at 18,” he says. “It’s that comfortable sense that you’re playing with friends who’ve all been in the trenches and grown up with you. For some of us, it’s hard to relate to people who are not musicians. When we hang out together after shows and sessions, we may not always be talking about music, but there’s a sense of connection many of us can’t find anywhere else.” ■



**Senri Oe**

***Letter to N.Y.* (PND/Sony Masterworks)**

On *Letter to N.Y.*, jazz pianist and composer (and former Japanese pop star) Senri Oe artfully captures the restless energy of the pandemic quarantine and his enduring love for all the colorful, rhythmically varied musical styles of his adopted hometown. Using a simple arsenal of his upright piano, electric keyboard and Logic Pro X music app, Oe complements tracks specifically influenced by the bustling magnificence of the Big Apple (“Out of Chaos,” “A Werewolf in Brooklyn”) with more hopeful, universal messages in tunes such as “Love” and “Togetherness.” In his words, everything was about creating “the jazz songs people all over the world can hum.”

**now playing**

# The Best Party You Never Knew About

An intrepid journalist documents the world of Cuba's *changüí*.

By Larry Blumenfeld



I remember sitting next to Gianluca Tramontana at Havana's Mella Theater in December 2016, for a concert by pianist Arturo O'Farrill's Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra within Cuba's annual jazz festival. I was ending a reporting trip for a story about O'Farrill's explorations of his Cuban roots, set against the backdrop of then-normalizing relations, embargo notwithstanding, between the U.S. and Cuba during the Obama administration.

Tramontana's journey, it turns out, was just beginning. An experienced music journalist and broadcaster born in Italy and living in New York City, he, like me, had fallen in love with the island, especially its entrancing and expansive musical culture. His first report from Cuba for National Public Radio explored the island's tradition of organ grinders. By early 2017, he was off in search of traditional *changüí*, a musical style born in the 19th century in Guantánamo Province, on the eastern tip of Cuba.

Nearly five years later, I had the fruits of Tramontana's quest in my hands: a glorious three-disc boxed set titled *Changüí: The Sound of Guantánamo* (Petaluma). The collection's 50 tracks bristle with the strumming of *tres*, a guitar-like instrument of Cuban origin; the deep-toned throbs of the *marimbula*, a wooden box with plucked keys; the syncopated beats of bongos and maracas; and the sung passages that told stories about the past or just reveled in the joy of a moment. I'd been writing about

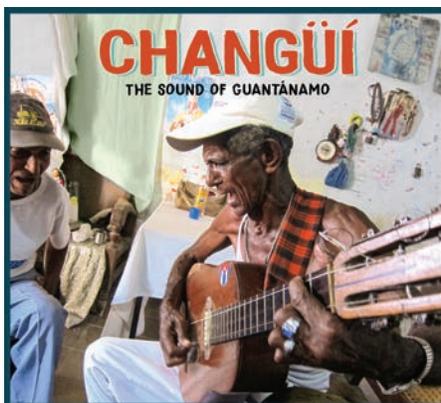
Cuban music, especially the many varieties of Afro-Cuban jazz, for more than 20 years, and had been back to the island several times. But I'd never ventured to Guantánamo Province. I'd never heard anything quite like this.

I dug into the music and the accompanying glossy 120-page book, rich with photography and background. The more I listened, the more I invested in O'Farrill's comment in the book's introduction: "If music is the fabric of life in the rest of Cuba, then *changüí* is existence itself ... here was not so much a musical style but a way of life." In his book, Tramontana claims that the word "*changüí*" was most likely derived from "*qui-sangüí*," the Congolese word for dance, or more literally "jump for joy." In the villages around Guantánamo City and in the city itself, he reports, the musical gatherings — something in between informal parties and jam sessions — often last for three days.

For Tramontana, the project was sparked during a trip to a Havana radio station, where he was being interviewed. Off the air, while waiting for one of Fidel Castro's marathon broadcast speeches to end, someone popped in a cassette. "This was not like all the Cuban music I knew," he told me in an interview. "It wasn't tied to the *clave* [the five-beat pattern elemental to most of the island's music]. It was syncopated and full of call-and-response singing. It was tight but also wonderfully raggedy.

It bounced around like a three-legged horse but, still, it felt elegant too.” He was smitten by these sounds.

Yet, as he poked around in Havana and other towns, he found little to satisfy him. He realized that precious little traditional *changüí* music had left the Guantánamo region, and that most people thought of the genre in terms of the modern, big-city *changüí* with electric instruments. Good as that stuff was, it lacked the grit and charming looseness of that cassette. “It was as if I’d heard Robert Johnson’s blues, and now everyone was telling me about the Rolling Stones or the Allman Brothers,” he said. In fact, when I posed questions about *changüí* to pianist David Virelles, who was born in Santiago de Cuba, not far from Guantánamo, and

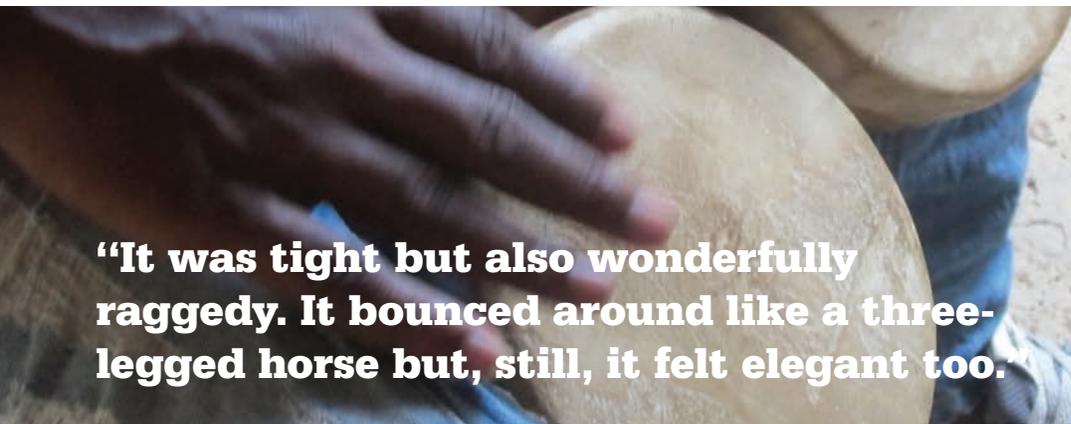


source of pride and an example of national defense, or, as for me, a source of shame and an unforgivable offense.

Far removed from the controversies of the facility, yet physically nearby, are the sugar and coffee plantations in the mountains around Guantánamo City,

rooster crowed along). The group’s co-founder, master *changuisero* and *tresero* Armando “Yu” Rey Leliebre, died at 91 just months after recording the two tracks that showcase his own distinctive mastery. Tramontana’s favorite track, the mesmerizing “El Viaje lo Pago Yo (I’ll Pay for the Trip),” documents Francesco Hernández Valiente (known as “Mikiki”) and his brothers on the back patio of their Guantánamo City home. The lyrics they sing summon deceased *changuiseros* for a “final party” in honor of a late percussionist.

Tramontana’s right. This music is one big party. It does contain history, some of it slipping away. Yet, by the evidence of these 50 tracks, *changüí* is still very much alive. The party goes on. ■



**“It was tight but also wonderfully raggedy. It bounced around like a three-legged horse but, still, it felt elegant too.”**

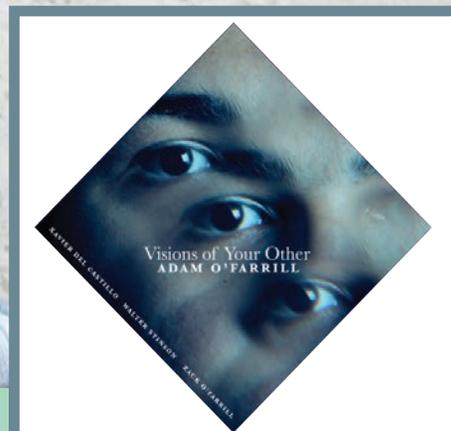
who now is a fast-rising star in New York City, he wrote to me in an email that “*changüí* is a foundational culture in Cuban music ... . But outside of the region in Cuba where this music thrives, there’s little understanding or appreciation of it.”

Tramontana “fell down a rabbit hole,” he said. “I realized the culture was very deep. It’s not just music. It’s a lineage, and it’s a memory bank. It’s their history and it’s also their daily life.” In January 2017, his planned 10-day trip to Guantánamo became a two-month stay. His research for a radio piece about *changüí* turned into a project that drew him back again and again through 2019.

For most Americans, the mention of Guantánamo calls little to mind besides the military prison in which terrorism suspects are detained without due process and interrogated without restraint. In the U.S., this continuing legacy is either a

the welcoming and joyous wellspring of *changüí*. That’s where Tramontana roamed with his camera and hand-held stereo recorder. In contrast to say, Ry Cooder’s approach to *Buena Vista Social Club*, Tramontana did not want to curate a session or a sound. He wasn’t interested in an ethnographic or musicological study either. “I’m no expert,” he said, “nor do I wish to be. I want to take you with me, let you hear what I heard, simple as that.” He made a conscious decision not to use microphone stands or to arrange musicians.

The first group we hear is the first one he recorded: Grupo Estrellas Campesinas, performing “Changüí en Yateras,” in Casa de Pipi’s Garden, the thatched roof structure that one of the group’s founders, the late Eduardo “Pipi” Goulet Lestapier, had built in front of his house for musical gatherings (and where an enthusiastic



**Adam O’Farrill**  
***Visions of Your Other (Biophilia)***

Trumpeter Adam O’Farrill has shone in the Afro-Latin orchestra led by his father, pianist Arturo O’Farrill. His Stranger Days quartet here includes his older brother, Zack, on drums. Yet this is no family affair. He has established himself as a confident bandleader and composer of his own style of music — challenging, forward-leaning jazz that draws from many cultures. This befits the O’Farrill composing legacy that began with his grandfather, Chico O’Farrill, yet bristles with the energy and inventiveness of a musician on the rise in New York City, in the here-and-now.

**NOW PLAYING**



# SAINTS ALIVE!

**Chucho Valdés unveils a new work that celebrates the African cultural and spiritual roots of Cuban music.**

B Y F E R N A N D O G O N Z Á L E Z

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aving just celebrated his 80th birthday, a time when many people would choose to sit back and enjoy the fruits of their labor, Cuban pianist, composer and bandleader Jesús “Chucho” Valdés is pushing forward with the most ambitious work of his career.

*La Creación (The Creation)* — commissioned by the Adrienne

Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in Miami — is a three-movement suite for small ensemble, voices and big band that tells the history of creation according to the Regla de Ocha, the Afro-Cuban religion known as Santería. It was scheduled to premiere at the Arsht Center on November 5 and be presented the following weeks in Lyon, Paris and Barcelona.

To help orchestrate, perform and conduct this work, Valdés summoned pianist, composer, arranger, producer and music director John Beasley, leader of the 15-piece MONK’estra big band, and Toronto-based Cuban pianist, composer, arranger, bandleader and conductor Hilario Durán. An old friend and collaborator, Durán has arranged Valdés’ work for more than 30 years. He calls *La Creación* “monumental.”

The themes in the new work, most notably the affirmation of African culture in the culture of the Americas, from music and language to spiritual beliefs, and the choice of instruments to explore them — from the trio of hourglass-shaped *batá* drums, essential in the ritual music of Santería, to the big band — have been recurrent concerns and musical strategies in Valdés’ career.

“This work is a summation of everything I have learned and also my experiments, because, as I’ve learned, I also have experimented a lot,” says Valdés. “This is a synthesis of all that. I had this music, this confluence of blues and Afro-Cuban music, in my head since I was a music student. I’ve arrived at a moment of full maturity, personally and musically, and now I feel prepared to do this.”

As the son of Ramón “Bebo” Valdés, an influential pianist, arranger and bandleader in Cuba’s musical Golden Age of the 1940s and ’50s, Chucho had, as he’s fond of saying, “the best teacher at home.” But he also studied formally at the Conservatorio Municipal de Música de la Habana, from which he graduated at 14. And then there was another “school” in his neighborhood that proved crucial to his education.

“In the house across the street from my house, there was a *santero* [Santería priest] and they were beating drums and singing for *santo* [a saint or deity],” he recalls. “They didn’t want anyone [not in their group] to be there. But the house had a basement, and I would go and hide there to listen. There was garbage, it was a mess, but I didn’t care, when I started listening to those songs ...,” he says, his voice trailing off. “I was a kid, and this was happening while I was studying Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin at the conservatory,” he laughs heartily. “But this was different; it felt different, I felt it in my bones. From then on, I tried to listen and inform myself on my own.”

It was the music that, many years later, as an adult, got Valdés interested in the religion.

Santería is a rich, complex system of beliefs that evokes Greek mythology in its pantheon of imperfect deities and their stories. Each god, or “saint,” as they took

“ I HAD THIS MUSIC, THIS CONFLUENCE OF BLUES AND AFRO-CUBAN MUSIC, IN MY HEAD SINCE I WAS A MUSIC STUDENT. I’VE ARRIVED AT A MOMENT OF FULL MATURITY, PERSONALLY AND MUSICALLY, AND NOW I FEEL PREPARED TO DO THIS. ”



on a Catholic counterpart, is addressed with a particular set of ritual drum-and-voice pieces. It is extraordinary music, spiritual and earthy, exquisitely detailed and exact, yet muscular and driven. “It was despised,” says Valdés. “I remember it well. It was a ‘cosa de negros,’ a Black thing, meaning a thing of low-class, illiterate, brute people. Playing Santería [music] was not well seen — and it was really our identity. People did it almost clandestinely. When [singer] Merceditas Valdés sang it publicly on the radio for the first time [in 1944], for some people, it was shocking — and 30 years later, it happened to us, to Irakere. People would say: ‘What is Chucho doing? Why is he doing that?’ This was in the ‘70s, and we had a struggle.”

Valdés debuted professionally as the pianist in his father’s orchestra, Sabor de Cuba; worked in the pit orchestra of the Teatro Musical de la Habana, and was selected to be part of Orquesta Cubana de Musica Moderna, a genuine all-star big band. In 1973, taking with him bandmates from the Orquesta such as Paquito D’Rivera and Arturo Sandoval, Valdés founded Irakere, an 11-piece little big band whose brand of Afro-Cuban, jazz and rock fusion marked a before and after in modern Cuban music. In Irakere, a superb jazz group and killer dance band all wrapped in one, Valdés incorporated *batá* drums, ritual rhythms and chanting, and developed adventurous pieces such as his “Misa Negra” (Black Mass), an early milestone in his career.

Bebo Valdés had been a visionary, bringing *batá* drums into the big band. Two decades later, Chucho Valdés put them front and center in jazz and dance music.

*La Creación* is heir to and, arguably, a natural conclusion to a path marked by works such as “Misa Negra” early on and “Canto a Dios,” a more recent composition for orchestra.

“*La Creación* is about Olódùmarè, the Creator in the Yoruba religion of Nigeria,” Valdés explains. “He is the great deity that creates humankind, nature, everything. I wanted to take it to a story in music: the story of the creation of Olódùmarè. It was a very big challenge. You have to know the history well, how those African roots then develop in the Caribbean and America — including, of course, Cuba, the United States, Brazil — and develop it through music.”

The three-part suite “opens with the drums playing the ritual *toques* [pieces] and calling on Olódùmarè and telling the story of how everything was created.” Arranged and orchestrated by Durán, “these are ritual chants, but mixed with other elements to give it a contemporary sound,” Valdés says. “This is not a folkloric thing. We have the African roots, yes, but with a reminder that this was made now, in the 21st century. So, you have *batás*, electronics and electric keyboards. The second movement, arranged by Beasley, is the blues, the blues with the big band, and references Miles Davis, but also the *batá* drums.” The third movement brings back the Caribbean feeling and the main theme of the piece.

“This is a summary of all the experiences up to today,” he says, accent on “today.” “But only up to this very moment. We are working on something ...,” he says with a Cheshire cat smile. “I’m just coming into my second adolescence.” ■

“ **IN THE HOUSE ACROSS THE STREET FROM MY HOUSE, THERE WAS A SANTERO AND THEY WERE BEATING DRUMS AND SINGING. THEY DIDN'T WANT ANYONE TO BE THERE. BUT THE HOUSE HAD A BASEMENT, AND I WOULD GO AND HIDE THERE TO LISTEN.** ”





REDEMPTION SONG  
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REDEMPTION SONG

**Irakere provided an opportunity for Chucho Valdés to bring a new Cuban sound to the world and to reunite with his father, who had lived in exile for 18 years.**

BY FERNANDO GONZÁLEZ

REDEMPTION SONG  
REDEMPTION SONG  
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REDEMPTION SONG

# IRAKERE

Chucho Valdés with a recent incarnation of Irakere



The following is an excerpt of a chapter from the unpublished *Mambo Influenciado: The Memoirs of Chucho Valdés* by Chucho Valdés with Fernando González. González is a longtime contributor to and former editor of *JAZZIZ* magazine.

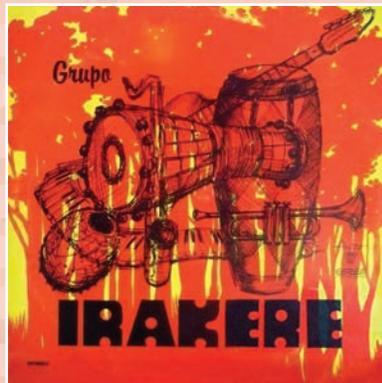
### Three Pianos, Two Guitars and a Band From Cuba

The Newport Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall on June 28, 1978, had been billed as “Three pianos and two guitars.” Yet, as John S. Wilson noted two days later in his *New York Times* review, “All five were there — Mary Lou Williams, Bill Evans and McCoy Tyner on pianos, Larry Coryell and Philip Catherine on guitars. But by the end of the evening, they had almost been forgotten in the wake of an unannounced added attraction — Irakere, an 11-piece group from Cuba that had just been brought to New York by Columbia Records.”

Irakere’s appearance was the improbable result of a visit to Havana of a floating jazz festival aboard the cruise ship *S.S. Daphne*

in May 1977. It was the first official U.S. visit to the island since the Cuban Missile Crisis. The truly all-star lineup included Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz, Earl “Fatha” Hines and also Ry Cooder, who decades later would stir interest anew of Cuban musical traditions with his *Buena Vista Social Club* project.

Among the discoveries made by the visitors was an extraordinary little big band with an odd name: Irakere. So bowled over was Getz by what he heard that, once back in New York, he went directly to speak to Bruce Lundvall, then president of CBS Records. Getz was insistent: Lundvall had to go to Cuba and check out that scene for himself. He did. “We went to Havana in April 1978, based on little more than curiosity,” he wrote in the liner notes for *Havana Jam*, a recording of a three-day festival that happened the following year. “During our last evening in Havana, we were so overwhelmed by the ensemble and virtuoso brilliance of Irakere ... that we immediately made a commitment to sign them.”



“ I DON'T THINK CARNEGIE HALL EVER HAD AS MANY MUSICIANS IN THE AUDIENCE AS IT HAD THAT NIGHT. MANY OF THEM JUST WANTED TO KNOW WHAT THE HELL WAS THIS IRAKERE THEY HAD HEARD SO MUCH ABOUT. ”

**Bruce Lundvall, former President of CBS Records and Blue Note Records**

“This was an unbelievably original fusion. Everybody impressed me. Chucho as the leader of the band, [Arturo] Sandoval, Paquito [D’Rivera], [Carlos] Averhoff, Jorge Varona, Carlos Emilio [Morales], a very nice guitar player, a terrific bass player [Carlos del Puerto] and Oscar Valdés.

“And I was really impressed with how original the concept of their fusion of jazz and rock with Cuban

music was. The compositions were great, and the playing was just extraordinary. They had some virtuoso players in the band, and it was very well-rehearsed.

“The whole thing just knocked us off our feet. We had no idea we would find something like this, so I said, ‘We have to sign them right away.’ We went to the EGREM studios, we had a party that night, and we had a jam session. [Drummer] Billy Cobham played with them. It was a late night with a lot of rum. But the embargo was a problem, so we had to figure out how we were going to make it work.

“When I got back, I called George Wein, I told him we had a great band from Cuba, and he said, ‘We don’t have any room.’ So I suggested that in the piano night, with Bill Evans, McCoy, Mary Lou Williams and all the rest, maybe we could have them as surprise guests. And we did, and boy, they blew the place apart.”

“Batá drumming, jazz and Mozart; there was nothing like Irakere.”





Chucho Valdés (left) with Carlos Emilio, Papito Hernandez and Emilio del Monte

“**BEBO AND I HAD SPOKEN ON THE PHONE, BUT WE HADN'T SEEN EACH OTHER. MY HANDS WERE SHAKING, KNOWING BEBO WAS WATCHING ME. IT HAD BEEN 18 YEARS.**”

That night at Carnegie Hall, wrote Wilson in his *New York Times* review, Irakere “created a carnival air ... dancing around the stage, marching through the aisles like a New Orleans band on parade and winding back on the stage with Maynard Ferguson on trumpet and Stan Getz on tenor saxophone joining them in a jam session.”

The person orchestrating such goings-on, sometimes literally, was a quiet but imposing tall man with an enigmatic smile, calmly cueing in the lightning bolts and thunder from behind the keyboards.

It had taken years to get here, hard work yes, but also persistence, patience and a certain poise to bargain with the cultural commissars of the Cuban Revolution. After all, for a while, jazz was a four-letter word in Cuba. “Imperialistic music,” they called it. Drum kits and cymbals were forbidden.

But on that evening, he had no time to gloat. As he surveyed the scene, Jesus “Chucho” Valdés, Irakere’s pianist, founder, main composer and arranger, was thinking about something else entirely. His first teacher and role model, not just as a musician but as a man, was somewhere in the hall: his father, Bebo Valdés.

At odds with the Revolution, Bebo Valdés, who, as a pianist, arranger and bandleader, had been a leading figure in the Golden Age of Cuban music, had left Cuba in October 1960. It was going to be, he told Chucho,

“just for three months, until things settle down.” But Bebo never returned. He eventually settled in Sweden, started a new family and made a new life for himself. Now he had come to New York to see Chucho.

Irakere’s historic 1978 Carnegie Hall concert not only put Chucho and Irakere on the map but shook up many dusty, fixed notions about jazz, Latin jazz, Cuban music and fusion. Several of the pieces Irakere played that evening were included on the band’s self-titled debut album on Columbia Records. A year later, Irakere would win a Grammy for Best Latin Recording.

And that evening, Chucho Valdés not only started to reclaim the lost years with his father but also began to reclaim his own story.

#### **Chucho Valdés**

“Debuting in Carnegie Hall was incredible, a dream. And we found out who was on the program that night, and obviously for me it was even more significant because of who was playing: Bill Evans? In my life I had dreamed of seeing Bill Evans up close, in person, live. McCoy Tyner? Mary Lou Williams? That was science fiction. I had to pinch myself.

“When they announced us, it was after midnight and the [stage hands] union said that [the concert] had to stop — but Columbia paid the overtime.



It was an incredible scene. I don't think Carnegie Hall ever had as many musicians in the audience as it had that night. Many of them just wanted to know what the hell was this Irakere they had heard so much about. We were the first group from Cuba to play in a jazz festival in the United States. The contact with Cuban music had been lost.

"What people mostly heard for years was salsa, Fania [Records] and artists like Celia Cruz, and what we were bringing was decades of change since that music. Everybody seemed to be there. It was a great success. And besides, my dad was there. I knew he was there. He was with my favorite aunt, Emelina, who had lived since 1958 in Brooklyn. I had seen my aunt. She was like my mom. And Bebo and I had spoken on the phone, but we hadn't seen each other. My hands were shaking, knowing Bebo was watching me. It had been 18 years.

"When we finished playing, there was a bit of chaos backstage with so many people coming to meet us and say hello. It was all very emotional. And here comes Paquito with a bearded man and says, 'There is this gentleman who wants to meet you.' We had so many people around us. I didn't know who this man was. So I just say, 'A pleasure to meet you,' and shook his hand. And Paquito laughs and says, 'Chucho, you know who this man is? It's Bill Evans, *coño!*' When he said that, I said '*Coño*' and fell to my knees. I think it was the first and last time I was on my knees in a place that was not

a church. I told him: 'Look, thank you and thanks to *Live at the Village Vanguard*, which was the greatest school I had. That was a record I took to my teacher to see if I could get a sound like yours.' I think I went on and on and I told him everything I could, and he listened very courteously, and then congratulated me — and I kept thinking, 'Now, wait, Bill Evans congratulated me?'

"We took pictures with everybody, and when I went out, there was Bebo. He was hiding. He didn't want to be seen because he was concerned that it might be a problem for me. If my father was there, it was possible that I would leave with him, so there was always someone [from Cuban State Security] watching. He stayed hidden, and someone gave me the signal to go to a certain place and meet him. And when I met with him and my aunt and her husband, you can imagine the hugs, the crying ... it was like an explosion. We'd had some letters. Very few calls. I couldn't call from Cuba. And he couldn't call me. But I know that he wrote to my grandmother, they wrote to each other.

"We jumped in my aunt's car and left for her house. She had cooked a meal that was like being back in [our old town] Quivicán. I didn't go back to the hotel that night. After dinner, Bebo and I went into a room and talked; we just talked all night, I'd say from 1 a.m. to 8 a.m., nonstop. Time passed in a blink. We talked about what had happened since he left that day [in 1960], how his life had been, what had happened

“ **ME ANGRY AT HIM? NO! HE WASN'T A SEER, AND I HAD MADE A COMMITMENT TO TAKE CARE OF THE FAMILY, AND I FULFILLED IT AND I'M STILL FULFILLING IT. I TOLD HIM THAT [IN THOSE DAYS, THE LATE-'70S] THINGS WERE GETTING BETTER. I WAS TRAVELING, AND I COULD GET SOME THINGS FOR THE FAMILY. BUT I ALSO TOLD HIM THAT THERE WAS A TIME WHEN WE WENT HUNGRY.** ”



with me since, and we talked and talked and talked. My aunt would come in after a while and say, 'Gentlemen, all right already. How long are you going to talk?' But we didn't care.

"We talked about the family, about [my mother] Pilar. Grandma Caridad, his mother, who had been so essential for me, had died just a few weeks earlier. He asked me about my brother, my sister, his brothers, and he asked how I had managed to hold the family together and make my way. He asked me about the death of my grandfather, told me what had happened when he found out. He told me he was in Germany when he learned that his father had died, and he drank too much and fainted and fell face down in the snow, and a fellow musician helped him and took him to his hotel. He saved his life.

"He would ask me about my piano studies, about [my piano teacher] Zenaida Romeu, about La Moderna [the fabled all-star Orquesta Cubana de Musica Moderna], about the musicians of his generation, some of whom had already died. After that first night, the conversation turned more general.

"Me angry at him? No! He wasn't a seer, and I had made a commitment to take care of the family, and I fulfilled it and I'm still fulfilling it. I told him that [in those days,



“ WHEN WE SAW EACH OTHER, IT WAS LIKE SEEING SOMEONE I DIDN'T KNOW. BUT IT WAS A FATHER SEEING HIS SON. IT WAS VERY EMOTIONAL, AS YOU CAN IMAGINE. ”

the late-'70s] things were getting better. I was traveling, and I could get some things for the family. But I also told him that there was a time when we went hungry.

“We had so much to talk about that we could've talked for another couple of days straight.

Every day I spent in New York, we got together and talked.

“After that concert, we stayed in New York for a few days because from there we were going to Montreux [to the Montreux Jazz Festival, Switzerland], so those days I would escape to my aunt's house and spend all my time with Bebo.

“And the guys [in the band] would come and say, 'We were looking for you, where were you?' and I'd say 'Oh, I must've been sleeping' or 'Oh, I must've been out shopping' Heck, nobody saw me those days. The guys in Irakere joked that I was The Invisible Man. They'd say that they saw me only when we arrived and when we played. And in fact, I would escape hiding from the State Security guy at a pharmacy around the corner from the hotel, and they would pick me up to go to my aunt's house in Brooklyn, and that's where I was most of my time in New York.”

In his biography *Bebo de Cuba: Bebo Valdés y Su Mundo*, author Matt Lundahl quotes Bebo recalling the encounter:

“It was not easy. [All those years] I had not talked with [Chucho] on the phone, just with my mother. When we saw each other, it was like seeing someone I didn't know. But it was a father seeing his son. It was very emotional, as you can imagine. I was very afraid that my presence would create problems [for Chucho] in Cuba. For him, it was something similar: emotion and fear. He was afraid because my name was forbidden in Cuba.”

### Chucho Valdés

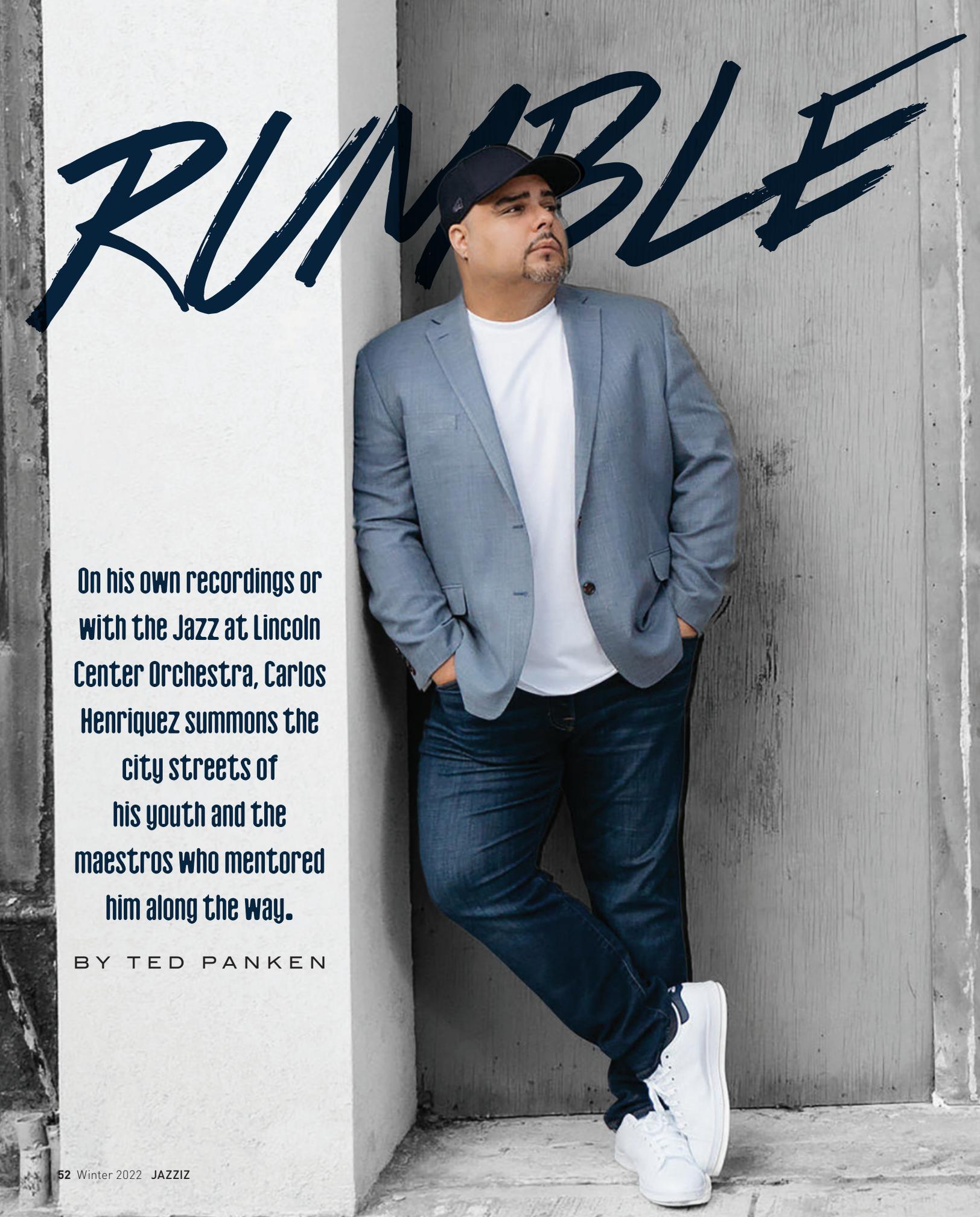
“He was right. It could've been a problem. If the security guy decided to write a report that I was with my father, I'm not sure what would've happened, but nothing good, for sure. Let's say that it would have been complicated.

“In Cuba at the time, there were certain rules and regulations, and for anything, you had to fill out certain forms where they would ask you, 'Do you have religious beliefs? Do you correspond with relatives outside Cuba?' If, by any chance, you had religious beliefs or corresponded with family, you were out of luck. So, I couldn't write a letter that they were going to catch. But I did write him several times. In 1967, a Swedish singer came to perform at the Varadero festival, and through him I sent Bebo letters and pictures and even the records I had done with Guapachá [singer Amado Borcelá] and my group.

“The only thing that darkened things a bit was his marrying Rose Marie [Pehrson]. He was in New York with her. That hurt me because Pilar, my mom, found out, and she was really distraught. I think she was still waiting for him. But by now, it was all old history. That's life. The love between us was such that I just accepted it, 'You got married. You are a grown man. You must've had your reasons.' And he said, 'I had to have a family, Chucho. I couldn't stay alone. I have my needs. I lost everything and had to start all over again.' And I understood him. I truly did.

“I loved my mother, but nothing about that story was important for me at that moment. The moment Bebo and I met, an ocean of distance, of time, disappeared in an instant. What was hard was when we had to say goodbye. I kept thinking: After 18 years, I finally got my father back, and now what?” ■

# RUMBLE



On his own recordings or with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, Carlos Henriquez summons the city streets of his youth and the maestros who mentored him along the way.

BY TED PANKEN

# FROM THE BROOKLYN



“You learn the instrument with finesse, with style, with accuracy, and with technique. But at a certain point, like Cachao and Mingus, you have to incorporate your life and what you dealt with growing up.”

“When I played with Danilo Pérez, he always said that in African music the bass is the moving line. It’s actually a solo instrument, but people don’t get it, because you’re always hearing the top voices. I extracted that focus on creating a solo from the root rhythm from Cachao’s playing and Bobby Rodriguez’s playing, and I use it everywhere I go.”

— CARLOS HENRIQUEZ

Perhaps the most demanding function in today’s jazz ecosystem is the bass chair in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, which Carlos Henriquez assumed in 2002, when he was 22.

His job description, as outlined by JLCO Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis, is as follows:

“You’ve got to understand the band’s tradition and know the tradition of the music. We play a very wide range of styles, and you have to know them all, play and solo in them with a degree of authenticity — and have a big enough sound so the band can hear you.”

Marsalis enthusiastically puts forth further details. “We have a large Afro-Latin book — understand all those grooves by name,” he says. “Play all the original music by the band members, which includes the many arrangements that Carlos contributed. Be able to slap bass. Play all different types of two grooves. Play and know the particulars of the gospel tradition and things that come out of the march tradition. Of course, anything in the mainstream jazz tradition — bebop and all the postmodern styles that people know, up to Ornette Coleman, but also the extra-modern styles. And view all those styles — including Afro-Latin music — as the same root.”

During Henriquez’s two decades anchoring JLCO, he’s fulfilled that code-switching, roots-to-the-future aesthetic with elegance and panache, as he does on his third leader album, *The South Bronx Story* (Tiger Turn). It’s a studio date comprising 10 Henriquez nonet charts

that Jazz at Lincoln Center originally commissioned for a December 2018 show. A year before, at Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola, an Henriquez-led octet generated *Dizzy Con Clave* (Rodbrosmusic), a crackling concert recording on which the leader fleshed out the Afro-Cuban rhythmic structures and sophisticated harmonic movement that underpin nine Dizzy Gillespie classics. That release followed Henriquez’s debut, *The Bronx Pyramid*, (Blue Engine), documenting a 2015 studio session on which he presented another 10 originals for an accomplished sextet, augmented at certain points by iconic *cantante* (vocalist) Ruben Blades and state-of-the-art *conguero* Pedrito Martinez, both collaborators on mid-2010s JLCO concerts that Henriquez guided.

The title track of *The Bronx Pyramid* — an Afro-Cubanized reframing of “Pyramid,” which Puerto Rican valve trombonist Juan Tizol wrote for Duke Ellington in the ’30s — references the mapped shape of the de facto perimeter beyond which it was taboo for Henriquez to venture during childhood in the Betances Projects on 146th Street and Brook Avenue in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx.

“That song has a distinct sound that gives me a memory block of the structure of events that I went through as a child, and *The South Bronx Story* is a continuation of that,” says Henriquez — who’d returned the day before from a one-off in Texas with Eddie Palmieri — via Zoom from the New Jersey home he shares with his wife and three sons. “Whether positive or negative, it’s a way for me to express my life through music.” As an example, he mentions



Photo by Pachy Lopez

“Hydrants Love All,” for which he wrote lyrics that describe children’s summer play on the urban street — cavorting under a fire hydrant’s gush, games of stickball and Skelzies.

The feel of “Hydrants Love All” and songs like “Moses on the Cross,” “Soy Humano” and “Hip Hop con Clave” would not be out of place at any of the uptown Latin dance clubs where Henriquez, during his middle teens, gigged with the likes of Manny Oquendo’s Libre, Tito Puente, Tito Nieves, Johnny Pacheco and Little Louie Vega, not to mention larger venues with Marc Anthony, La India and Chaka Khan. “They bring out a little of my salsa-commercial side,” Henriquez says. “Before I was a jazz musician, I was a Latin bass player.”

The messages that subtextualize the repertoire comment forthrightly on the social conditions framing the cultural milieu in which Henriquez was raised. “Moses on the Cross” references Robert Moses, whose massive mid-century public works projects included the Cross Bronx Expressway, which uprooted stable working-class neighborhoods and displaced thousands of residents. It opens with a brisk gospel-jazz section, transitions to Latin jazz, then jump-cuts to hardcore mambo behind a chorus singing (Henriquez’s translation) “Listen up, my people; here I come with division.”

The dedicatee of “Mama Lorraine,” a soulful boléro exquisitely played by trumpeter Mike Rodriguez, is Lorraine Montenegro, a community activist once married to Joe Canzo Sr., a close associate of Tito Puente, and the mother of Joe Canzo Jr., whose photographs and films documented South Bronx culture. On “Black (Benji),” Melissa Aldana’s soulful, Coltrane-channeling solo reflects the spiritual force that was Cornell Benjamin, a gang member who in December 1971 was beaten and stabbed to death outside a South Bronx playground while trying to mediate a beef between two gangs. Relations improved, and gang members were able to pass more freely from neighborhood to neighborhood, leading to the early-’70s block parties at which hip-hop gestated, as represented in the lyrics and inexorable grooves of “Hip Hop con Clave.”

Contrapuntal voices and urgent beats introduce “Boro of Fire,” imparting a tumultuous feel à la Bud Powell circa early 1950s and Eddie Palmieri circa 1970. Henriquez deployed the “whole tone vibe” to reflect the “pandemonium” of his neighborhood a decade before his birth, when “greedy landlords and corrupt political insiders were burning buildings from the top-down so that — at least so they thought — people would have time to get out.” “Fort Apache” is titled for the sobriquet applied to the police precinct that “served” that benighted neighborhood, which pioneer South Bronx code-switchers Jerry and Andy González, both hands-on mentors to Henriquez, appropriated for their various configurations after 1981.

Henriquez grew up Nuyorican, in a working-class family. His mother, once a dancer, taught children with disabilities as a paraprofessional in occupational training centers of New York's Board of Education. He dedicates "Guajeo de Papi" to his father, once a trombonist, who attended college before serving in the Vietnam War. He came back with PTSD, and worked the night shift as a custodian at the VA hospital where he's still employed. The family soundtrack featured Palmieri, Puente, Tito Rodriguez, Count Basie and Frank Sinatra in heavy rotation.

Before the VA, Henriquez's father was a custodian at a local middle school, where he befriended guitar teacher Adonis Puertas; a decade later, as Carlos was entering sixth grade, he asked Puertas to teach his son. "He taught me by ear, one-on-one," Henriquez recalls. "He'd play it; I'd figure it out." Not long thereafter, the concert band teacher, a flutist who'd played with Yomo Toro, asked him to try bass. "I slowly started loving it, and one thing led to another," Henriquez says. This teacher soon introduced him to bass master Victor Venegas, a stalwart of New York's Latin scene, whose discography includes well-known recordings with Cal Tjader, Mongo Santamaria and Celia Cruz.

"Victor told me, 'You need to understand how the congas sound, to feel it when you play it. Otherwise, you will not be able to survive as the bass player in any Latin group. You and the congas are like brothers; you play off each other.' I learned the patterns, and began to understand the value of the bass in terms of a rhythmic and support role."

Venegas introduced Henriquez to New York

Philharmonic bassist John Schaeffer, who would be his teacher for 15 years. He also introduced him to Machito veteran Joe Santiago, who brought him along on quality time visits with icons like Mario Bauzá, Graciela and Patato Valdés. Then Venegas gave his mentee the phone number of Andy González, who welcomed Henriquez into his world. "On my first visit, Andy asked what I wanted him to teach me," Henriquez remembers. "I wanted him to show me this lick he did on a lot of songs I'd heard. He played it for me. He'd give me things to listen to and explained them." At a certain point, González invited Henriquez to come to his gigs with Conjunto Libre, allowing the youngster to serve as a quasi roadie.

"Because of Andy, I quickly started playing with people of a certain level," Henriquez says. "He'd tell me to come by his rehearsal with Eddie Palmieri, or Don Grolnick with Michael Brecker, Don Alias, Milton Cardona and Dave Valentin. I'd be the kid sitting next to Andy, and I'd hear the cats talk about the music and give suggestions to each other. Andy might step out for a while, or show up late — guys in the band knew I played bass and said, 'Why don't you just play this part for us?' I'd pick up the bass and play it. 'Shit, wow, how old are you?' I'm 15; I'm just learning with Andy.' Then, cool. Everybody knew Carlito. Then it got to a point where Andy would ask me to make one gig or another that he couldn't get to. That happened with Fort Apache, with Tito Puente, with Palmieri.

"I knew at an early age what a bass player's job is. I chose the right notes. I stayed in my lane. I fulfilled that role. I think many of the leaders I got to work with then were very happy to see that."

**“ Victor [Venegas] told me, ‘You need to understand how the congas sound, to feel it when you play it. Otherwise, you will not be able to survive as the bass player in any Latin group. You and the congas are like brothers; you play off each other.’ ”**

— CARLOS HENRIQUEZ

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— CARLOS HENRIQUEZ



As he was becoming a fixture on New York's Latin scene, Henriquez was attending LaGuardia High School of Music and Art, a block away from the Lincoln Center campus and across the street from Marsalis' apartment. Midway through 1996, a trumpet-playing classmate invited him to a rehearsal for *Sweet Release*, a Marsalis-Judith Jamison collaboration for the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. "It was my first time in front of a big band, and it was mind boggling," Henriquez says. "It was incredible to see what Rodney Whitaker could do on the bass. I think I went to three rehearsals, I met Wynton, and he invited us to his apartment."

"Carlos brought out his bass and started swinging hard," Marsalis recalls. "I said, 'Man, I know you play in the Afro-Latin tradition, but how did you learn how to swing like that?' He had a huge beat, like he has now. He was soulful. He was a like a grown man, a professional. He was always joking and clowning, but very serious, too. He was always saying, 'Write this out' or asking what he should study or check out."

"I'd ask him questions, like, 'What is this *clave*?' I never could really play Afro-Latin music, and I wanted to learn about it.' He'd tell me the truth. I said, 'The problem I have with Latin music is it just stays on the same chord a lot.' Carlos looked at me. He said, 'Let's listen to this.' He put on a track, and he said, 'Now, tell me what one drum is doing.' I couldn't really tell him what the drum was doing. He said, 'That's why you have the mistaken impression that it also needs to have a pile of chords. You can't have everything going on in the same space, papa.'"

Over the next two years, Henriquez continued to attend rehearsals and hang out with Marsalis, becoming, Marsalis says, "part of the band, part of the family." Two years later, he hired Henriquez to sub for Whitaker, who took a lengthy sabbatical. During this preliminary stint, Henriquez continued to speak his mind, demonstrating for Herlin Riley idiomatic *clave* bell patterns on three "Latin Tinge" concerts with arrangers Ray Santos and Chico O'Farrill.

"It was intimidating," he acknowledges. "I had to learn all this music. We were featuring Wynton's new work, *Big Train*, at Avery Fisher Hall. I played with Shirley Horn, and she vibed the hell out of me — she was at the age where she didn't need to deal with somebody like me. I played with [singer-drummer] Grady Tate. It was tough, but you develop fast. The

hardest part was labeling, not knowing what certain grooves were — like a straight ragtime groove. But I heard them so much that it became natural."

When Whitaker returned, Marsalis recommended Henriquez to Danilo Pérez's venturesome, interactive, Pan-American-oriented trio with Antonio Sanchez, which toured for a year behind Pérez's *Motherland* album. "I learned all Danilo's music by heart," Henriquez says. "At a young age, I learned that if you want the gig, you have to be super well-prepared, because other people also want the gig. If you miss one thing, that might be it."

Eighteen months later, Henriquez transitioned to Gonzalo Rubalcaba's trio with iconic Cuban drummer Ignacio Berroa, who'd recommended him. "I was looking for a bassist with the ability to play Cuban or Latin music with depth, and at the same time play straightahead and everything related to jazz vocabulary without an accent," Rubalcaba says. "During the rehearsals, Carlos read everything fast, understood the intention of every rhythmic design I had in the music, and improvised beautifully. When we toured Brazil with bands led by João Bosco and Ivan Lins, he showed his capacity to understand Brazilian music in the freshest, most accurate way. He'd follow everything that happened on stage; every show he'd add things that enriched the composition and the structure. He was always right — or at least, I always liked his suggestions. Everything for him was clear at 22 or 23 years old."

Before a JLCO "Nursery Rhymes Swing" concert in 2007, five years after he'd joined for keeps, Henriquez joined drummer Ali Jackson in persuading Marsalis to give everyone in the band an opportunity to write. Henriquez contributed "Brahms Lullaby," with, he says, "a very Chico O'Farrill mentality behind it." A few months later, for a Thelonious Monk show featuring Marcus Roberts, he offered Thelonious Monk's "Bye Ya," "with a twist of Eddie Palmieri La Perfecta vibe."

"I jumped in cold," Henriquez says. "Luckily, because of my experience listening to the music, I had enough understanding to put things together. Most of the guys in the band thought Wynton had helped me."

"Someone looked at me and said, 'You helped Carlos with that arrangement,'" Marsalis confirms. "I said, 'I didn't tell Carlos shit.' He hears this stuff; he's not working off a technical formula."

“ At a young age, I learned that if you want the gig, you have to be super well-prepared, because other people also want the gig. If you miss one thing, that might be it. ”

— CARLOS HENRIQUEZ





His arrangement was so good, it gave us confidence in everybody doing it. Pretty soon we had a wave of all of us writing arrangements.”

“It was a turning point for Jazz at Lincoln Center,” Henriquez says of Marsalis’ decision to incorporate works by himself, Vincent Gardner, Ted Nash, Chris Crenshaw, Sherman Irby, Victor Goines and other band members. “It took the orchestra to the next level.” Through the 2010s, Henriquez music-directed several important cross-cultural explorations — a retrospective of the music of Cachao; a “Machito-Puente-Henriquez” concert that showcased several Henriquez originals; the JLCO-Pedrito Martinez collaboration *Orishas*; the JLCO-Odo Addy collaboration *Congo Square*; the kinetic 2014 Havana concert that became the *Live in Cuba* album (Blue Engine); a show with singer Rubén Blades (*Una Noche con Rubén Blades*, also on Blue Engine), on which the band vibrationally shape-shifts into the Mambo King era. These projects established JLCO as a unique entity, able to render the entire timeline of the Afro-Diasporic music of the Americas with idiomatic clarity, multilingual fluency and a fresh, multi-perspective attitude.

“Afro-Latin music is often neglected because we just don’t know enough about it to do a good job,” Marsalis says. “We have Carlos, who’s encyclopedic in his knowledge of it and a die-hard for its integrity. He’ll express clear dissatisfaction when the music is not played right. He’ll say, ‘This is on the wrong side of the *clave*, papa.’ Or, ‘That shit you wrote is corny; it doesn’t sound right.’ I started off teaching him, but he’s taught me far more than I’ve taught him.”



“I’m able to explain to Wynton what’s complicated, simply,” says Henriquez of what he perceives to be his primary value to JLCO, apart from instrumental derring-do. “I’m a puzzle-reader; I try to understand the logic of everything I learn, bring it to the lowest common denominator. When we did the African stuff with Odo Addy, I sat with Wynton for months so he could figure that stuff out. I did the

same thing when we did the *orishas* project — Pedrito played each of the *orishas* [devotional songs to Afro-Cuban deities] for him, and Wynton didn’t know where the downbeat went. He forwarded it all to me, and I wrote all of it down, note by note. He saw what it was.”

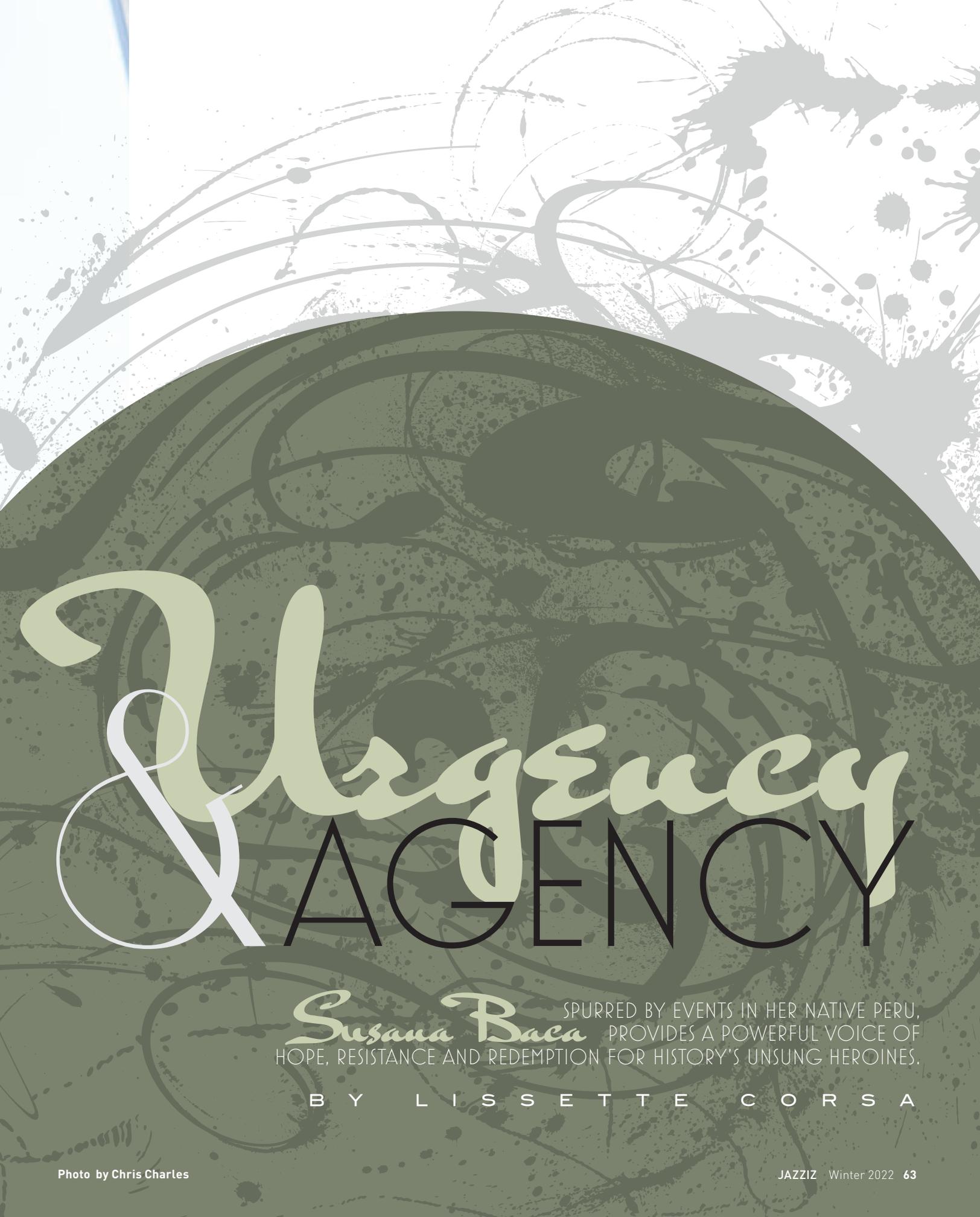
On Henriquez’s trilogy of recordings, he conveys with his own ensemble the attributes that mark his JLCO writing — the multiplicity of moods; the seamless juxtaposition and fresh interpretation of grooves; the endless melodic counterpoint; the writing for the tonal personalities of his band members in ways that facilitate individualistic improvisations that blend into the warp and woof of the chart; the “accentless” bilingualism. He’s hoping to record an album with a big band comprising his own musicians, perhaps with the title *Keeping the Story Alive*, an as yet unrecorded piece he’s played with JLCO.

“That tune was about keeping alive the tradition of Puente, Machito, Palmieri — through me,” Henriquez says. “The Catch-22 of Jazz at Lincoln Center is that at a certain point you might have to remove yourself so people can see you in a different setting. I think it’s to my advantage that I have the Latin tradition in terms of being able to move around — it’s not something that Wynton does, so people have to see me for what I am.” ■

“ Afro-Latin music is often neglected because we just don’t know enough about it to do a good job. We have Carlos, who’s encyclopedic in his knowledge of it and a die-hard for its integrity. He’ll express clear dissatisfaction when the music is not played right. ”

— WYNTON MARSALIS





# Urgency & AGENCY

*Suzana Baca* SPURRED BY EVENTS IN HER NATIVE PERU,  
PROVIDES A POWERFUL VOICE OF  
HOPE, RESISTANCE AND REDEMPTION FOR HISTORY'S UNSUNG HEROINES.

BY LISSETTE CORSA

"ONCE THE MUSIC  
STARTED, EVERYTHING  
WOULD CHANGE FOR  
ME. I'D STOP PLAYING  
WITH MY LITTLE COUSINS  
AND WOULD RUN TO  
WHERE THE MUSIC WAS  
COMING FROM."

A

fro-Peruvian songstress Susana Baca has spent a lifetime uplifting and celebrating her culture, first as an educator, folklorist and ethnomusicologist and later as Peru's Minister of Culture. But music has been her greatest loudspeaker by far. Baca, 77, learned from the legendary singer Chabuca Granda, a friend, mentor and

source of inspiration, and worked in relative obscurity before David Byrne came across her stirring rendition of "Maria Lando," a song he later included in his 1995 compilation *Soul of Black Peru*. The rest is history. Together, under Byrne's Luaka Bop imprint, they made a string of albums throughout the late-'90s and early aughts that were worthy of all the international accolades that they garnered.

On her new full-length recording, *Palabras Urgentes* (Urgent Truths), released by Peter Gabriel's Real World label, Baca, a three-time Latin Grammy winner, reflects on her 50th anniversary as an artist in a collection that encapsulates themes of defiance, anger and hope during troubled times. Recorded in 2018 — before last year's *A Cappella*, the Latin Grammy-winning album she made at home in Cañete, Peru, during the pandemic lockdown — *Palabras Urgentes* coincides with Peru's bicentennial and also doubles as a tribute to some of the forgotten women who fought for Peru's independence. Snarky Puppy founder Michael League, the project's main producer and arranger and contributing musician, fulfills Baca's signature vision of crafting songs rooted in tradition while embracing a contemporary, outward-looking approach defined by eclecticism and experimentation. Reached by Zoom at her home in Cañete, Baca talked to *JAZZIZ* about her latest release, the important milestone in her career and the power of music to heal.

**WHAT COMPELLED YOU TO RECORD *PALABRAS URGENTES*?**

In those moments, when we were planning this album, very sad, very serious things were happening in my country. The corruption that we always knew existed was exposed at the highest levels; this time it was evident by audio [wiretap recordings] and all the information coming from Brazil [the scandals revealed in the Panama Papers] and the names of those involved. The people and politicians who we thought were very correct turned out to be criminals. The disappointment was like saying they have been deceiving us all this time. So that's where the songs emerged from. I selected these songs and worked on them with that idea, that feeling. *Palabras Urgentes* is also the name of a manifesto put out by a group of poets, Hora Zero, some decades ago, also during a critical time in our political history.





"WHEN I MET MICHAEL FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE INVITED ME AS A GUEST ON HIS ALBUM, *FAMILY DINNER – VOLUME 2*. I OFFERED TO DO TWO AFRO-PERUVIAN SONGS. AFRO-PERUVIAN RHYTHMS ARE DIFFICULT TO PLAY, BUT HE MASTERED IT RIGHT AWAY."

**ARE THERE ANY PARALLELS BETWEEN YOUR ALBUM AND WHAT THE HORA ZERO POETS WERE PROPOSING IN 1970?**

They were very radical in those times and I got to know them well. Their poems came at a much-needed time to change things. It's the same. The songs on this album are songs to help us overcome.

**POETRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE HAVE ALWAYS GONE HAND AND HAND IN YOUR MUSIC. ON *PALABRAS URGENTES*, IT'S MORE PALPABLE THAN EVER BEFORE.**

Well, on this album more than ever because it arises from a very difficult political moment in our country — from that disappointment, from that situation of deep sadness seeing how the people who, as politicians, promised to do something for Peru were really just concerned with benefiting themselves and lining their own pockets. We are now seeing the result of all of this compounded by the pandemic. So, I continue to sing poetry. "Color de Rosa" is a poem about anger and I sing it because it's something we can't ignore.

**ON THE ALBUM, WHICH COINCIDES WITH CELEBRATIONS AROUND PERU'S BICENTENNIAL, YOU PAY HOMAGE TO SOME OF THE OVERLOOKED WOMEN WHO PLAYED IMPORTANT ROLES IN PERU'S INDEPENDENCE. "LA HERIDA OSCURA," WRITTEN BY CHABUCA GRANDA, IS ABOUT MICAELA BASTIDAS, A GUERRILLA LEADER AND INDIGENOUS PERUVIAN WHO FOUGHT FOR INDEPENDENCE FROM THE SPANISH. HOW IMPORTANT TO YOU WAS IT TO ELEVATE THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THESE REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN IN THE RECASTING OF A NARRATIVE HISTORICALLY WRITTEN BY MEN?**

Yes, of course, we have had heroines that, thanks to the bicentennial and the work that others have been doing, are now being recognized. There are many women in our history, but [their stories] are being rescued little by little now.

**CHABUCA GRANDA HAS HAD AN INDELIBLE INFLUENCE ON YOUR LIFE AND MUSIC AND YOU CONTINUE TO BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO HER SONGS.**

She was like a mother to me, a musical mother, and we were also friends. We knew each other well and we were very close. I learned a lot from her. I have already recorded a new album of her songs with my new band and a chorus of young people who will be performing the songs in concert with me to shed awareness on the Indigenous population that is being impacted by COVID.

***PALABRAS URGENTES* ALSO MARKS THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF YOUR CAREER. WHAT REFLECTIONS CAN YOU SHARE ON THIS IMPORTANT MILESTONE IN YOUR CAREER?**

I feel that we should always look ahead to the possibility of being in a constant state of giving something to people that moves them to search within, so that they rediscover those values of solidarity, kinship and community. Women have realized that we cannot be against each other and that we should instead build communities, forging a path with that in mind.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU TO BE THE VOICE OF AFRO-PERUVIAN MUSIC ON THE WORLD STAGE?**

I came to understand where I came from, what my roots were, little by little. As a child in school, you'd be singled out by other students for being Black. You start to ask yourself what it means to be Black. And then, at home, you get together with your family on Sundays, all of them Black, all of them full of laughter and grace. Once the music started, everything would change for me. I'd stop playing with my little cousins and would run to where the music was coming from. This same enthusiasm is what has led me to identify with who I am. Who am I? That family, that world that surrounded me in my childhood, and to be able to share that, as well.

**WHAT DID YOU TAKE AWAY FROM YOUR TIME AS PERU'S MINISTER OF CULTURE IN 2011 THAT INFLUENCED YOUR MUSIC?**

I traveled to many parts around the country. I learned from the music of the places, I learned from the soul of the people and I think that is in my singing anyway.

**PALABRAS URGENTES IS FRAMED BY CLASSIC MELODIES AND TRADITIONAL AFRO-PERUVIAN RHYTHMS MIXED WITH CONTEMPORARY SOUNDS. ON THIS ALBUM MICHAEL LEAGUE TAKES THE LEAD IN PRODUCTION. HOW DID THAT ENCOUNTER COME TO BE? WHAT WERE LEAGUE'S CONTRIBUTIONS AND HOW DID THAT TRANSLATE INTO THE MAGIC THAT WAS CAPTURED IN THE STUDIO?**

Michael had already known my music for a long time, from when he was a student at the University of Texas, in Austin. He had a band, and he tells me that one of his professors made him listen to my music and so he would play my music with his band around different venues in Austin. When I met him for the first time in Peru, he invited me as a guest on his album, *Family Dinner – Volume 2*. I offered to do two Afro-Peruvian songs. Afro-Peruvian rhythms are difficult to play, but Michael mastered it right away. And so, we traveled to New Orleans and recorded the songs.

"I'VE WORKED WITH GUITARIST MARK RIBOT, AND ON OTHER PROJECTS I'VE INVITED JOHN MEDESKI, A PIANIST WHO IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE NEW GENERATION OF FREE JAZZ. THESE ENCOUNTERS ARE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL. THEY ARE THE BEST OF WHAT GLOBALIZATION HAS TO OFFER."

**THE CONFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL AFRO-PERUVIAN MUSIC AND CONTEMPORARY SOUNDS FROM ACROSS THE GLOBE ARE POINTS OF REFERENCE IN YOUR BODY OF WORK. WAS THERE A TURNING POINT IN YOUR CAREER WHERE YOU DECIDED TO GO IN A BROADER DIRECTION?**

I'm very curious. What would my music sound like mixed with this? For instance, I've worked with guitarist Mark Ribot on other albums and I've loved working with him. On other projects, I've invited John Medeski, a pianist who is at the forefront of the new generation of free jazz. Of course, the producers play a role. The producer will say to me, 'Susana, listen to this musician. Do you like it? If you like it, we'll invite them.' 'OK, let's invite them. How wonderful.' And they come. They enjoy my music and I enjoy their sound. These encounters are something beautiful. They are the best of what globalization has to offer.

**IN OTHER AREAS, GLOBALIZATION HASN'T FARED SO WELL, AND ON THE TRACK, "CAMBALACHE," YOU SING ABOUT THE CHAOS IN A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN. IT WAS ORIGINALLY WRITTEN AS A TANGO IN 1930. YOU UPDATED THE LYRICS SOME, BUT THE SONG STILL APPLIES TO OUR CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS.**

It was almost like a premonition; it's still relevant.

**THE ALBUM CLOSES WITH "VESTIDA DE VIDA," A SONG THAT HAS A STRONG MESSAGE OF HOPE. DO YOU FEEL HOPEFUL ABOUT THE FUTURE?**

Yes, I still am. I think it's what helps us overcome disease, sadness, depression, feeling that the world is coming to an end, that it has nothing left to offer. So then you have to think about things that help you to persevere and shake the fear of pushing ahead. And if you have the voice and can transmit feeling in your music then you have to share that with people. That's what came to mind when I made my album *A Cappella*, which I recorded in the middle of the pandemic. I began the album reciting the words of [Argentine rocker] Fito Paez — 'Who says everything is lost? I come to offer my heart.' So that's what compels me to always give. I see people around me in extreme situations and feel that we must give people some spirituality, happiness, something they can reflect on, like *Palabras Urgentes*. *Palabras Urgentes* is an album about reflection and perhaps about tackling problems head on. ■



# CINCO BY

## FIVE JAZZ ARTISTS DISCUSS FIVE LATIN JAZZ RECORDINGS THAT LEFT AN INDELIBLE IMPRESSION.

BY MARK HOLSTON

If searching for the holy grail of Latin jazz, look no further than the cultural melting pot that was New York City in 1943 and the genre-defining recording of “Tangá” by Machito and his Afro-Cubans big band. Written by the group’s Afro-Cuban arranger and multi-instrumentalist Mario Bauzá, the work represents the first time jazz harmony and open spaces for horn solos were successfully married to the seething undercurrent of an Afro-Cuban rhythm. A signature bell pattern called the *clave* and the central role of timbales, conga drums and bongos in the rhythm section cemented the new style. A flurry of interest in the exotic hybrid followed. By the end of the decade, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, considered a godfather of the emerging style, and saxophonist Charlie Parker added the verve of bebop phrasing. Arranger and composer Arturo “Chico” O’Farrill, *conguero* Chano Pozo and Machito, among many others, fortified the evolving partnership through their innovative use of Afro-Cuban rhythmic elements.

The widespread popularity in the 1950s of mambo and cha-cha-chá rhythms fueled interest in Afro-Cuban dance music and its stylistic cousin, Latin jazz. The decade launched the careers of a group of artists who in time would become viewed as founding fathers of Latin jazz. They represented an ethnically diverse group of visionaries that included trailblazers such as Tito Puente, Mongo Santamaria, Sabu Martinez, Willie Bobo, Ray Barretto and Cándido Camero, among many others.

As the decades rolled by, Latin jazz groups proved a welcoming environment for musicians of diverse ethnic and racial

backgrounds and nationalities. Where the jazz big bands that preceded them were mostly highly segregated, Latin ensembles boasted an open-door policy that welcomed legions of Jewish, Italian-American, Anglo, African-American and Latino musicians. Collaborations among name artists were another hallmark. Puente shared billings with pianist George Shearing, alto saxophonist Phil Woods, trumpeter Maynard Ferguson and clarinetist Woody Herman, and Poncho Sanchez cut dates with trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, saxophonist Eddie Harris and vocalist Dianne Reeves.

While the bebop-meets-Afro-Cuban-rhythms stylistic template remains an unbending point-of-reference for some Latin jazz stalwarts, it is no longer considered heresy to step beyond those bounds and explore new influences. For several decades, adventurous musicians in Panama, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and other countries have been experimenting with the use of the folkloric idioms of their indigenous music in improvisational settings. In many instances, the results have been exhilarating. At the same time, a cadre of young instrumentalists, composers, arrangers and vocalists from Cuba and Puerto Rico have refreshed the voluminous contributions to Latin jazz that their forefathers made several generations ago.

To get a sense of how Latin jazz has continued to exert its powerful influence, *JAZZIZ* asked five notable musicians to tell us about five recordings that they found particularly inspiring, recordings they would eagerly recommend to friends. Their selections range in release date from 1955 to 2019, a span of more than six decades, and are not presented in order of preference.







# CAMILA MEZA

*Jazz guitarist, singer and composer Meza is among a growing number of Chilean musicians who have established successful careers in the U.S. in the past decade. Her latest recording, *Ámbar* (Sony Masterworks), 2019, features the Nectar Orchestra. While not a Latin jazz artist herself, she has a keen interest in the genre and its most inventive practitioners.*

## **CLAUDIA ACUÑA**

*Wind From the South* (Verve), 2000

As a fellow Chilean musician, I grew up listening to Claudia and she has always been a huge inspiration. The arrangements on this album are amazing! She managed to fuse our folkloric traditions and other influences with the fiery aspect of jazz improvisation and harmonic sophistication. Her vocalizing expanded the concept of Latin jazz beyond just Cuban and Brazilian styles.

## **GUILLERMO KLEIN & LOS GUACHOS**

*Filtros* (Sunnyside), 2008

Klein is one of our time's greatest composers and arrangers and his band is composed of some of the best improvisers in the world, including saxophonists Miguel Zenón and Chris Cheek. Originally from Argentina, Guillermo explores such folkloric rhythms as *chacarera* and *zamba*, but also has a personal and quite intricate rhythmic approach as a pianist to his compositions, which makes his music super interesting.

## **GONZALO RUBALCABA**

*Suite Caminos* (5Passion), 2015

An absolute master at his instrument and always pushing the envelope, the keyboardist creates an adventurous journey on this album, experimenting with synth sounds, oblique melodies mixed with Yoruba chants, and rhythms. The session includes a great collaboration with guitarist John McLaughlin and is a true testament to the fact that the music is always evolving.

## **EDMAR CASTAÑEDA & GRÉGOIRE MARET**

*Harp vs. Harp* (ACT), 2019

I love the textures that the harp and harmonica create together. Playing the llanera harp, Edmar celebrates his rural Colombian music traditions, and this session shows both his versatility and the playfulness that can be achieved between two musicians of strikingly different backgrounds. I loved the repertoire and that in an instant they can go from a very intimate to a dynamic vibe.

## **GRUPO IRAKERE**

*Irakere* (Areíto in Cuba/Columbia in USA), 1978

I remember that this LP was being shared among musicians in the Chilean scene when I was growing up. I still didn't understand very well what jazz or Latin jazz, for that matter, was. But this album by the Havana-based group led by keyboardist Chucho Valdés was how I conceived music. It was not Afro-Cuban, not jazz, not rock, not funk, but it was all that at the same time. No boundaries, just music as a fluid expression.



# LUIS MUNOZ

A multi-instrumentalist known primarily as a trap drummer, composer and arranger, Muñoz is a longtime California resident who was born and raised in Costa Rica. His series of self-produced albums have won critical acclaim for their sophisticated melodies, complex arrangements and multiple influences, from flamenco and tango to a broad panorama of tropical Latin styles. His current recording is *The Infinite Dream* (Pelin Music), 2019.

## CAL TJADER

*Cal Tjader's Latin Concert (Fantasy), 1959*

This live recording by vibraphonist Tjader's quintet has everything you wish for from a traditional Latin jazz ensemble: great charts, an organic, tight swinging sound that shifts from cooking at low heat to burning with intensity, and a deep pocket. The percussion duo of Mongo Santamaria on congas and Willie Bobo on timbales in this type of setting is unmatched.

## EDDIE PALMIERI

*Unfinished Masterpiece (Coco), 1975*

A combination of impeccable big band arrangements, with Palmieri's pianistics spiced by Monk, McCoy Tyner and even Cecil Taylor at times, driving the music with fierce *guajeos* [repeated phrases] and aggressive, expanded piano voicings. Singer Lalo Rodriguez (only 17 at the time), along with a star-studded band, created what I consider a "finished masterpiece."

## MIGUEL ZENÓN

*Jíbaro (Marsalis Music), 2005*

Except for the drum chair, this quartet has been playing together for close to 20 years, allowing itself to develop a tight, lyrical, complex and exploratory sound, all immersed into the essence of the jazz tradition along with the Puerto Rican folklore. The simplicity of the island's music, deconstructed by Miguel on alto sax, seems to always permeate everything he touches. Modern Latin jazz at its very best.

## RALPH IRIZARRY

*Ralph Irizarry & Timbalaye (Shanachie), 1998*

The debut album by a very forward-thinking and extremely creative ensemble quickly established a loyal following. While remaining deeply rooted in the Afro-Caribbean tradition, Timbalaye often expanded the concept of what a Latin jazz combo could do. Under the leadership of master *timbalero* Irizarry, the band truly became a legend in its own time.

## GONZALO RUBALCABA

*Live in Havana (Messidor), 1987*

An open window into the genesis of a master musician. A little green, as was to be expected then, Rubalcaba was relying perhaps a bit too much on technique and driven by a frantic spirit. He eventually settled down and became one of the greatest pianists in the history of jazz, Afro-Cuban or otherwise.





# DOUG BEAVERS

*An ace arranger and producer for salsa and Latin jazz artists, Beavers is also one of the top trombonists in Latin music and a proponent of salsa dura — hard swinging, traditional salsa. Of Spanish and North American parentage, he has been a mainstay in legendary groups such as The Spanish Harlem Orchestra and pianist Eddie Palmieri's various ensembles. Beaver's current release, Sol (Circle 9), is a funky update on salsa-laced Latin soul that features new salsa vocal sensation Jeremy Bosch.*

## **MACHITO**

*Kenya (Roulette), 1958*

This could be considered a veritable encyclopedia on Latin jazz during its formative years in the U.S. Machito [born Francisco Grillo], leader of The Afro-Cubans big band, and arranger Mario Bauzá teamed up with such jazz luminaries as “Doc” Cheatham and Julian “Cannonball” Adderley to deliver an album of stunning scope and imagination. It was renowned for the inventiveness of its orchestrations, which were all firmly structured around the key concepts of the *clave* [the foundational rhythmic pattern of Afro-Cuban music].

## **DON GROLNICK**

*Medianoche (Warner Bros.), 1996*

This little-known gem, led by pianist Grolnick, has been one of my favorites for well over two decades. The original compositions are supple in nature and masterfully crafted. What floors me is the production quality of the album. The contributions to our Latin jazz genre by the likes of Michael Brecker and Dave Valentin, and Latin percussion legends Milton Cardona, Don Alias and Steve Berrios are, in my opinion, historic.

## **EDDIE PALMIERI**

*Palmas (Elektra Nonesuch), 1994*

When I heard this recording the first time in 1995, I was utterly shocked. I couldn't believe the aggressiveness and grit coming from the speakers, particularly from the piano of maestro Palmieri and from my future trombone teacher, Conrad Herwig. I had never heard someone sit on the upper register of the trombone like that, executed with such fire. There had never been an album of Latin jazz with the ferocity of *Palmas*, nor has there been one since.

## **MARVIN DIZ**

*Habla El Tambor (self-released), 2008*

A shocking scope of vision on this one. The track “Yemaya Mother” was introduced to me some years ago by my good friend, *conguero* George Delgado. Listen how the energy builds from the Yoruba [Afro-Cuban religion] chant and lends power and meaning throughout. When you have the principal percussionists of the New York scene all on one session, you can't go wrong: Pedrito Martinez, Giovanni Hidalgo, Little Johnny Rivero, Richie Flores, Luisito Quintero, Bobby Allende and Ralph Irizarry.

## **RALPH IRIZARRY & TIMBALAYE**

*Best Kept Secret (Shanachie), 2000*

Ralph took me aside one day in 2013 after a session at the after-school program I established, the Harlem School of Urban Music. He asked me if had I heard about his group, Timbalaye. Sadly, I hadn't. He described the countless hours they would rehearse before performances and recordings, and the evidence is clear on this release. It is one of the most technically impressive and transcendent Latin jazz recordings ever.



# ANDREA BRACHFELD

*Brachfeld's life story is a prime example of being in the right place at the right time. For an aspiring flutist, what could have been better than to have been in New York City in the late 1960s and '70s during the peak of the Latin music explosion in the Big Apple? She studied with and performed alongside a long list of artists that can truly be called legendary, from Mauricio Smith, Hubert Laws, and Eddie Daniels to Bobby Rodriguez, Joe Quijano, Dave Valentin and countless others. Today, Brachfeld can take her rightful place in this pantheon of flute greats. Her current recording is Brazilian Whispers (Origin), 2020.*

## **TONY MARTINEZ & THE CUBAN POWER**

*Mafereful (Blue Jackel), 1999*

Born in the provincial Cuban city of Camagüey, Tony studied popular and classical music at the local conservatory, focusing on alto sax and piano. I love this recording because it combines the intricacy and power of Cuban rhythms with the expansion of jazz harmonies. This perspective is deeply rooted in Afro-Cuban rhythms and the island nation's music culture, including the contemporary mode pioneered by Irakere. Tony has found great success in Western Europe.

## **SABU MARTINEZ**

*Palo Congo (Blue Note), 1957*

This is a classic Latin jazz album which I believe has been sadly overlooked. Born in New York City's Spanish Harlem, Sabu was a contemporary of Cuban conga drum player Chano Pozo, renowned for his historic collaborations with trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. Sabu was widely recorded as a *conguero* in the late 1940s and '50s, and his choice of music on this storied album is steeped in the tradition of Cuba's folkloric *son* and has an amazing array of fantastic musicians, including *tres* [Cuban guitar] legend Arsenio Rodriguez.

## **DAVE VALENTIN**

*Live at the Blue Note (GRP), 1988*

This Valentin record is my absolute favorite. The flutist is at the top of his game musically and technically, as are all the other musicians on the recording, including pianist and longtime Valentin music director Bill O'Connell and *conguero* Giovanni Hidalgo. Coming from his *charanga* [a vintage Cuban style featuring violins and flute] roots, Dave was able to expand the music form and bring it to new heights and innovations.

## **BILL O' CONNELL**

*Wind Off the Hudson (Savant), 2019*

I love this recording because of the choice of music, where Bill, as the arranger and pianist, combines traditional Latin styles with progressive elements in a fluid and seamless manner. He has also chosen the *crème de la crème* as far as musicians in the field go, including trumpeter Alex Sipiagin and trombonist Conrad Herwig. This recording to me exemplifies how non-Latinos can play this music with as much expertise and authenticity as the best Latinos.

## **ANDY NARELL**

*Sakeshó (Heads Up), 2002*

This is one of my absolute favorite albums across all genres! The steel pannist and his amazing ensemble combine Caribbean rhythms with jazz harmonies in a seamless groove moving in and out of each selection on the recording. Although this is not what one would call a traditional Latin jazz album, I feel it is right up there in terms of excellence and innovation in representing the music.





# CHARLIE SEPÚLVEDA

*This Puerto Rican trumpet virtuoso and keeper of the flame remains loyal to the basic stylistic formula that launched the Latin jazz movement more than seven decades ago: hard-bop soloing over fiery Afro-Caribbean rhythms. His three-decade-old ensemble The Turnaround is all but a Latin incarnation of The Jazz Messengers. Sepúlveda has performed and recorded with virtually every Latin jazz icon, from Tito Puente to his cousin, Eddie Palmieri. His most recent recording is This Is Latin Jazz (HighNote), 2021.*

## **RAY BARRETTO**

*The Other Road (Fania), 1973*

The interesting thing is that Fania released this instrumental Latin jazz album after Ray had a run of big salsa hits for the label. It was totally unexpected — a true left-field hit. I was just a little kid at the time, and it made a lasting impression. It was the first time I'd heard "Round About Midnight!" Ray was on congas, and the band was loaded with international talent, including Colombian Edy Martínez on Fender Rhodes, Panamanian trap drummer Billy Cobham and flutist Artie Webb from the States. A classic of classics.

## **TITO PUENTE AND HIS LATIN ENSEMBLE**

*On Broadway (Concord Picante), 1983*

Tito recorded so many amazing albums that some truly great ones tend to get overlooked. This one is special, with Alfredo de la Fé on violin, pianist Jorge Dalto, Mario Rivera on woodwinds, and Jerry González playing congas and flugelhorn. My wife asked me what kind of a guy Tito was, and I told her that off stage, he was funny, you couldn't know a nicer person. But on stage, he was all business.

## **KENNY DORHAM**

*Afro-Cuban (Blue Note), 1955*

I took this album to play for my band, to show them what we wanted to accomplish. With Carlos "Patato" Valdés playing congas, a leader like Kenny on trumpet, and hard bop jazz musicians in the group, they produced an incredible album. When I decided to create my group The Turnaround, I said to myself, this is what I want my band to sound like.

## **MACHITO**

*Kenya (Roulette), 1958*

This incredible album is special for me because of the presence of my dear friend Ray Santos. Ray is mostly known as one of the greatest arrangers of our music, but on this historic session, he played tenor saxophone. There was so much talent on hand — it was the definition of an all-star band. René Hernández was the pianist and primary arranger, and such luminaries as saxophonist Cannonball Adderley, trombonist Eddie Bert and percussionist "Patato" Valdés were in the ranks.

## **JERRY GONZÁLEZ**

*Rumba Para Monk (Sunnyside), 1989*

When I moved from Puerto Rico back to New York about four decades ago, I became fascinated by the Fort Apache group of the González brothers. They could adapt the rumba rhythm to jazz and not lose the spirit of the music. It was incredible. This album, led by Jerry on flugelhorn and percussion, features interpretations of eight compositions by Thelonious Monk. It's unbelievable that I have never recorded a Monk tune. Maybe someday! ■



# auditions



# Outside the Lines

**ARTURO O'FARRILL EXPANDS THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT'S TYPICALLY REGARDED AS LATIN JAZZ.**

On his latest album, the celebrated pianist and composer Arturo O'Farrill leads his Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble, a considerably smaller offshoot of the similarly named big band that he created in the early 2000s. But despite its subtle affinity with aspects of Cuban music, anyone taking a spin with the new ... *dreaming in lions* ... — his debut for the Blue Note label — might wonder how “Afro-Latin” it really is.

Stupefyingly complex percussion interludes? Screaming trumpet solos? Rhythms that propel your feet before you realize this is happening? You won't find such elements in this elegant and eclectic album, which packs a dizzying range of colors and structures into 14 relatively compact, mostly solo-free pieces. Taken together, these tracks — which make up two ballet suites commissioned by the Malpaso Dance Company of Havana — conduct joyful, ear-opening incursions into territory not usually associated with O'Farrill's name.

So despite the name of the ensemble, is this really an “Afro-Latin jazz” album? “Oh, not at all,” O'Farrill says. “I mean, everything I do has that edge to it, because I grew up in that environment.” (A photo on his website shows a pre-teen O'Farrill standing by the piano as his father — the legendary composer-arranger and Latin jazz pioneer Chico O'Farrill — works on a composition.) “But this is much more through-composed, with different textures, experimental thinking.” In fact, the album's aversion to pre-imposed boundaries recalls the non-Latin works that his Cuban-born father wrote for conventional big bands and even symphonic orchestra.

The album's title work draws its inspiration from the Ernest Hemingway classic *The Old Man and the Sea*. “But the ballet is not narrative,” O'Farrill says. “It was never meant to be exactly like the story, with the old man catching the big fish and all. It's really more evocative of the book's themes, which are about feelings of



isolation and alienation.” The album cover — which shows O'Farrill standing still but surrounded by multiple-exposure photos of dancers in motion — captures the aesthetic he wanted to convey with the music. “I wrote the piece with the idea that you can be surrounded and yet very much alone.”

O'Farrill's career has given him plenty of experience with that mindset. “Honestly, I don't know where I fit in,” he explains. “I've always felt, ‘Well, I'm not Latino enough for the Mambo Kings. I'm not really Black and I'm not really white.’ So I've always kind of felt that otherness. I got in under the guise of the sombrero, and

if the sombrero was my way in, I was going to wear the loudest sombrero I could find. But you know, my father wrote 10 albums for Count Basie. At the end of the day, we are jazzers — even though I also really embrace the Afro-Latino roots that I have. That music is such a powerful part of my soul.

“So sometimes I do feel alienated from, you know, the middle of the road. I think my father had the same issue. He was classically trained and could write jazz albums — and was known as ‘the Latin person.’”

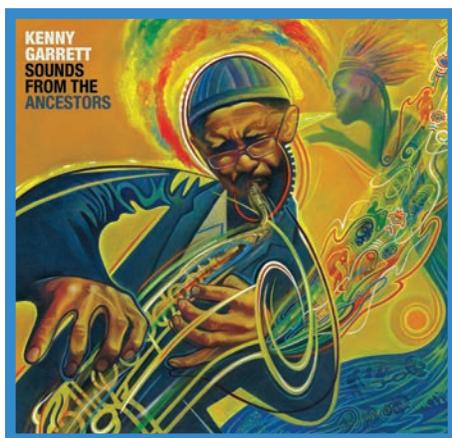
O'Farrill's roots brought him into contact with Malpaso Dance (for whom he has now scored three ballets) as well as Ballet Hispanico, based in New York. These commissions, in turn, have had an outsized impact on his creative process as a whole. “There was a point in my life where all I wanted was to write music,” he says. “But after I started working with dance companies and choreography, I almost can't imagine writing music without seeing a structure, an architecture.

“It's really changed the way that I think of music in general,” he adds, with palpable wonder. “When I write large-scale works, I see them now; I see them almost as cathedral-like structures. It's completely revolutionized who I am.” ■

B Y N E I L T E S S E R



Chick Corea, John Patitucci and Dave Weckl



**Kenny Garrett**  
*Sounds From the Ancestors*

(Mack Avenue)

Thirty-seven years after alto saxophonist Kenny Garrett's first of 20 releases, he remains the embodiment of aggressive blowing. However, the segue from young incendiary to middle elder has manifested in Garrett's musical expansion into a sizable amount of lyricism, leading to the duality in his playing heard here.

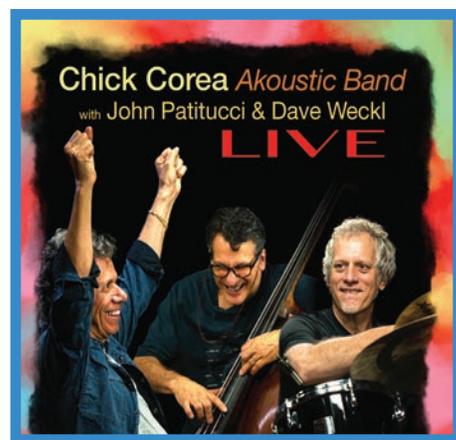
*Sounds From the Ancestors* seems to illuminate two disparate approaches, with most tracks placing greater emphasis on Garrett's composing and arranging skills than his saxophone soloing. West African influences abound, while a dedication titled "Roy Hargrove" covers an R&B/hip-hop groove heard on the late trumpeter's RH Factor releases. Throughout five of eight tunes, Garrett's improvisations are relegated to a more succinct, lyrical style.

Case in point are bookending takes on "It's Time To Come Home." On the opening version, Garrett sets a diasporic preamble for the project with a percussion-laden 6/8 Afro-Cuban beat. The simple lithe melody, harmonized by Jean Taylor's wordless vocal, floats on top of the song's pulsating groove in sing-song fashion. Garrett's eventual alto improvisation maintains the melody's lyrical simplicity. Midway through the song, the melody returns, supplanted by Garrett's unique use of his saxophone as a breathy percussive instrument. The closing version (not an outtake) is reduced from septet to his

stellar quintet — pianist Vernell Brown Jr., bassist Corcoran Holt, drummer Ronald Bruner and percussionist Rudy Bird — with similarly relaxed results.

The three remaining cuts offer more aggressive blowing, oft considered Garrett's forte (pun intended). Opening with Garrett's solo piano intro — he's heard overdubbing keys throughout this release — the title track segues into a loping 6/8 with vocal cries from Dwight Trible and Yoruban lyrics by percussionist Pedrito Martinez. Garrett comes on strong, blowing his trademark full-toned alto with the deliberate and exciting intensity he unveiled as a sideman with Miles Davis back in the 1980s.

— James Rozzi



**Chick Corea Akoustic Band**  
*LIVE*

(Concord Jazz)

Chick Corea was so prolific that it's practically human nature to overlook some of the 100 albums he created with his myriad projects. Now, following the iconic pianist-composer's death in February, anything left in the vault is a treasure — especially the live double-disc recording of a 2018 performance by his self-titled Akoustic Band with bassist John Patitucci and drummer Dave Weckl. The simpatico rhythm section was originally culled from the larger Chick Corea Elektric Band in the late 1980s, yet this trio always proved capable of energetic wattage regardless of instrumentation.

Corea's opening "Morning Sprite" is



Lady Blackbird

Photo by Christine Solomon



the same track that closed this ensemble's last live album, *Alive*, from 1991. The pianist's unaccompanied introduction sounds even more joyous than on previous recordings, and is subsequently energized by Weckl's rimshots and Patitucci's middle break. It's a recurring and welcome theme through Corea's buoyant "Japanese Waltz," with Weckl deftly switching between brushes and drumsticks and Corea answering Patitucci's lines during his solo; a trio of standards ("That Old Feeling," "In a Sentimental Mood" and "Summer Night"); and the seven-and-a-half-minute Disc One closer "Humpty Dumpty," repeated on Disc Two in a longer and even more playful form.

The second disc also features Patitucci's gorgeous, viola-sounding bowed intro to Corea's "Eternal Child"; the pianist's inventive take on Thelonious Monk's "Monk's Mood"; and a show-stopping finale of the original "You're Everything." Initially sung by Flora Purim on Return to Forever's second release, 1973's *Light As a Feather*, this version features Corea's wife (and former Mahavishnu Orchestra band member) Gayle Moran Corea on vocals. The piece starts out as a four-minute duet between the couple before Patitucci and Weckl kick into six minutes of overdrive that culminates in the singer's near impossibly long final note. Live albums should make listeners wish they'd been present; poignantly, *LIVE* also makes anyone who hears it wish its architect were still here.

— Bill Meredith

## Lady Blackbird

### *Black Acid Soul*

(BMG)

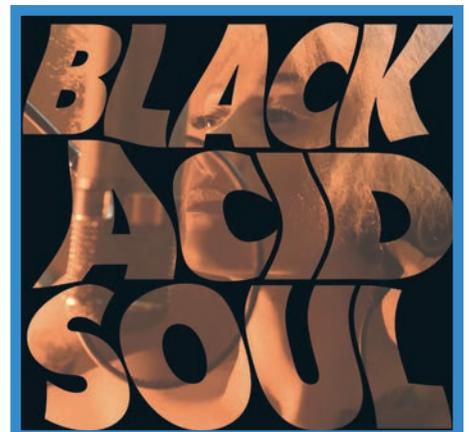
Los Angeles-based singer Lady Blackbird's buzzworthy full-length debut release brims with retro vibes and melancholy. The album heralds the arrival of an enigmatic vocalist who spent years searching across various genres before a partnership with producer Chris Seefried led the artist, formerly known as Marley Munroe, to re-imagine herself. The rest, as they say, is history.

*Black Acid Soul's* 11 meticulously curated ballads — seven covers and four originals — are drenched in the anguish of inconsolable heartache and a yearning for vindication. Scaled-back arrangements evoke brooding moods and the smoldering atmospherics of a bygone era, allowing space for Lady Blackbird to color her songs with the many shades of her rich vocal palette.

Backed by former Miles Davis pianist Deron Johnson, double bassist Jon Flaughner, drummer Jimmy Paxon, and Seefried on guitar, Lady Blackbird kicks off the set with a spellbinding rendition of Nina Simone's "Blackbird." The singer's earthy tones contrast with the metallic underpinnings of her voice, teetering between control and surrender. Flaughner's menacing bowed bass and Johnson's ominously scattered accents on keys add to the sense of despair.

"It's Not That Easy," a '60s Southern soul tune, soars despite the heaviness of Lady Blackbird's tortured vocals, as pulsating piano chords punctuate crawling organ lines. "Fix It" is crafted around a contemplative two-chord motif made timeless by Bill Evans in his classic "Peace Piece." But on this iteration, Johnson's billowing piano swirls lift the song out of its rainy-day introspection as Lady Blackbird croons her lyrics with tender vulnerability.

Original track "Nobody's Sweetheart" delicately sways with the slow-burning cadence of a waning love affair and features Trombone Shorty blowing



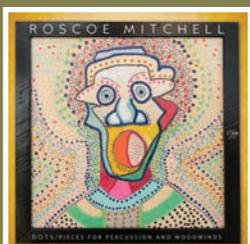
# DANCING ON THE EDGE

Old hands and new voices continue to redefine the avant-garde.

By Josef Woodard

As lines of stylistic demarcation and old-school definitions blur in the modern moment, categories such as the “jazz avant-garde” are subject to change and redefinition. These four new releases may be considered avant-garde and beyond any accepted jazz mainstream, but each heeds its own muse and mission. And each freshens the mind and ear, which may ultimately be a common feature under the avant-garde umbrella.

After hearing maverick jazz sage **Roscoe Mitchell** in larger contexts for decades, as a key figure in the Art Ensemble of Chicago and as head of his Note Factory and elsewhere, it’s illuminating to catch him in spare settings in recent years. With the fascinating new solo album *DOTS, Pieces for Percussion and Woodwinds* (Wide Hive), Mitchell brings a painterly approach to his blend of saxophonics and subtle percussion over the course of 19 tracks, recorded at his home in Wisconsin under the pandemic hunker-down mandate. Fittingly, Mitchell’s own enchanting pointillistic folk art-inspired paintings grace the album’s liners, in organic aesthetic collusion with the sonic pointillism of his music.



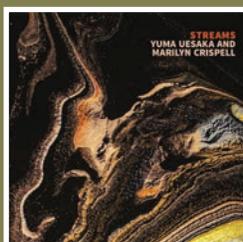
Although **Tyshawn Sorey** seized attention in jazz circles as a ferocious and smart reckoning-force drummer with Steve Coleman, Vijay Iyer and multiple projects of his own, he has enjoyed a deepening respect (and commissions) for his work in the new music and contemporary classical orbit. And that’s the direction of his ethereal and probing new double-

CD, *For George Lewis/Autoschediasms* (Cantaloupe Music), with noted new music chamber orchestra **Alarm Will Sound**. MacArthur Grant recipient Sorey’s compositional palette, partly bowing towards the airy temporal reinventions of Morton Feldman but with Sorey’s own voice growing ever stronger, benefits from a generous forum here: One disc is dedicated to the legendary trombonist-scholar-innovator George Lewis, while the other comprises “Autoschediasms” (improvisations) recorded live in 2019 and via video chat in 2020 lockdown times.

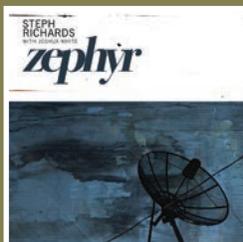


The unique blends of structure and improvisation on the latter disc, with the composer’s “conduction” style adapted from Butch Morris’ playbook, split the differences between jazz and concert music without fanfare or excuse.

Veteran pianist **Marilyn Crispell** has been deftly dancing along the edges of “outside” and “inside” jazz for decades, with insight, natural musicality and disregard for courting categories. On the alluring release *Streams* (Not Two), she is heard in her full, exploratory glory, in dialogue with the young and ascendant saxophonist-clarinetist (and for this date, composer) **Yuma Uesaka**, with an ease of communication and expressiveness resulting in music of alternately meditative and restlessly creative properties. Analogues to Crispell’s past dialogues with Anthony Braxton and Joseph Jarman naturally arise, but something refreshing this way comes.



Trumpeter — and trumpet practice rethinker — **Steph Richards** is a prime example of a new, increasingly important figure on the current scene. Revitalizing past notions of the avant-garde and free improv ideals, with sensual-sensorial lyricism in tow, Richards in 2020 released *SUPERSENSE*, a quartet album that came equipped with custom-made scents for each piece. On leaner turf and with the extra-musical element of an artful video by Vipal Monga, Richards is joined on her new release, *Zephyr* (Relative Pitch), by an empathetic ally, pianist **Joshua White**, for a series of engaging, varied pieces. What starts, deceptively, with the melodic ease of the title track, stretches into more abstract regions as it progresses. Like the Norwegian Arve Henriksen, Richards extends trumpet techniques and timbral possibilities, sometimes dipping the bell into water vessels and finding tones between the cracks and echoes of jazz clichés. Water is a key element of the project, made when the trumpeter was six months pregnant and cognizant of the fluidity and fecundity of natural processes.



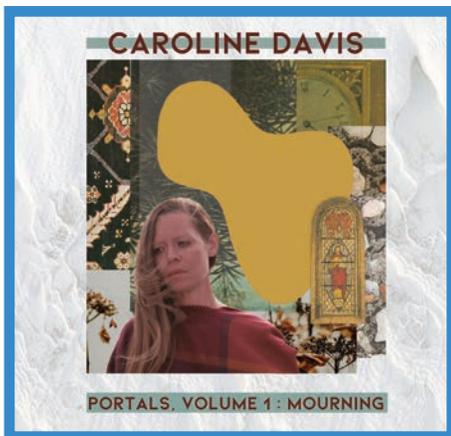


Steph Richards

plaintively on trumpet. The James Gang's psych-rock deep cut, "Collage," signals a shift in mood midway from pained nihilism to Lady Blackbird reclaiming her agency. And Tim Hardin's wistful lament, "It Will Never Happen Again," retains some of its bleary-eyed melodicism, amplified by lyrical, contemporary piano lines and Lady Blackbird's unfettered singing.

The mostly instrumental title-track closes the record in a freewheeling, psychedelic hodgepodge. Arco bass, percussive accoutrements, smashing cymbals, drums and creeping electric organ are intensified by an ethereal choir that seems to rise from the ashes. Lady Blackbird is here to stay.

— Lissette Corsa



**Caroline Davis**  
*Portals, Volume 1: Mourning*  
(Sunnyside)

Caroline Davis always does her homework. As a grad student at Northwestern University in the early 2000s, the alto saxophonist instituted an oral history of nearby Chicago's jazz scene, which years later evolved into her acclaimed 2015 album *Doors*. In early 2019, driven by the sudden passing of her father, and armed with a doctorate in music cognition, she started writing the compositions that became *Portals*, in which she tackles the emotional, intellectual and physical effects of grief.

From that somber foundation Davis has built an elegant monument

to memory and resilience, and to the complexities of loss and acceptance. But like many similarly inspired works throughout the ages, it also proves paradoxically uplifting, even joyous. Credit goes in large part to her compatriots — including trumpeter Marquis Hill, cellist Mariel Roberts, pianist Julian Shore, and the protean violinist Mazz Swift — as well as Davis' distinctive style; greatly influenced by the late Lee Konitz, she has a bittersweet tone and a fluent but gritty technique that pays no mind to surface sheen or empty theatrics.

Much of *Portal's* success stems from Davis' unfussy, bracing compositions and her writing for string quartet. Rather than using the strings to merely color, Davis fully integrates them into her existing quintet, where they play a variety of roles. On "Hop On Hop Off," for instance, they underscore the opening motif which, played as a round by alto and trumpet, recalls 18th-century Shaker songs. The strings later adopt that repetitive motif — which itself recalls Steve Reich's minimalist works — as the piece reaches its climax.

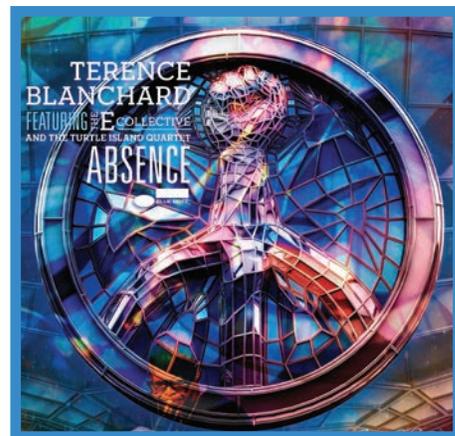
Recorded in late 2020, when there was plenty to mourn, *Portals* opens with a gathering storm of musicians' voices reciting a brief meditation by the ancient Persian poet Omar Khayyam. Other short narrative segments, spoken plainly by the instrumentalists (rather than actors), could have proved intrusive, but here they provide context and intriguing mystery. Davis has transformed the most intimate of sorrows into a work of universally accessible insight and often searing beauty. Among the year's most ambitious and gorgeously rendered concepts, it gets better with each hearing.

— Neil Tesser

**Terence Blanchard**  
featuring the E-Collective  
& the Turtle Island Quartet  
*Absence*

(Blue Note)

Anyone seeking to connect the dots between Terence Blanchard and



Wayne Shorter, whose music Blanchard salutes on *Absence*, won't struggle. Both apprenticed with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, both were heavily influenced by Miles Davis, with Shorter playing in Miles' Second Great Quintet, and they share a label home that has traveled from classic jazz to its current focus on artists all over the jazz map. But a penchant for musical fusion — Shorter co-created Weather Report — and a fondness for experimentation with genre, forms and electronics, may represent their most significant commonalities.

Blanchard, who plays his horn and writes for small groups when he isn't scoring Spike Lee movies or composing operas like the just-launched Metropolitan Opera production *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, here brews a compelling sonic concoction. For his third release leading the electronics-heavy E-Collective, he brings in strings, collaborating with the experimental-minded Turtle Island Quartet. Split about evenly between Shorter compositions and originals by the participating musicians, the album is built on artfully layered electric and acoustic elements, and heady improvisations. It often feels cinematic, as if these tones and textures were merely building blocks for a larger story yet untold.

The tale that unfolds, though, is plenty engaging. Shorter's melodies are stepping-off points: For "The Elders," trumpet, piano, string, guitar and synth lines criss-cross over a heavy backbeat, while "Fall" begins with bass leading the way, and piano and strings responding



Terence Blanchard

Photo by Cedric Angeles

auditions



Brandee Younger



before Blanchard injects gorgeous long tones into the mix. On “Diana,” which opens with three minutes of strings, the leader’s distinctive trumpet resembles a human cry as he battles a turbulent piano attack, the whole thing ebbing and flowing and the band breathing as one. Pieces by Blanchard and bassist David Ginyard take a similar approach, the former’s distinctive, effects-drenched horn the brightest color on an always fluctuating, oft-fascinating canvas.

— Philip Booth



### **Brandee Younger** *Somewhere Different*

(Impulse!)

Genre-defying harpist and composer Brandee Younger is a singular voice on the modern music scene. After five superb releases, Younger ups the ante on her major label debut, *Somewhere Different*. This soulful batch of eight originals, with its polished sound, showcases Younger’s mature writing and her confident playing maintains its thrilling spontaneity throughout.

Overlapping refrains open “Reclamation” with a laid-back swagger. Drummer Allan Mednard’s restless vamps and electric bassist Rashaan Carter’s muscular lines create a retro-sounding backdrop. Over this groove, the rest of the band — including expressive trumpeter Maurice Brown — interweaves its emotive performance. In addition to Younger’s charming turn in the spotlight, the tune includes

passionate improvisations from flutist Anne Drummond and tenor saxophonist Chelsea Baratz.

The album’s densely layered cinematic ambience conjures 1970s soul jazz. Younger, however, is not simply imitating harpist predecessors such as Alice Coltrane and Dorothy Ashby. Rather, she elegantly fuses various styles, creating her own dynamic *mélange*. On “Pretend,” for instance, guest vocalist Tarriona “Tank” Ball alternates smooth, silky singing with sharp, clever spoken-word recitation that perfectly complements the tune’s R&B-ish vibe.

The effervescent title track, meanwhile, is akin to a Western classical sonata, with Younger’s resonant strings shimmering melancholically. Drummer Marcus Gilmore’s programmed beats add a dramatic effect that’s delightfully irreverent and urbane, taking chamber music to the streets.

“Olivia Benson,” featuring bass maestro Ron Carter, is the most boppish piece. Younger’s phrases match Carter’s in sophistication, crackling with vibrancy as Mednard takes a thunderous solo that ushers in the concluding head.

In the span of little more than a decade, Younger has proven herself a unique and individualistic artist. With this enchanting album, she firmly establishes herself as a superlative, well-rounded musician. *Somewhere Different* is a brilliant milestone in a promising career.

— Hrayr Attarian

### **Harvie S Trio** *Going for It* (Savant)

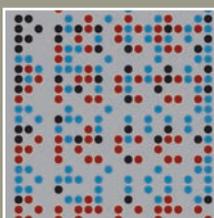
In 1985, bassist Harvie S and guitarist Mike Stern played for three nights at a club in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They were joined by the greatest drummer in the region, Alan Dawson, and those fortunate enough to attend have spoken about the performances with reverence and awe. Unbeknownst to the players, the club owner, David Lee, always taped the gigs at the 1369 Jazz Club, and *Going for It* presents seven tunes from that engagement. The



Enrico Rava

# SOUNDBITES

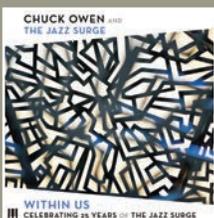
By Eric Snider



## Eric Hofbauer/Dylan Jack

*Period Pieces* (Creative Nation Music)

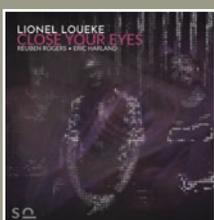
This Boston quartet has conjured up a triumph. Hofbauer's slurry acoustic guitar, Jerry Sabatini's intrepid trumpet work, Tony Leva's acoustic bass and trippy electronics, and Jack's wonderfully musical drumming meld into a flowing suite of improvised pieces that move through spacey free improv, smoldering funk, warped bop, noise-jazz and more. The music is spacious, never clotted. Of special note, Jack issues a master class in minimalist groovemanship on "Tread Lightly ..."



## Chuck Owen and The Jazz Surge

*Within Us* (Summit)

Big band agnostics would do well to give this orchestral jazz effort a spin. Owen, a Tampa-based composer, arranger and conductor, leads a 20-piece ensemble through eight complex, multi-movement pieces that showcase a prismatic array of colors (a Dobro solo?) and shifting dynamics. The music, while challenging, is uniformly melodic, highly listenable throughout, and — perhaps most important — goes easy on the blare and bombast.



## Lionel Loueke

*Close Your Eyes* (Sounderscore)

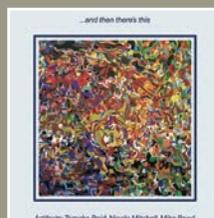
Working with drummer Eric Harland and bassist Reuben Rogers, guitarist Loueke puts his wiry, percussive sound to solid use on an 11-track collection of jazz classics ("Solar," "Blue Monk") and standards ("Moon River," "Close Your Eyes"). The trio ably delivers on the swing pieces and ballads, but the music most comes to life when rooted in Loueke's West African background — best heard on "Footprints" and "Skylark."



## Orrin Evans

*The Magic of Now* (Smoke Sessions)

For his first album since ending a three-year tenure with The Bad Plus, pianist Evans put together a stellar quartet that includes stalwart drummer Bill Stewart, superb young alto saxophonist Immanuel Wilkins and bass ace Vicente Archer. The album, a decidedly straightforward affair, succeeds on the strength of the spirited playing more so than the seven standard-issue originals — four by Evans and three by Wilkins.



## Artifacts Trio

*... and then there's this* (Astral Spirits)

Flutist Nicole Mitchell, cellist Tomeka Reid and drummer Mike Reed — all third-generation, Chicago-based members of the AACM — put their charged chemistry on display throughout this set of predominantly originals, ranging from atmospheric ("Song for Joseph Jarman") to Afrocentric ("Dedicated to Alvin Fiedler") to swinging ("In Response To"). Most of the tracks, though, are built upon quirky iterations of funk.



## Enrico Rava

*Edizione Speciale* (ECM)

Recorded in Antwerp two days before the Italian trumpeter's 80th birthday in August 2019, this live set comes barreling out of the blocks with the frenetic, Ornette-indebted Rava original, "Infant." The all-Italian sextet chops hard, and — surprisingly for an ECM title — most of the rest remains loose, uptempo and often boisterous. It's fun to hear Rava, exclusively on flugelhorn, keep up with his younger bandmates.



## Lena Bloch & Feathery

*Rose of Lifta* (Fresh Sound New Talent)

Saxophonist Bloch's airy, cerebral sound gets overshadowed by the forceful triumvirate of pianist Russ Lossing, bassist Cameron Brown and drummer Billy Mintz. The Russian-born Bloch's musical background in Israel and Europe lends a worldly scope to her compositions — especially the Middle Eastern-influenced "Promise of Return" — but her comparative lack of improvisational acumen prevents *Rose* from blooming.



## Scott Reeves Quintet

*Alchemist* (Origin)

Reeves' use of alto flugelhorn and alto valve trombone — both arcane instruments rarely heard in jazz — provides this 2005 live set an appealing extra dimension. (The horns sound quite similar, both round-toned and sonorous.) Out of six tracks, it's the two percolating funk pieces — "New Bamboo" and the title tune — that fare best. Mike Holofer's electric piano meshes particularly well with Reeves' downsized trombone.



result is a powerhouse recording that exudes passion and surprise.

The greatest revelation, perhaps, is Stern's performance. While he has often been negatively stereotyped as a loud, fusion-focused musician, here he provides exhilarating, in-the-pocket lines made all the more exciting by Dawson's drive and responsive punctuation. On the up-tempo "Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise," for example, Stern unleashes a relentless torrent of choruses, separated by a bass solo in which the leader wisely drops out of tempo to provide a necessary respite. This is followed by Horace Silver's classic ballad, "Peace," and two other standards: a jaunty take on "Like Someone in Love," with Harvie S taking center stage, and a spritely rendition of "Moment's Notice," with Stern once again saturating the air with breathless phrasing and Dawson energizing the crowd with a vivacious, lyrical drum solo. The album concludes with lengthy renditions of Chick Corea's "Windows," a showcase for Stern, and the guitarist's own composition, "Bruze," with memorable features for all three musicians.

Throughout, Harvie S grounds the trio with rich, thoughtful support, and Dawson demonstrates why he should be considered one of the greatest drummers of his generation; although he had never previously performed with Stern, he unerringly propels the guitarist's flights, as though the trio had been together for decades.

— Sascha Feinstein



## Adonis Rose and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra featuring Cyrille Aimée

### *Petite Fleur* (Storyville)

Teaming Adonis Rose's New Orleans Jazz Orchestra with the French-born Cyrille Aimée seemed like a good excuse to emphasize the ties between New Orleans and France. At least that was the original concept. However the results, while rewarding, come closer to the type of vocal

albums of the 1960s that found the Count Basie Orchestra playing a subsidiary role behind a variety of singers.

The France-New Orleans connection is at its strongest on the first three numbers, which include the title track and Django Reinhardt's "Si Tu Savais." Sidney Bechet's "Petite Fleur" is taken at a perfect medium-slow tempo that is ideal for Aimée's warm and sensuous vocal, which is joined by the passionate soprano-sax playing of Ricardo Pascal (who's listed in the credits as only playing tenor). This rendition is both memorable and dramatic, while "Si Tu Savais" is almost on the same level.

Only a few of the other numbers evoke New Orleans or France. There are occasional solos along the way (none credited in the liners), most notably a trumpet battle by Ashlin Parker and John Michael Bradford on Aimée's "Down" and some booting tenor by Ed Petersen during an obscure Jelly Roll Morton tune ("Get the Bucket") that in this version sounds like it's from the early 1950s.

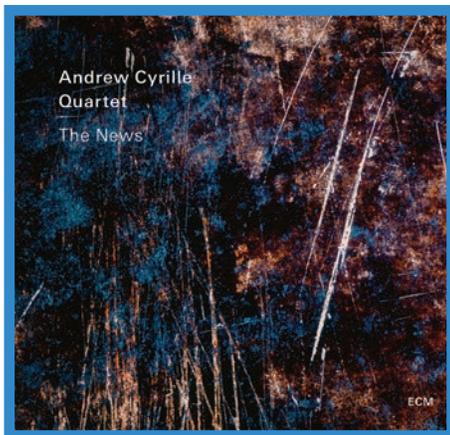


Adonis Rose & Cyrille Aimée

In actuality, this album should have been billed as “Cyrille Aimée featuring Adonis Rose and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra,” instead of the other way around. The singer displays quite a bit of talent and versatility. She’s a superior ballad singer (“What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life,” “Crazy He Calls Me”); scats creatively on the relaxed “In the Land of Beginning Again” and the uptempo “Undecided”; is quite at home on the Fats Domino-inspired “I Don’t Hurt Anymore”; and swings with the big band during “On a Clear Day.”

*Petite Fleur* is easily recommended to Aimée’s many fans.

— **Scott Yanow**



## Andrew Cyrille Quartet

### *The News*

(ECM)

On his new quartet album, drummer Andrew Cyrille barely uses his legs. Instead of grounding the music with the kick drum’s stabilizing weight or the hi-hat’s metronomic grid, he sends it drifting; the snare head whispers and cymbals chime, forming constellations that suggest the movement styles of each piece without anchoring them within too firm of a pattern.

*The News* is Cyrille’s 21st album as a leader, and his leadership, too, is as subtle as ever. Compositions by the drummer and his session mates range from sunny blues (“Go Happy Lucky”) to abstract noise collage (the title track). Cyrille only fleetingly assumes the spotlight; his

playing, spare and impressionistic, serves as a frame that perpetually disintegrates and reforms around the musical gestures of his cohort.

Guitarist Bill Frisell, bassist Ben Street and pianist David Virelles (the group’s sole newcomer), play with an equal degree of patience and awareness. Frisell’s “Mountain” opens the record with a combination of a bang and a long sigh. His signature lyricism assumes a somber majesty as the band rolls and clatters through the chord melody, cycling through the lyrical twists like a free-time mantra. Chaos bleeds into the pattern until it comes apart completely, giving way to a phantasmagoric, shapeshifting piano solo. The bandleader accompanies Virelles into the depths with playing that is atmospheric yet decisive.

On “Incienso,” Cyrille leads with the opposite approach to the sporadic inventiveness that defines his playing on the rest of the album. He anchors the skulking, dissonant ballad by confining himself religiously to a rhythmic pattern that resembles a quiet version of the “We Will Rock You” beat. Changes in orchestration and articulation allow him to react to his bandmates, but he never once seeks to draw attention. Fifty years into his bandleading career, Cyrille seems to have fully conquered his ego.

— **Asher Wolf**

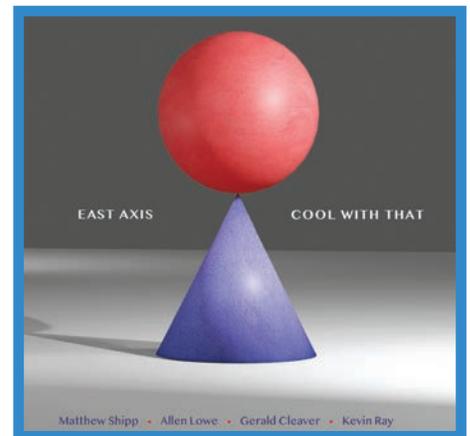
## East Axis

### *Cool With That*

(ESP-Disk)

The members of this impressive lineup — pianist Matthew Shipp, saxophonist Allen Lowe, drummer Gerald Cleaver and bassist Kevin Ray — initially started playing together in 2017. They’ve since given themselves a new name for their debut recording. And while the bandmates enjoy a high degree of free-improv street cred, East Axis’ interplay offers plenty of internal cohesion, as well.

“A Side” begins with a sense of hesitancy, as if the musicians were feeling each other out. It’s only a matter of time, however, before Shipp establishes



a rolling motif that’s gradually picked up on by Ray, and which spurs Cleaver on to more assertive patterns. All the while, Lowe issues gruff yet melodic bursts. “Oh Hell I Forgot,” on the other hand, wastes no time establishing its rollicking mood. Shipp races up and down the keyboard, and the rest of the quartet seems determined to keep pace with its own fleet attack. Nonetheless, Ray’s high-speed walking bass lines help establish a solid foundation, and Lowe interjects a few lyrical passages within his otherwise rapid-fire phrases. You can hear Shipp and Lowe pick up on each other’s phrases throughout, just one instance of the deep listening engaged in by these masters.

“Social Distance” takes an aptly subdued tone. Shipp’s delicate phrases float atop Ray’s sinuous bass lines, while Lowe’s searching melodicism drives home the melancholic air. The blues-drenched title track features Shipp in full-on Monk mode; the space between his deliberate, off-center phrases sets a playful tone that Lowe willingly follows. It’s the piece with the most consistent through line.

All that would be sufficient to recommend the album, but *Cool With That*’s closer, the 28-and-a-half-minute tour de force “One,” truly showcases the group in all its glory. If the running time seems indulgent, the subtle shifts in tempo, mood and texture command listeners’ attention for the entire track. Like the album as a whole, it takes you on a journey highlighted by fascinating detours.

— **John Frederick Moore**

# REFLECTIONS ON A LEGENDARY SESSION

By Nick Gold

Working on the 25th Anniversary Edition of *Buena Vista Social Club* has taken me back again to that once in a lifetime session. Not that it needs much of a trigger for the memories to come flooding back. But these previously unreleased songs, takes and rehearsals cause an instant flashback to the joy, excitement and sense of responsibility I felt in that wonderful wood-paneled room, surrounded by that most perfect ensemble making its debut.

We went to Havana's EGREM Studios in March 1996 to record two albums. We didn't have album titles, the bands themselves didn't exist, and it was my first time recording in Cuba.

In the first week, during the recording of what became the debut Afro Cuban All Stars album (*A Toda Cuba Le Gusta*), I encountered Rubén González. He was waiting by the studio door and once it was unlocked, he shuffled toward the piano, sat down, opened the lid and began to play. And play and play. While other musicians walked in, greeted him and warmed up, while microphones were being placed and music was being passed around, he improvised some of the most beautiful music I'd ever heard. It was like listening to Jelly Roll Morton's Library of Congress recordings. Strange (to my uneducated ears) *danzons*, *habaneras*, *descargas* and *boléros* played in a never-ending medley with a sublime touch. Band leader Juan de Marcos, who'd invited him to the sessions, had to gently ease down the piano lid to stop him playing so the band could get on and rehearse and record. But at every break, and especially every morning, he poured out that dream music. Once I realized that the African musicians we had scheduled weren't going to make it for the following week's session, I suggested we keep Rubén on for the "Eastern Album" (as *Buena Vista* was originally called). About the same time, producer Ry Cooder called from L.A. asking if we could find a pianist called "Rubén something." He'd heard him soloing on records where the musicians were calling out his name. "He's right here, sitting next to me!" I said.

Another soloist from the All Stars session who I fell for was the great trumpet player Manuel "Guajiro" Mirabal. Unlike Rubén, he only played when called upon. But it was always perfect. Beautiful,

inventive little solos and comments, played with a personal sound, reminded me of a Cuban version of the Ellington or Basie small group soloists. We asked him to stay on for the "Eastern Album," too.

Eliades Ochoa was one of the very few of the musicians I'd known before arriving in Havana. We'd invited him in from Santiago, and lo and behold, it turned out that he'd recently teamed up with the veteran Santiago maestro Compay Segundo ("The Bible," Juan de Marcos called him, and "like having Louis Armstrong on the session," according to Ry). Eliades and Compay would reel off these Santiago dance songs one after the other, seeing which ones might get recorded. These repertoire suggestions, complete with two-voice harmonies and guitar solos, were captured on a pair of mics we had going direct to stereo DAT tape throughout the sessions. (Even footsteps sounded great in that room.) Ry really fell for Compay and the two of them would sit in intimate conference on these little green wooden chairs in the middle of the studio, talking repertoire and guitar parts while I tried to keep their haven secure from the steadily rising hubbub around them.

We recorded fast, but it was both concentrated and relaxed. Ry and Jerry Boys (the engineer I brought from England) established a wonderful sound that envelops you and makes you feel like you're sitting right there amongst the band. We didn't have "talk back," and I remember being in the studio (trying to keep still because of the very creaky floor) waving at Jerry in the control room to record as soon as we had a song ready. If the musicians became too aware of an impending take, they would start tuning up again or re-rehearsing the coda and the moment would be diluted. You can see from the track sheets and their temporary song titles (and sometimes musicians' names) how fast we were going. Nearly everything is first or second take. Never to be repeated. ■

Nick Gold presided over the *Buena Vista Social Club* recording that sold more than 8 million copies, won a Grammy and brought global recognition to its participants. A 25th anniversary box set edition was released in September.

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