

The Latin Jazz Corner

5 Artists That Are Making Us Question Our Assumptions About Latin Jazz

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At its most basic level, good music forces us to reflect upon ourselves and question our lives. Music speaks volumes about culture, from the most established concepts to the ever-changing modern edge. When we hear inspiring music, it should make us examine our relationship to culture and consider recent changes in our own communities. Tradition shines through music in many ways, like a clear picture of the way that things have always been done. As the world changes and we move into the future, we need to make decisions about evolving traditions. History comes alive through recordings and performances, reminding us of the past while forcing us to look into the future. Each song, album, and performance relates to a moment in history, and with our related memories come questions about how these events affected our lives. The basic idea of preference comes into play as well, as we sort through the vast array of choices before us. Our choices change over time, making us ask why we enjoy the music we choose. Our answers to all these questions shape our core beliefs and define our identities – once we ask them.

Latin Jazz is a music filled with a wealth of loaded assumptions. We assume that the core of an artist's music relates directly to their heritage. In some cases, this assumption is true, but the reality is much deeper than that. We think we know what a piece of Latin Jazz will sound like before we hear it; and in many cases, this involves jazz chords over Afro-Cuban rhythms. We associate certain moods with genres; from the ominous effect of a minor 6/8 Bembe to the soothing saudade of a bossa nova, the sounds go through our heads before we actually hear them. We expect standard forms, instrumentation, and approaches that have been established through years of performance practice. We want to dance with our Latin Jazz, keeping the music closely tied to Salsa so that the party doesn't end when the soloists takes center stage. In our minds, we've got Latin Jazz figured out and we're often looking for more of the same - this mindset often stops us from asking essential questions, unless we are pushed.

Like many true artists before them, a group of young Latin Jazz artists are delivering music that challenges our assumptions about the basic nature of Latin Jazz. They've shattered any pre-existing ideas about what Latin Jazz should sound like; instead,

they've reconstructed the elements into a new statement that reflects their unique and modern perspective as an individual. They remain well-versed in music history, but they don't feel tied to it. They take the lessons of their elders and build upon them. In many cases, they are not playing Latin rhythms beneath their compositions; instead they lean towards swing or other modern expressions. At other times, they manipulate traditional rhythms to fit their ideas or they re-contextualize cultural elements into new musical settings. They clearly state their identities, both as musicians with a Latino heritage and creative individuals - they simply make their statements in a way that we don't expect.

The Latin Jazz world is changing, and we need to reflect upon our place in these evolution. Fortunately, these artists are helping us search for answers with their probing and thought provoking recordings. Their music often travels a more intellectual path, and we may have to dig deeper to unveil connections to Latin culture. Once we see the finely woven tapestries of music and culture, they cannot be denied - we must revisit our own thoughts about Latin Jazz and see how our ideas fit into this new world. For some of us, these artists challenge every notion that we've ever believed important to Latin Jazz. Other listeners may find these works as natural progressions of the style. Regardless of your initial impression of the music, it will undeniably make you think - take an opportunity to hear their work and question your own assumptions.

1. Elio Villafranca

Cuban pianist Elio Villafranca explores the connections between culture and style on *The Source In Between*, a collection of several strongly constructed Villafranca originals. Most of the pieces lean towards swing and modern jazz, but a closer look reveals a close connection to Villafranca's Cuban roots. "Oddua Suite" captures the deep spirituality embedded in John Coltrane's music, yet the piece reflects a Santeria deity, basing the spirituality in Cuban religion. Villafranca makes the connection between Cuban music and modern jazz very apparent with two version of "The Source In Between" - one featuring Arturo Stable on congas and one just utilizing the quartet. "Resurrection of the Incapacitated" explodes with bold drama in the vein of Chick Corea, yet draws the storyline from a Santeria ritual involving the orisha Babalu Aye. "Luna" receives an almost classical treatment with an intricate compositional structure but consistently contains the sparse rhythmic underpinnings of a classic bolero. Villafranca spends most of the album in a modern jazz mode, rarely providing an obvious connection to Cuban rhythms. The strength of Villafranca's compositional process builds the necessary bridge though, deeply rooting his work in Cuban culture.

2. **Dafnis Prieto** *Taking The Soul For A Walk*
3. **David Sanchez** *Cultural Survival*
4. **Francisco Mela** *Cirio: Live at the Blue Note*
5. **Arturo Stable** *Notes on Canvas*