

THE JAZZ CORNER

Album Review

ALBUM OF THE WEEK By Chip Boaz

Latin Jazz has become increasingly difficult to define through the modern history of the music. In its original incarnation, Latin Jazz thrived in big band settings, placing Afro-Cuban rhythms underneath complex arrangements. Brazilian rhythms found popularity in American culture and soon made their way into Latin Jazz. Big bands eventually became financially improbable and musicians became increasingly interested in individual expression, so they altered their performance setting into a combo format. As musicians explored the freedom inherent in small groups, they began to integrate other styles and bend the original intentions of the genre. Musicians found ways to refer to Cuban styles without actually playing traditional rhythms and hold onto authentic roots without blatantly playing established genres. The line between Latin Jazz and traditional jazz has become increasingly thin and blurry, and jazz musicians have used these distinctions to their advantage. Cuban pianist Elio Villafranca plays upon the interplay between styles on his release *The Source In Between*, creating songs that blur genres while making space for personal expression.

An Organic Connection To Cuban Rhythms

Some tracks integrate Cuban rhythms to vary degrees, ranging from the complete integration of the rhythms into a song to slight implications. Villafranca, bassist Jeff Carney, and drummer Dafnis Prieto create a vamp over an up-tempo son montuno on "The Source In Between," that leads into saxophonist Eric Alexander's winding melody. Villafranca introduces short rhythmic ideas into his solo until Prieto transitions into a driving swing feel, inspiring long aggressive lines. The rhythm section shifts between son montuno and swing behind Alexander, pushing him towards a group of frenzied ideas. Saxophonist Yosvany Terry shapes a menacing melody over the rhythm section's intensive son montuno vamp on "Don't Ever Say Never," creating a dark mood. A shift into up-tempo swing allows Terry the freedom to develop a series of ideas into long flowing phrases. Prieto introduces an

interesting blend of funk and Latin rhythms for Villafranca's improvisation, inspiring interesting rhythmic variations. A melodic duet between Terry's soprano sax and Carney's bowed bass introduces "Luna," leading into a delicate melody. As the rhythm section implies a bolero beneath a swing ballad, Villafranca utilizes the sparse texture to thoughtfully express himself. Terry develops a brief but potent statement, combining bluesy note choices and an underlying intensity that strongly transitions the song back into the melody. Villafranca organically maintains a connection to Cuban rhythms throughout these songs without letting the rhythmic structures dictate the compositions.

Firmly Entrenched In Modern Jazz

Several songs lean heavily towards swing and modern jazz traditions while retaining Villafranca's compositional depth and style. The swung melody on "Three Plus One" moves forward through a combination of bebop phrases with ample space for Prieto to insert short bursts of improvised ideas. Villafranca and Alexander both work through full solo choruses, displaying a familiarity with bebop conventions while inserting distinct creative slants. Villafranca and Alexander continue to trade phrases with ferocious ingenuity until Prieto once again reveals his powerful improvisational skills in a straight-ahead setting. Villafranca provides an understated reading of the melody on "Faces Not Evil," until Alexander revisits it with a slightly more assertive approach. Alexander utilizes a strong forward motion to develop his ideas while Prieto serves as a prime interactive agent. Villafranca inserts harmonic variations and rhythmic tension to build an engaging statement, leading into Carney's logically developed and melodically interesting improvisation. "Resurrection of the Incapacitated" opens with an unaccompanied and soulful solo from Carney until the rest of the band attacks Alexander's improvisation with an open sound. Alexander switches from improvisation to melody over a straight eighths feel, which evolves into a quick swing for Villafranca's solo. He takes his time with short phrases, instituting a gradual development that the rhythm section helps push into a powerful intensity. These songs find Villafranca firmly entrenched in modern jazz, basing compositional and performance ideas around swing and traditional improvisational settings.

An Introspective and Spiritual Side

Other pieces reflect a highly introspective side, revealing a personal and at times spiritual part of Villafranca's music. A series of carefully constructed short phrases from Villafranca opens "The Lonely One," until Alexander weaves them into a full melodic statement. Alexander draws inspiration for his solo from the original melodic shape, slowing moving into a different idea, full of rhythmic motion. Alexander creates contrast with a disparate idea that benefits from his keen melodic sensibility and harmonic insight. Villafranca moves through a series of lush harmonies on "In The Dark" until Alexander introduces a melody over a rumbling freedom from the rhythm section. Villafranca stretches time and drummer Ferenc Nemeth provides coloristic embellishments, creating one of the album's most personal statements. The rhythm section emanates a focused power as they follow Alexander's second reading of the melody with a balance of freedom and composition. As intense harmonies and free spinning improvisations move into a highly spiritual melody, an album highlight arrives with "Oddua Suite," Villafranca's dedication to the Santeria deity. Alexander presents a more open melody over a dark swing, leading into the song's original statement and an unaccompanied solo by Carney. The swing feel returns for an extended solo from Villafranca, which he builds into a tense mesh of dissonant harmonies and angular lines. Alexander follows with a brash and Coltranesque statement, which seems appropriate, as the Suite owes much to Coltrane's suite, *A Love Supreme*. Villafranca integrates free improvisational ideas, longer compositions, and intense personal interaction to construct a personal piece of the album.

High Artistry and a Powerful Latin Jazz Voice

Villafranca pulls together a wide variety of ideas on *The Source In Between*, that result in a unique sound. He pulls influence from all across the jazz spectrum; Cuban rhythmic forms, bebop melodic lines, Coltrane charged spirituality, and modern swing all earn equal priority here. Villafranca jumps between these influences quickly, but he never cheapens their foundations through simple implication. Instead, he pays respect to their roots with artistic depth – the level of

his study and understanding becomes apparent through his clever manipulation of each musical element. Stylistic elements grow into more than basic influences in Villafranca's music; they become tools of self-expression. His application of those elements in both composition and performance defines his unique identity. The members of his quartet understand Villafranca's genre blending concept, and they support his compositions with full-force. They fearlessly jump between Cuban styles and swing while exposing their voices completely; their compatible artistic backgrounds serve as the perfect partners for this music. In many ways, Villafranca continues the blurring of stylistic elements on *The Source In Between*, but it makes perfect sense within his overall concept; instead of defining style, he uses style to define his own experience and expression. The resultant is music filled with high artistry and a powerful Latin Jazz voice that needs to be heard.