

GLOBE UNITY



Rise Again Vol. 2

Manuel Valera New Cuban Express (s/r)
We Are Not the Headliner (Live from Studio 9)
Omar Sosa Quarteto Americanos (Otá)

Nuit Parisienne à La Havane

Roberto Fonseca/Vincent Ségal (Artwork)
by Daniel A. Brown

The Cuban influence on jazz cannot be understated. Singular elements of Cuban music—including clave and syncopated rhythms, Afro-Cuban percussion instruments, extended chords (including 9ths, 11ths and 13ths), piano-based montuno patterns that lock in with the rhythm section, bass lines grooving on the offbeat ostinato tumbao rhythm-line—all tie together with call-and-response ensemble playing. These pervasive qualities, as well as the influence of groundbreaking musicians such as Mario Bauzá, Machito, Chano Pozo, Chucho Valdés and Gonzalo Rubalcaba, have long-since merged the streams of Cuban and jazz music into potent forms. Three recent releases throw light on the current state of Cuban jazz, albums as varied as the unique elements of the storied island’s creolized son cubano and drum-based, West African-derived musical heritage.

Born and raised in Havana, NYC-based pianist-composer Manuel Valera is a GRAMMY Award-

nominated artist, Guggenheim Fellow and NYU professor. Valera maintains that credibility with the recent *Rise Again Vol. 2*, boasting the participation of his band the New Cuban Express: Alex Norris (trumpet, flugelhorn), John Ellis and Felipe Lamoglia (tenors), Boris Kozlov (electric bass), Hamish Smith (bass), Jimmy Macbride (drums), plus Mauricio Herrera and Samuel Torres (percussion). Opener “Emilianesque (dedicated to Emiliano Salvador)” is indicative of the album’s allure: a syncopated, polished-to-a-chrome-sheen arrangement, courtesy of the ensemble’s crackling performance. “Mr. Shorter (dedicated to Wayne Shorter)” is a languid tribute to the late jazz magus, a dreamy ballad featuring sensitive playing from the assembled players, while the percolating “La Otra Mano”, with its blinding, unison playing and unpredictable shifts, dips into fusion territory.

Recorded live in concert at the titular venue in North Adams, MA, *We Are Not the Headliner (Live from Studio 9)* is the 11-track debut from Omar Sosa Quarteto Americanos. A seven-time GRAMMY Award nominee, pianist-composer Sosa and his Bay Area-based, Latin-world-jazz ensemble—Sheldon Brown (woodwinds), Ernesto Mazar Kindelán (bass), Josh Jones (drums)—augment their sound with guests Natacha Atlas (vocals), Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Reggie Stephens (spoken word), Camilo Landau and Kai Lyons (both on *tres*, the traditional guitar-like Cuban instrument) and Tito Leliebre (percussion). The light, airy ballad “Back Home to My Dwelling” complements the genre-mashup of “Africa in My Fingers”, the latter hinting at contemporary jazz, rock and all points in between. The hip-hop-tinted “Hella

Changui” boasts spitfire rap rhymes, expansive piano chords and a whip-smart rhythm. In total, *We Are Not the Headliner* is a solid collection of the current state of forward-thinking Cuban jazz.

Pianist Roberto Fonseca and cellist Vincent Ségal join forces for *Nuit Parisienne à La Havane*, an 11-song collection of dark, shadow-hued romanticism. The players’ career mixtures—from Fonseca (Buena Vista Social Club, Herbie Hancock, esperanza spalding) to Ségal (Cesária Évora, Elvis Costello, Sting)—blend well in creating a potent genre-jumping blend on cuts such as the modern, classical-tinged “Rumbo a Ti”, where ethereal cello lines move ghostlike atop metronomic piano rounds. Conversely, “Paciencia Es Lo Que Hay Que Tener” builds like a menacing flame, an unrelenting minor-key swirl of Fonseca’s piano trills and Ségal’s confident arco work. “Un Homme Qui Dort” evokes a nebulous hint of Duke Ellington’s “Fleurette Africaine”, as Fonseca’s unhurried approach to the arrangement is partnered with plucked and bowed unison lines from Ségal, culminating in a dizzying solo from the pianist that spans the gamut from Cuban to blues and classical. This album proves to be the ideal spin for fans of intimate, candle-lit jazz.

For more info visit manuelvalera.com, omarsosa.com and store.pias.com. Sosa’s album release concert is at Blue Note Jul. 13-14. Valera’s *New Cuban Express* is at Smalls Jul. 23-24. Valera is also at Smalls Jul. 1, 8, 15, 22 (with Carlos Abadie) and Jul. 17-18 (with Dave Schumacher and Cubeye), Bar Bayeux Jul. 8 (with Duduka Da Fonseca), The Django Jul. 21 (as leader) and Mezzrow Jul. 22 (with Tony Moreno). See Calendar.



Freedom of Art
Corcoran Holt (Holthouse Music)
by Rachel Smith

Bassist and composer Corcoran Holt’s sophomore album is well constructed from a thematic point of view, but not necessarily from a sonic point of view. The title, which makes reference to the names of his children (Freedom and Art), captures with admirable poetry the goal of this album: to self-consciously bring together the theme of family with the versatility of jazz. Supported in this highly personal move, the leader is joined by Stacy Dillard (tenor, soprano), Josh Evans (trumpet), Benito Gonzalez (piano, Fender Rhodes), Kweku Sumbry (drums, djembe) and Lewis Nash (drums).

The opener, “Theme for Ma” introduces the album’s most inventive thread: the intermingling of music and speech. Holt composes the tune around an everyday voicemail left for him by his mother and his use of the bow here is masterful. There is something melancholy about using voicemails—reminders of a missed connection—as the basis for tunes. That sadness is especially poignant in “Golson Calling”, another voicemail (no music) left for Holt by the late great tenor saxophonist, Benny Golson. It’s jarringly private, and Holt’s musical voice disappears for a moment. But he does deliver some wonderful musical tributes elsewhere on this album, including a rendition of “Kiss to the Skies”, written by Kenny Garrett (Holt is best-known for

playing in Garrett’s bands). This tune is one of several instrumentals—along with “Transition Blues”, “Hello” and “Ibou & Art”—that each serve as high points of the album, highlighting the entire band’s chops (Dillard shines in particular). On the last selection, “To My Dear Ones”, pianist Sharp Radway delivers an expressive reading of a poem written by Holt’s father. Again, the track fits thematically, but the curated sound of spoken word comes at the expense of closure to the album. Though the pieces may not always sound like they fit together, *Freedom of Art* has some very fine moments built around a thoughtful concept.

For more info visit corcoranholt.com. Holt is at Dante Park Jul. 15 (part of Lincoln Square BID’s “Summer Jazz Sensations”). He is also at Jazz Forum (Tarrytown, NY) Jul. 10. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.



Ella
April Varner (Cellar Music)
by Pierre Giroux

Paying tribute to Ella Fitzgerald is among jazz’ most daunting tasks. The temptation to imitate is ever-present. But vocalist April Varner wisely avoids that trap on her *Ella*, honoring by embracing the qualities that made the First Lady of Song unique, including joy, swing, imagination and impeccable musicianship, while remaining true to herself.

From the opening notes of “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” (Fitzgerald’s 1938 breakthrough hit), Varner makes her intentions clear. Pianist Emmet Cohen’s clever arrangement shifts effortlessly between swing and Latin rhythms, allowing the singer to recast the classic nursery rhyme in a fresh light, respectful without being reverent. The supporting cast is first-rate throughout. Cohen, Yasushi Nakamura (bass) and Ulysses Owens Jr. (drummer, producer) bring energy and sensitivity to the small-group tracks, while trumpeter Brian Lynch’s arrangements lend color and excitement to the big-band performances. “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” (Cole Porter) benefits from Lynch’s dramatic alternation between Latin grooves and swinging passages, complementing Varner’s command of melody and rhythm. The other Porter gem, “Night and Day”, an intimate, heartfelt reading, moves in the opposite direction. Varner resists grand gestures, allowing the lyric to unfold with elegance and clarity.

One of the album’s most affecting moments comes in the ballad pairing of Jimmy McHugh, Harold Adamson’s “I Couldn’t Sleep a Wink Last Night” (a song Fitzgerald never recorded) and David Mann/Bob Hilliard’s “In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning” (memorably performed by Ella in 1958 on her *Live at Mister Kelly’s*). Varner’s warm, conversational delivery suggests longing and temporary separation rather than heartbreak, lending the medley an appealing emotional nuance. “Cheek to Cheek” (Irving Berlin) highlights the superb rapport between Varner and Nakamura, whose elegant bass quietly acknowledges the influence of bassist Ray Brown, Fitzgerald’s former, longtime musical partner and, briefly, husband as well. The intricate multi-tempo arrangement of “Mr. Paganini” (Sam Coslow) draws on one of Fitzgerald’s earliest influences, The Boswell Sisters, and showcases Varner’s technical command and playful scatting. Conversely on “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered” (Rodgers, Hart), she covers the initial run-through using the original lyrics before yielding