

HEY MR. MUSIC

You Say You Want A Revolution

BY DAVE HUCKER

I am such a sucker for the trick of printing grooves and a center label on a cd to make it look like a 45, I'll give any pile of old rubbish that does it a good review.

However I do not have to make up a glowing review of **Grupo Caribe's** latest offering, *Somos Caribeños* (CMS), which has just such a label. The latest release from this highly rated NY combo led by pianist Sergio Rivera has had the salsa fans all aquiver recently. This is very hard music, very Caribbean, beautifully done in a very simple way. There are no overblown fancypants orchestrations hiding a lack of ideas. This release is brimming over with strong songs and a real serious creative groove. *Soneros* Herman Olivera and Lusito Ayala return to the fold along with one of the great soneros of all time, Tito Allen, guesting.

The opening track "Salundando" is one of those numbers that power crisply through *mucho* salutations and mentions about every country where salsa is appreciated. Tito Allen, whose name these days is mentioned in a most reverential manner, gives us a tribute to Tito Puente in "El Rey" which obviously features a percussion storm on wheels.

Herman Olivera solos on three tracks: "Homenaje A Los Bailadores," a self-explanatory dancers' delight, "Bongo" which pops and bangs its way into a mega-mover and "La Comparsa de los Rumberos," a jazzed-out percussion party. He joins Lusito Ayala and guest Liza Bauso vocalizing on "Bobby Capo," a smooth cha cha. I cannot find a duff moment in this fantastic release—it is tight and well honed without being overdone. The sound is meaty and solid and everybody involved does their best. You cannot ask for more than that.

The **Spanish Harlem Orchestra** has carved out a substantial niche for themselves with their finely crafted examples of modern/retro NY music. Their latest cd *United We Swing* (Six Degrees) takes the usual route with a few new twists and turns on the journey. The band seems to have gelled: There have been no major personnel changes and this album finds them in fine fettle. As they explore facets of the traditions, SHO has been accused of being antiseptic and lacking *sabor*, an efficient but soulless machine for churning out grooves. Also that the law of diminishing returns does apply—what was radical three releases ago is now mainstream retro, which I think is a bit harsh: Somebody has to carry the popular torch. But by moving on and introducing music like *danzon* and *plena*, SHO is progressing. Keeping with tradition in Spanish Harlem they cover

Spanish Harlem home boy Joe Cuba's cha cha "Mujer Divina," which is one of the standouts of the cd. They continue to delve into the cha cha with "En El Tiempo del Palladium" while "Se Formo la Rumba" is a punchy rumba with spirit.

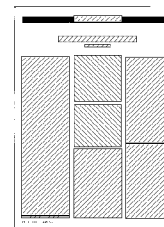
I like it when playing live they stretch out, slow down and extend the sound. I caught them earlier in the year in London previewing the cd. For me one of the standouts of the show was "Plena Con Sabor," its square beat giving a new dimension to the SHO. Another very welcome safari is into an exquisite, very jazzed-out danzon, "Danzon For My Father," an Oscar Hernandez composition that works so well. I always welcome a look again at some of the old styles like plena and danzon that seem to have gone out of fashion.

The only deviation from the SHO norm is "Late in the Evening/Tarde En La Noche," a song written by and featuring Paul Simon. I can see why it happened as Oscar Hernandez did the music/arrangements for Simon's musical *Capeman*. I have to say it is not going to set the world on fire. Now if Paulie had done a duet with whichever lumpbrain is the current *el rey* of reggaeton, he would have got more props.

Maña, Por Fin...Maña! Comenzo la Fiesta, (RR) is a NY band led by pianist Ramon Rosado and *timbalero* Victor Maldonado. Another of the *salsa dura* ensembles, this debut crackles with energy coming from the mix of original compositions and classics like Arsenio Rodriguez's "Monte Adentro" and Eddie Palmieri's "No Hay Mal Que Bien No Venga." A major effort is "El Que No Sufre No Vive," a percussion tour de force.

"Donde Este La Conciencia" is dedicated to PR bandleader and musical god Rafael Cortijo and is trad *bomba*, another of the riddims that need to be rediscovered by the people who think salsa is the only rhythm. Definitely left field and worth keeping an eye out for.

What is funk? James Brown said it made him "feel happy." Two funky releases of note bridge the divide of time and explore funkiness from two perspectives. First up is the vintage funk view, **Si, Para Usted: The Funky Beats of Revolutionary Cuba, Vol. One** (Waxing Deep). This is a fabbo selection of very funky stuff from Cuba as played on the Canadian radio show "Waxing Deep." Mega music, the best of '70s and '80s funky Cuba, when Earth Wind and Fire was the top/best U.S. band in the entire world and a major influence everywhere. Cuban bands always have had serious funk even before the term was used for music. In the '80s I was deejaying upstairs at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in London.



Every summer groups like Irakere, Arturo Sandoval and AfroCuba played there. They really were mindblowing: They had the jazziness, the funkiness and the musicianship.

This absorbing and entertaining compilation opens with 'bone player Juan Pablo Torres y Algo Nuevo, who provide us with a major avant-garde funk mover, acidic and dubbed out. While on the journey through this great collection Irakere's classic "Bacalao Con Pan" gets a worthwhile outing. Stopping off at fat bass junction, Los Tainos pump out great vocals and a rhythm which could be zouk. A fantastic tune. Ricardo Eddy Martinez's "Tambo Iya" has lovely female vocals and more than a tinge of Manu Dibango. Orquesta Riverside provides a wild moment or two as they crank it up to max. Title-track providers Grupo Monumental are hipper than thou. Babblin' rappers could do themselves a favor and check out this one.

Combo Tiempos Nuevos gives us jazzy scatty vocals while another JP Torres masterpiece is "Y Viva La Felicidad," sort of Fela meets bongo. JP's trombone is exceptional. The music comes from a period of optimism not only in Cuba but all around the world—before it all went so horribly wrong. Sometimes I do wonder what would have happened if the hlockade and ideological isolation against Cuba had not been there and there had been a genuine freedom of movement of people, music and ideas.

Los Van Van's groove is unparalleled in the world: "Y No Le Conviene" gives us an idea of what the future of LVV would sound like. Juan Formell's funky strangulated bass leads the violins into a *songo* funk that just keeps building and wandering all over the place, kicked around by a ferocious kit drum. We get a musical journey from the hippest hand in the world that is really quite totally out there. It is deep and very remarkable. With this track you can hear how Juan Formell was creating the basis for the LVV groove that we hear today.

Now Juan's son Sam, who has certainly added to the funkiness, runs the kit drums ragged—they don't need a timbales player—and he has shouldered the mantle of leader. When I first saw them in the 1980s the timbales player had a pedal bass drum, which gave a very funky pan-Caribbean big boom thumpy sound. *Si Para Ustedes* is a great compilation. We need people to collect, keep, disseminate and reintroduce the music before it's lost.

Jose Conde y Ola Fresca (Mr. Bongo) are class exponents of today's funky view. Jose is a very talented Cuban songwriter and singer. *Revolution* is a very smart and absorbing cd out of New York. This is not funky in a '70s way but it takes the Cuban sensibilities in his own new direction. The funk is throbbing in the music like you see a heart-beat pumping through a distended vein. The band is a typical NY mix of everybody from everywhere, including guests like regular NY 'hone man about town, Jimmy Bosch, and from south

of the Mason-Dixon line, Meters' drummer Ziggy Modeliste, a man who knows more about funk drumming than any other person on earth.

And it is all brought together very tightly by Jose's broad catholic view of the church of music. This is high-quality music through and through. Every track says something in the well-stocked rhythm hank: We visit the windows offering Haitian Compas and Son (French and Spanish versions), Son-Flavored Funk, Bombafunk N Salsa, New Orleans Funk N Mambo, Old School Cuban Jam Session, Cumhia-Soca-Reggae, Son Pa' L Joropo, Guarjira Funk Parody, Salsa N Timba and Jazzed Mambo Descarga. It's a pretty wide palate, and all are played with superb musicianship by the hand.

A short *bata* drum intro leads into the son-flavored funk of "Ritmo y Sabor," which is catchy and things just get better with Jose's smooth smoky vocals while "Cafe Con Sangre" goes into hard overdrive after a velvet beginning. "Oshiri Pan Pan" is an exceptional funk mover featuring Mr. Meters. This is another example of Jose's classy songwriting and great vocals and features cataclysmic guitar. "Ride La Ola" is Caribbean funky that surfs "3 O'Clock Roadblock" and moves it into Latin funk like Charanga 76's version of "Ain't No Stopping Us Now," whereupon it takes it and twists it more. Another classy tune. "Descarga Inez" is the old-school Cuban jam session and is a jazzed mover as Jimmy Bosch slides between the notes and pries open the groove—grade A example of a new twist on the descarga theme. Dipping into the Haitian compas we are regaled with a French vocal and sweet guitar leading the way. Very subtle and groovy and the Spanish version closes the circle and makes perfect sense. The cumbia/soca/reggae track "Probando Nuevos Sabores" is great stuff, slinky and sophisticated, while "El Chacal," the guarjira funk parody, is spot-on prowling and menacing, almost an instant Latin soul classic.

Revolution is going to resonate around for quite a while and reach all kind of corners of our globe because it has an open mind, taste, quality musicianship and great dripping gloops of creativity, and is driven by one person's unique vision. A major factor in the good vibes given off by this release is the very warm, friendly and enveloping quality of the sound, because the whole album was recorded on two-track analogue at Brooklyn Recording Studio and mixed at Studio 4, Conshohocken, PA. Two-track analogue—just how funky can you get?

Mr. Bongo is a record shop in London. After recently putting out mainly Brazilian music on their label they have returned to Cuban music. Their first Cuban release was well over 10 years ago and featured a young vocalist called Hanny. It was the best thing he ever did and now he has disappeared into England. Mr. Bongo's antennae are still spot on, but I can confidently say that Jose

Conde will not go the same way.

A much-overdue exploration of rare and funky music from Guinea in the shape of a double cd, *Authenticité: The Syliphone Years* (Stern's) covers the years 1965-80 and features the cream of Guinean bands. A very comprehensive booklet accompanies the release with full sleeve notes by Graeme Counsel and reproductions of the original lp covers. CD one covers 1965-72 and has the official government bands like Balla et ses Balladins, Orchestre de la Paillote, Horoya Band National and Bembeya Jazz National. CD two concentrates on the 1972-80 "Federaux" bands such as Keletigui et ses Tambourinis, Syli Authentique and Tropical Djoli Band de Faranah. The two cds contain 28 tracks in total which clock in at two hours 16 minutes of exquisite music.

It's not very often that a socialist government gets it right when it tries to start encouraging their country's music to go in a certain direction and make popular music central to their cultural outlook but with newly independent Guinea under President Toure that is what happened. *Authenticité* is put together with love and attention to detail and is so packed full of essential unmissable music that after listening to one cd, you have to take a break to recover. The guitars chime, the sublime sax honks away, the singing is really soulful and there are some fine examples of Cuban-influenced grooves. This is another incursion into tuff music that has not been neglected but inadvertently passed by. Essential.

A interesting release from Kenya comes in the shape of **Kenge Kenge** and their cd *Introducing Kenge Kenge* (World Music Network) who are breathing new life into the revered *benga* style. They were formed in the early '90s as musicians for the Catering Levy Trust Choir, but by the late '90s had developed a more contemporary benga sound. What you hear now is rough, ready, high-energy Luo music with a thumping heartbeat and loony percussion. Wild and unpolished, it is like stepping back in time. Very interesting.

Sampling a Salif Keita show in London, he is on better form these days, but his band's stadium-pomp rock licks annoyed me. I bumped into World Circuit's Nick Gold who said he was mixing the new Orchestre Baobab and says it has a harder edge, as if they are getting tougher and tighter. And they are using a talking drum for the first time. I look forward to it with great anticipation.

[Dave "El Manicero" Huckler plays the music of two continents and assorted islands at several very hip London dance clubs. Contact him at huckero@ntlworld.com and visit his home pages at www.technobeat.com .]

