

NOCHES CALIENTES

Hermana Duda

BY ROBERT LEAVER

Los Angeles' Congolese multicultural musical adventurer **Ricardo Lemvo** celebrates the birth of his daughter and his inspiring trip to Angola, where he participated in independence observations, with the release of the superb *Isabela* (Mopiato Music). Enlisting the support of Cuban multi-instrumentalist and composer Jesus "El Nino" Perez, Congolese singers Wuta Mayi and Nyboma, Congolese guitar legends Papa Noel and Huit Kilos, and with guest spots by violinist Alfredo de la Fe and Cabo Verdean singer Maria de Barros, Lemvo reaches another level of creativity on this, his fifth recording. "Kasongo Boogaloo" is an uptempo salsa tune with swinging horns and ticklish African guitar augmenting its sweet melody as Ricardo's suave voice floats and nestles with the rich chorus. With Wuta Mayi's ecstatic harmony vocals and Papa Noel's exquisite guitar "Malambo" is an irresistible mid-tempo Afro-Latin bon bon.

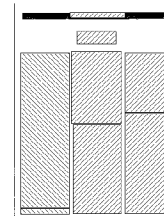
Lemvo shows his linguistic talents throughout, singing equally well in Portuguese, Spanish, Lingala, Kikongo, Swahili and even Turkish, on his cover of Candan Erceetin's "Elbette," which employs accordion and violin transforming the tune into a tango-tinged slow Congo rumba. "O Casamento" is an Afro-Portuguese song that is both dance-snappy and melancholic melodically, while "Lolobrigida" harks back, reeds chirping and accordion squeezing, to classic '50s Congolese rumba, executing a surprising and tricky switch of gears midway. But my personal favorite here is "Habari Yako," an ode to Yemaya that combines African and Latin elements seamlessly, with a catchy chorus, soaring trumpet, hypnotic guitar riffing, and a catchy chant-like chorus. "Serenata Angolana" slows things down for a heartfelt duet with Maria de Barros, while "Isabela" celebrates his "pumpkin pie," switching tongues deftly. "Mentirosa" is the most straight-up salsa tune as "Prima Donna" is the most uptempo Afro-dance cut and both are capable of provoking involuntary boot(y) shaking at any given moment, while "Papa Na Bana" cuts both ways, an excellent example of African salsa. Hats off to Ricardo for his artistic vision, musical integrity and perseverance, but most of all for remaining a positive spirit, compelling us to share his sincere joy, one which ignores borders and embraces diversity.

Moving down into the Caribbean coast of Central America another group of musical explorers,

Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective, celebrate both their deep African roots and their unique place in Latin America. Producer Ivan Duran of Stonetree records in Belize has almost single-handedly put the Garifuna people of Belize on the map by cultivating and recording all types of local artists in his home studio. With high production standards, he pursues a vision that is both true to their musical traditions yet not afraid to mix in a modern sensibility. Descended from slaves who were shipwrecked off the Central American coast, thus freeing them before they could be delivered to the slavemasters, the Garifuna have remained mostly in obscurity in remote coastal Belize and Honduras, thus preserving their distinct language and musical traditions.

For this recording traditional drums and percussion and acoustic guitars are enhanced by electric guitar and bass, mandolin, dobro and "Maya guitar," and some horns employed sparingly. Most songs feature a chorus of male and female singers, and join Palacio, the best-known of the singers, as he trades vocals with a host of other singers, but the element that stands out above all to me is the range of superb guitar playing. Tasteful rhythm and lead guitar is abundant here, whether in an Afro-funk, reggae skank or "Spanish" style. Several songs stood out right away on my first listen, first among them one that I cannot get out of my head, "Lidan Aban (Together)" with its distinct harmonic chorus trade-offs, indecipherable vocals, guitar skank similar to Bob Marley's "Stir It Up," and a sax-out-of-nowhere chiming in like the ghost of Congolese rumba, all eerily familiar, yet ultimately like nothing I've ever heard. Not only are there strong songs, great musicianship, and top-notch production on *Watina* (Cumbancha), but there is an otherworldly quality that is hard to describe, a testament to its utter uniqueness and the resilience of the Garifuna people.

Uruguayan singer/guitarist/songwriter **Jorge Drexler**, who came to the world stage when he won the Academy Award for Best Song in 2004 for *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and had to suffer the indignity of watching Antonio Banderas sing his song, released a brilliant record at the end of 2006 entitled *12 Segundos de Oscuridad* (Warner Music Latina). Drexler is credited with vocals, Spanish and acoustic guitar, dobro and slide on this quiet, but textural production that includes percussion, piano, drums, violins, acoustic bass, electric guitars and some electronic treatments. His gentle, almost-fragile voice belies his innate melodic gift. Surrounded by clever arrangements and



skillful production, this doctor-turned-musician has a gift for poetic verse, existential query, quasi-psychedelic imagery and a melancholic sense of the profound.

The title cut is a mellow, pop-orchestrated kaledoscope that leads us to the profound "La Vida es Mas Compleja de lo Que Parece" ("Life is more complicated than it appears,") whose heavy theme is counterbalanced with a sweet melody and catchy guitar riff. In "Disneylandia" he rapidly spouts out incongruous images of widely varied peoples mixing and melding in a panoptic world, wanting to enter the mythic Disneyland, as the acoustic strings slide around a programmed beat and a woman chants "Disneylandia" like a devotional rite. "High and Dry" is a neo-folk tune, stripped down to guitar bass and vocal, that would do Nick Drake proud and shows Drexler has the capacity to write and sing in English and still sound credible.

"Hermana Duda" is a moody tune that ranges from sparse to jangly as he implores "Sister Doubt" to a truce." The lounge-like croon of "Inoportuna" is followed by the popified tango of "Quien Quiera Que Seas" ("Whoever You Are"). Brazilian singer Maria Rita joins him for a sadly sweet duet on "Soledad" or "Loneliness, here are my credentials." Drexler has a keen sense of irony, not the forced irony of aspiring rockers from suburbia, but more profound, based on a realization of a wide, complex world with which he is trying to come to grips while riddled with doubts.

The Barcelona-based Spanish *nuevo flamenco* collective **Ojos de Brujo** have a recent release called *Techari* (Six Degrees) that showcases their ever-expanding world of musical experimentation. While firmly based in the fundamentals of flamenco traditions with a strong rhythmic sense, powerful vocals and passionate guitar, their approach to composition is a musical montage. Employing a stunning range of musical instruments, textures and concepts they create a dense jungle of music, while managing to avoid falling into a cacophonous pit. This ambitious recording starts with "Color," recorded in Cuba with pianist Roberto Caracasses and his bold brass arrangements—a heady tune full of percussive flurries, dj treatments and urgent vocals. They settle into more familiar flamenco turf on "Sultanas de Merkaillo" and the *tabla* drum-spurred "TodoTiende" which brings in the Oriental (as in Arabic and Indian) to add sparkling melodic color. Marina "La Carrilas" stands center stage with her powerful, emotive voice, but is joined by others on tunes such as "El Confort no Reconforta" where she trades vocals with a male rapper. Flamenco diva Martirio gives a strong performance on the more traditional "Tanguillos Marineros" while Nitin Sawhney brings a bit of Asian underground sensibility to "Feedback."

"Corre Lo la Corre" struts to an easy reggae

rhythm. "Piedras vs. Tanques" metaphorically explores the tension implied in its title. "Rocks versus Tanks," and they close out with the beautiful melancholy of "Nana" reconnecting the Iberian peninsula to North Africa. Included is a CD-ROM which includes several excellent animated videos and a documentary called *Mi Habana Sana* showing the group in Cuba preparing for a high-profile show incorporating a huge host of Cuban musicians. Superb footage of Havana, the musicians rehearsing and jamming, recording in the studio and ultimately performing in Karl Marx Theater give a true taste of Cuba. Ojos de Brujo has an artistic vision that goes beyond their music to include design, video and photography, and all of those elements are strongly presented in this package. Grounded in a fundamental musical integrity, they reach out to embrace a wide range of styles and welcome many guest musicians. Their aesthetic umbrella allows ample space and an inclusive sensibility makes for their exclusively unique sound.

Staying for a moment on the island of Cuba, a surprising and welcome cd, *Si, Para Usted: The Funky Beats of Revolutionary Cuba Vol. One*, arrived from the Waxing Deep label, which takes its name from a weekly radio show and podcast. What makes this so exciting is that it documents the intense period of musical experimentation in Cuba during the '70s and '80s. The musical marketplace is filled with endless reams of Cuban music from the '40s, '50s and into the '60s and from the late '80s until present but the musical epoch centered on the '70s is largely missing. Most of the music recorded from that time remains hidden on rare records and there is little documentation about it.

It was a tremendously expansive time for Cuban musicians. The country was embracing its African connection, literally sending thousands there in various capacities, and culturally they had a sense of modernity that allowed experimentation in sound and composition. Equally important, there was an almost clandestine respect for American soul and jazz that made it cool to be funky, whether that meant sporting wild afro, trying a new rhythmic break or bass line, wah-wah guitar riffing, reveling in a cheesy organ or synth sound, wearing bell-bottom trousers or feeling free to let loose a spontaneous, whimsical blurt. Musicians in Cuba at that time embraced change and, since the music scene was not ruled by market forces, they were free to experiment.

Jazz giant Chucho Valdes and his band Irakere, which included Paquito D'Rivera and Arturo Sandoval, emerged during this period as did the legendary dance band Los Van Van. They are both present in this collection along with lesser-knowns such as trombonist/composer/arranger Juan Pablo Torres whose group Algo Nuevo is featured on three propulsive tracks. One of my favorite obscure vinyl-dwellers, Grupo Monumental, gives

us the title cut and even old Orquesta Riverside can be heard getting down on "En Casa del Trompo No Bailes." Other groups included here include Los Reyes '73, Los Tainos, Sintesis and the film institute experimental venture, Grupo de Experimentacion Sonora del ICAIC. What emerges here is different snapshot of Cuba that shows more musical kinship with Earth, Wind and Fire, Miles Davis or Manu Dibango than with Mr. Babalu, Desi Arnaz, or the mythic Buena Vista geriatric crooners.

All-star salsa supergroup **Spanish Harlem Orchestra** returns us to the dance floor with *United We Swing* (Six Degrees). They live up to their billing with 13 swinging tunes that hark back to the classic '70s sound of Latin New York. Under the direction of pianist and composer Oscar Hernandez, who brilliantly anchored Ruben Blades' backup band Seis del Solar, they give us a fresh set of familiar yet original compositions. With baby bass thumping and *timbales* clicking, the rhythm section bubbles with energy while the brass section swings relentlessly in the hands of veterans trombonist Jimmy Bosch and Dan Reagan on trumpet and Mitch Froman on the crucial baritone saxophone. Boasting a solid front line of singers in Ray de La Paz, Willie Torres and Marco Bermudez, SHO (what a cool acronym) creates a classic salsa experience that can be heard in its full sonic range on this high-quality production.

Among my favorites here are "Se Formo la Rumba," composed by singer Willie Torres, which cleverly navigates rhythm shifts and accents to create an explosive dynamic tension, and "Sacala Bailar," a compelling plea to "take your woman dancing." "Ahora Si" calls forth with urgency to hit the dance floor, while "Que Bonito" has a sweet, melodic chorus that reminds me of the Caribbean-loosened sound of Colombian salsa. "Salsa Pa'l Bailador" delivers exactly what it claims, "Soy Candela" has a furiously hot horn lay-down and "Plena Con Sabor" switches to the folkloric up-tempo Puerto Rican *plena* rhythm, a critical form of communication in the island's social telegraph. To close it out they do an unlikely cover of Paul Simon's "Late in the Evening" that includes the world music expeditionary himself on vocals in a bilingual rendition that picks up steam as it rolls forward. SHO doesn't break any new ground here, they simply celebrate their craft like the masters they are.

Compiled by Pablo Yglesias, whose excellent book *Cocinando* on Latin album art eminently qualified him for the task at hand, *The Rough Guide to Salsa* (World Music Network) hits like a gust of steamy air as a subway door opens. Choosing to feature lesser-known artists, including some this experienced reviewer had not heard

of, makes this compelling to the serious aficionado and highlights how deep and wide this genre has become. Macolla, a band from Nicaragua, gets the ball rolling with a medley of tunes. "Homenaje A La Musica Latina" that starts with Joe Arroyo's classic "Rebellion." Veterans Jimmy Bosch and Wayne Gorbea have set the standard for New York salsa as represented by tunes included here. La Sonora Carruseles, the Colombian hand which has set the benchmark for "heavy salsa" in recent years is featured as are Africans Ricardo Lemvo and Kekele, showing salsa's roots as well as its branches stretch back across the Middle Passage to the Motherland, Africa. Salsa's rhythmic core is Afro-Cuban, and Cubanoson with "Recordando a Cuba" as well as "Mi Salsa Tiene Candela" by Yumuri y Sus Hermanos confirm a Cuban essence. Yglesias even takes his salsa excursion into the contemporary club realm with Alex Wilson's "R&B Latino." While most of the artists here would be considered among the best-known in this genre, the exclusion of other such icons is precisely the strength of this collection. Salsa runs deep from Cuba to Puerto Rico, New York and Colombia and has truly become a global phenomenon, with this *Rough Guide* providing strong tes-

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timony to its universality.

Also compiled by Yglesias is *The Rough Guide to Salsa Dura NYC*, a collection of straight-up salsa from its birthplace, New York City. From its inception in the '60s in the cosmo-Latino world of New York, salsa has been a unifying force among exiles from Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Panama and others born to or taken with Afro-Latino culture. As it exploded in the '70s and '80s it reached all corners of the globe, but as a new generation came along in the late '80s and '90s with their "romantica" version or "salsa erotica" many people became turned off to this New York/Puerto Rico phenomenon—cute skinny boys singing in high voices about their sexual urges may have reached the young female demographic but has completely alienated the salsa veterans. They thought of this new style, exemplified by Eddie Santiago and Luis Enrique, as weak or *salsa floja* while in Colombia and Venezuela musicians like Grupo Niche, Joe Arroyo and Oscar D'Leon were keeping the flame burning with their hard salsa, or *salsa dura*. It is in this historical context that *salsa dura* has particular meaning and while the root of *salsa dura* lies in its point of origin, as presented here, it is the Colombians in particular who defined "hard salsa" when New York's scene became flaccid.

Choosing Eddie Palmieri and his resurrected La Perfecta sound as the point of departure with "Lo Que Traigo es Sabroso II" is most appropriate as is the inclusion of Wayne Gorbea, Los Soneros del Barrio and Chico Alvarez. Other tracks are culled

from the solo projects of legendary New York Latin sidemen—Jimmy Bosch, Jimmy Delgado, George

Delgado, Ricky Gonzalez and Chino Nunez. Topping off this hard New York style is the campy version of “I Get A Kick Out of You” by veteran Joe Quijano. This collection serves as a fine testament to the salsa bloodlines that continue to pulse with energy in the city that never sleeps. ★



PHOTO BY JEANNE JALBERT

RICARDO LEMVO: NO BORDERS

