

Each generation cherishes its own age of music. Juke boxes, department stores, high school reunions and classic rock radio stations all thrive because of this phenomenon. Popular anthems, hypnotic grooves and other mind-bending musical innovations forever shape the soundtracks of our lives. Opportunistic and uniquely moving, certain music remains transcendent. Often acting as an emotional catalyst or cinematic memory, these classic tunes transport us by continually sparking our imaginations with the brilliance or sheer charisma of their artistry.

In this respect, popular music within the United States has always reigned supreme. Ragtime, the blues, swing, rock, funk, R&B and disco have all evolved from various cultural incubators powering the prestigious expression within the diverse musical traditions embedded in our society. What makes certain songs so influential that they eventually become inducted into the collective consciousness of our culture? Once canonized, what kind of musical alchemy is required to reimagine these legendary classics, re-positioning their authority for generations of new adoring listeners? Spoiler alert! The exhilarating answers to these questions reverberate within Latin Crossroads 2, the dazzling new album from pianist, orchestrator and master arranger Gino Amato.

Given the landscape of music Amato navigated within his brilliant debut album Latin Crossroads, it's no surprise that the element used to shape the spirit of this album is the impressive malleability of Latin music. With the clave as his compass, Amato canvassed an extraordinary range of popular music, from childhood favorites to songs he's played throughout his career, while crafting arrangements that ingeniously lean into the subtle variety of Latin sensibilities that make this album so special. A habitual tinkerer, Amato's persistent curiosity shapes the numerous

foundations for the elite range of vocalists brought together for Latin Crossroads 2. "Pop music is all about vocals," he believes, "and I love nothing more than doing something different with them in ways that people haven't heard before."

Celebrating the endless allure of vocal harmonies, Amato crafted every composition's arrangement to pair perfectly with the musical personalities of each featured vocalist on the album. Janis Siegel, Veronica Swift, Kevin Osborne, Kandace Springs, Arnold McCuller, Matt Cusson, Aubry Johnson, Lauryn Kinhan, and acapella group Kings Return, make up the remarkably skilled cast of artists whose work spans several genres of music and styles of singing. All this makes for a bounty of joy along with the traditional twists and turns that Amato's adventures within pop music are already well known for. Also powering this is another stellar cast of veteran musicians (Oscar Hernandez, Joe Locke, Doug Beavers, Alex Norris, Itai Kriss, Samuel Torres and many others) whose experiences, dexterity, and gift for nuance make such a musical adventure possible.

Opening with *Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard*, Amato tucks the gentle pulse of a mambo into Paul Simon's hit from his 1972 self-titled album. Shared vocals and lovely harmonies by Arnold McCuller and Matt Cusson accentuate the narrative of the song complimented by a brief solo by flutist Itai Kriss and successive *montunos* by pianist Oscar Hernandez. An up-tempo version of 1959 Flamingos' classic *I Only Have Eyes for You* fuses bits of funk, R&B and swing to the amber sound of vocalist Kandace Springs. Toying with the band, Springs banters playfully with Chris Rogers, who solos wonderfully on muted trumpet, and the silky vocal harmonies of Janis Siegel, Aubrey Johnson, Lauren Kinhan and Kevin Osborne.

Always looking for an appealing angle, Amato honors the lyrics and gorgeous melody of When I Fall In Love by positioning them squarely within the wheelhouse of the sensational acapella vocal group Kings Return. And why not when you can combine the subtle rhythmic nature of a danzon to elegant four-part harmonies and the rich tone of saxophonist Lou Marini. Meeting the moment by altering the lyrics and scaling down the instrumentation, Moonlight In Vermont features Kevin Osborne with the whisper of samba and the perfect touch of french horn and oboe to accentuate the mood. For a song that has been adapted from everything from broadway and rock, to Jazz, fusion and soul, Amato's take on Tangerine features the 1960's style of singing syllables to frame the melody before Siegel, Johnson, Kinhan and Osborne launch into the lyrics, setting the stage for Marini's saxophone solo and some lovely musing by Amato on piano.

Salsa inspires *No Moon At All*, written in 1947 by David Mann and Redd Evans and popularized by Doris Day, June London and Ella Fitzgerald. Janis Siegel sings as if the song was specifically written for her, bending notes and infusing a sassy character into an song that is both haunting and flamboyant. Think vintage Manhattan Transfer with the resonance of Amato's stunning aptitude for Latin tinged horn arrangements. Vocalist, and fluent French speaker, Veronica Swift adds a delightfully playful energy to *I Love Paris*. Opening with just vocals and bongos from percussionist Samuel Torres, the song quickly vaults into a flirtatious call and response between the band and Swift's declarations of "J'aime Paris!" Sneaking in a quote of Ravel's Bolero, a nod to one his favorite orchestral pieces, *I Love Paris* is easily recognizable, excitingly new, and wonderfully, everything in between.

Balancing the weight of the song's reputation with the desire to tweak it to his liking, Amato leverages the elegant musicianship of violinist Leonardo Suarez-Paz, vibraphonist Joe Locke and harpist Alyssa Reit on Louis Armstrong's *What a Wonderful World*. Here Amato's mischievous slight of hand reverses the roles of piano and harp, flipping the instrumental dimension to one of Armstrong's signature songs. George and Ira Gershwin's *Someone To Watch Over Me* slows down as a faint bolero where the song's preamble becomes the hook, shaping a dialog between lead and background vocalists as they meander through the shared intimacy of the ballad. Like a blues, words drip off percussive beats as Amato's piano chords create a *cha cha* like feel underneath Marini's saxophone solo and Siegel's soulful improvisations.

Oscar Hernandez's charismatic arrangement of *Windmills of Your Mind* creates the kind of sonic matrix you'd expect given the subject and extensive musical history of the song. Questioning horn harmonies perfectly compliment this Latin Jazz interpretation aided by vocalist Matt Cusson and a vivid flugelhorn solo by Alex Norris. In what is perhaps the most complicated arrangement on the album, Latin Crossroads 2 ends with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. Symphonic by nature, Amato's adaptation is announced by trumpeter Randy Brecker whose tone soars above somber strings before the song settles into a stately *mambo/samba* groove. Shuffling sections of the score to fit the Latin context of the album, Amato neatly manages such a dramatic departure from the original while making sure not to understate the melody or slip into saccharine clichés. As the album's sole instrumental, *Scheherazade* acts an elegant resolve to Latin Crossroad 2's innovative exploration of pop classics.

For most of us, finding ourselves within popular music simply requires going to concerts or maintaining a personal collection of hits. We browse, croon, revisiting good or bad times, all while embracing popular music like it's our own because in many ways it is. Gino Amato embraces popular music with an alternative intention. In a curious act of reverse engineering, Amato uses Latin Crossroads 2 to explore the underlying genius of popular music while creating new paradigms for us to revisit what continues to make it so inspiring. By making sophisticated arrangements sound so accessible and re-harmonizing familiar melodies into fresh, magnetic, ear candy, Amato continues to showcase how the radiant pulse of Latin music remains one of the core foundations of our collective musical history.

Great songs have many lives. What makes popular music so enduring and illustrious are the same principles that allow it to be completely reborn in the hands of artists like Gino Amato and his community of musical magicians. "I never create arrangements that dominate a song," Amato told me, "I just want the arrangement to carry the song and create an exciting platform for the vocalist. Because at the end of the day, it's about the vocalist." It sure is. Latin Crossroads 2 honors that with a selection of songs and remarkable arrangements that challenge and delight, breathing new life into storied classics while honoring exactly what made them so magnificent in the first place.