

Epiphanies seem to always come when you least expect them. Years ago between sets at a cherished Jazz club, a DJ filled time playing a tune by the group *Seis Del Solar*. Tired after a long shift at a popular downtown restaurant, my ears perked up as the group's pianist ripped through an electrified solo halfway into *Decision*; a perfect example of *Solar's* ability to shift musical gears at the drop of a downbeat. Inspired I hit up a local record store the next day and was introduced to the wonderful world of pianist, composer, arranger and musical alchemist, Oscar Hernandez.

Tracing the dots that connect the career of Oscar Hernandez is like taking a master class in salsa and Latin Jazz. A celebrated son of New York City's Fort Apache neighborhood, Hernandez has cultivated a dynamic life long relationship with sound, incorporating into his craft an impressive array of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Cuban traditions that have transformed American popular music. Tenures with Celia Cruz, Tito Puente, Ray Barreto, Pete "Conde" Rodriguez and Ruben Blades, all neatly complimented by the innovation he pursued while performing with progressive groups like *Libre*, *Grupo Folkorico Experimental* and *Seis Del Solar*. And when luminary pop stars like Paul Simon, Gloria Estefan, and Juan Luis Guerra needed a new, special, or unique conceptual framework for their music, they all reached out to Oscar Hernandez.

But perhaps the largest jewel in the crown of Hernandez's musical philosophy is the Spanish Harlem Orchestra (SHO), the gifted ensemble he's led since 2001. Multi Grammy® Award winning, Spanish Harlem Orchestra has thrived in an era where Jazz has abandoned its allegiance to dancers, and the economics of leading an orchestra are as daunting as ever. While salsa and Latin Jazz are often entangled in a tug-of-war between music that moves you to dance, and music that challenges the norms of modern Jazz, Spanish Harlem Orchestra bridges the divide, performing on salsa stages with the added dimension of a prestigious Latin Jazz band, and at Jazz festivals with an effervescence epitomizing their reputation as a world class "*salsa dura*" band.

Spend any time with SHO's music and you'll immediately hear the secret to their success. Whether on stage, recording in the studio, or collaborating online, they're live - no overdubs, no post-production tricks, just astute composing and arranging shaped by masterful musicianship and seasoned improvisation. Traditionally SHO's albums rally around the strength of how

separate parts of the band interact. Horns glide into one voice, percussion circles arrangements with elaborate layers of rhythms, while vocalists clear the air with harmonic precision and the punch of the *sonero*, or lead singer in the group.

For *The Latin Jazz Project*, guest artists take the place of SHO's vocalists, providing a unique tapestry of musical voices that blend seamlessly into the arc and energy of the band. Spicing up the project are artists cultivating some of the more compelling creative visions in Jazz. From Kurt Elling, one of the premier male vocalists in Jazz, to Miguel Zenón, an award winning alto saxophonist reshaping the contours of Latin Jazz, guest musicians add new dimensions to SHO's familiar orchestral swing. Joe Locke, Jimmy Haslip, Tom Harrell, Dave Liebman, Bob Franceschini, Bob Mintzer, Jonathan Powell and Michael Rodriguez round out the players for a delightful mix of salsa, classic Jazz, and original compositions by Hernandez.

Beginning with the robust *Ritmo de mi Gente*, the album revs up quickly, featuring the deft flute work of the group's main vocalist Jeremy Bosch, and a crackling solo by the gifted percussionist Luisito Quintero. *Bobo* drifts through the rhythmic delta of legendary composer Marty Sheller, extending a leisurely clave beat that sets the table for saxophonist Bob Mintzer to find just the right notes to bring the song home. Trombonist and co-producer Doug Beavers breathes new life into the classic *Invitation*, featuring Elling and Zenón, with a mambo section where both end up trading "fours" with SHO to spectacular effect.

Angel Fernandez's *Acid Rain* bobs and weaves through winding chord changes until graced by the agile contributions from long time Hernandez associate saxophonist Bob Franceschini, and trumpeter Jonathan Powell, a new contributor to the band. On *Las Palmas* trumpeter Tom Harrell's whimsical solo simmers over a steady fire courtesy of SHO's horn and rhythm sections, while *Silent Prayers* melodic chill creates the perfect backdrop for introspective solos by bassist Jimmy Haslip and saxophonist Dave Liebman.

The classic '*Round Midnight* and Hernandez original *Fort Apache* soar as compositions remade by adroit Latin Jazz arrangements, showcasing two of Latin Jazz's brightest stars on trumpet in Powell and the accomplished Michael Rodriguez. Stellar and hypnotic, reminiscent of its original release on Daniel Ponce's *Chango Te Llama* album, *Latin*

*Perspective* radiates alluring rhythms and melodies, propelled by luscious solos by flutist Bosch and the always lyrically minded master vibraphonist Joe Locke. Fittingly, *The Latin Jazz Project* ends with *Descarga de Jazz*, a buoyant anthem to the distinctive manner in which Hernandez unifies salsa and Latin Jazz.

Swinging all the way to the end, SHO leaves you wanting an encore in a time when being together often means staying apart, which for now at least, mostly means listening to recordings. Nonetheless, you're set to to enjoy a series of firsts: SHO's first full length Latin Jazz album, and their first audiophile edition recording,

mixed and mastered to accentuate vinyl's reputation for reproducing the fidelity and warmth unique to live music. Like me so many years ago, you now hold your own circular epiphany, a timeless recording made by the rare musical alchemy that is Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

Rooted in the clave, forged from the creative furnaces of barrios from the South Bronx to the Mission District, salsa and Latin Jazz remain vital connections to the lineage of rhythms and melodies passed down from plantations and cane fields, to clubs and dance halls the world over. Within an industry often desperate to dumb down what makes music powerful, authentic and representative of the cultures that create it, Oscar Hernandez and the Spanish Harlem Orchestra remain resolute, making smart, compelling, passionate music into a special gift for any audience that would embrace it.

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