

THE PAN-AMERICAN NUTCRACKER SUITE

Reinvention is an essential engine to the evolution of Jazz. Not just simple steps forward, but sweeping jumps into the abyss of managing curiosity, risk and enough respect for tradition to know when and how to bend or break the rules. Having spent years elegantly forging Afro-Cuban rhythms into the remarkable precision of their big band orchestration, the New York Afro Bop Alliance Big Band has leveraged artful risk into the reward of becoming one of the best large Latin based ensembles in Jazz.

Marching to the beat of their spirited master drummer/arranger Joe McCarthy, the New York Afro Bop Alliance Big Band excels at producing albums that speak to the band's uncompromising artistic mission. "I've always considered the group to be a Jazz band that embraces the rhythms of the world," McCarthy shares. And those diverse rhythms have produced seminal albums like *Una Más*, *Angel Eyes*, *Revelation* and *Upwards* - all fascinating insights into McCarthy's passion for hybridizing musical genres into the unique energy, style and vision of this gifted ensemble.

Channeling influences like Ray Barretto, Mario Bauzá, Chico O'Farrill and the famed Fort Apache Band, McCarthy has honed percussive skills that extend beyond simply keeping time. "I've always been intrigued and fascinated with how a drummer develops the ability to support things that might not be directly in the music," McCarthy says, adding "Even though I'm concentrating on playing the drums, I'm also concerned with highlighting the arrangement that shapes the music for the band."

Having adapted his style to embrace the percussive roles of the timbales, bongos, and cowbells, McCarthy's drumming guides the ensemble through shifting time signatures, and complicated arrangements, all while supporting the band's soloists. "My role in my band is to

direct, inspire, and shape the music for my musicians" he adds. A critical skill given his intention to challenge and inspire audiences with stunning albums like *The Pan American Nutcracker Suite*.

Rescued as the original score of a failed ballet, *The Nutcracker Suite* evolved into one of Tchaikovsky's most popular compositions. As a perennial winter holiday tradition, *The Nutcracker Suite* has enjoyed tremendous popularity, slowly etching itself into the world's popular musical consciousness. While the ballet has been adapted to fit the energy of hip-hop, flamenco, and other kinds of modern dance, *The Nutcracker Suite* remains a secular icon, an ingrained masterpiece that few dare to reinvent.

Like a great novel, *The Pan American Nutcracker Suite* unfolds unpredictably, tacking back and forth between Tchaikovsky's genius and the creative vortex of rhythmic traditions from Cuba, Africa, Brazil, and China. Beneath it all is the Alliance's signature ability to position groove or swing at the precipice of compositions, adding color and dynamics to the funk, classical and the Afro-Cuban musicality this eighteen piece big band is renowned for.

Gliding over an "Afro-Groove" sustained by McCarthy and percussionist Samuel Torres, the album opens with *Overture*, laced with intricate brass and reed sections, and highlighted by a gorgeous trumpet solo by Alex Norris. Before you get too comfortable, *March* launches from its traditional *Bolero* snare intro, into a Mambo pivoting into straight ahead swing that features solos by pianist Luis Perdomo and saxophonist Ben Kono. Elevated from its traditional "music box" quality, *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* is transformed into a *Cha-Cha-Cha* played over sixeight time, the swinging ballroom quality of the song captured with elegant solos from Frank Basile, Ryan Keberle, Alejandro Aviles and Luis Perdomo.

McCarthy's magnificent drum work spices up a delightful arrangement of Trepak (Russian Dance), a buoyant nod to Duke Ellington also alternating between a Mambo and six-eight time. Airlifted to Havana, Arabian Dance uses a rolling triplet pattern, settling into an exotic Afro-Cuban vibe shadowed by the band's lush treatment of the melody before giving way to a luscious soprano sax solo from Andrew Gould.

Trombones and Chinese drumming take center stage as *Chinese Dance* pirouettes around McCarthy's spin on ancient rhythms accented by percussionist Samuel Torres and his superb work on conga. Motivated by the unique momentum of Brazil's partido alto, *Dance of the Reed Flutes* dips into funk, *Samba*, symphonic horn arrangements, and some tasty atmospheric guitar work from Vinny Valentino. *Waltz of the Flowers* features a Venezuelan Joropo rhythm that fits seamlessly with the jubilant nature of the tune.

The Pan American Nutcracker Suite's distinct beauty comes from the ingenuity that McCarthy, conductor and co-arranger Vince Norman, and the New York Afro Bop Alliance Big Band bring to the nuance of arranging that incorporates so many musical styles. Utilizing the adaptability of the clave, the effervescence of Afro-Latin artistry and the measured brilliance of a band of seasoned, like-minded musicians, Joe McCarthy and the New York Afro Bop Alliance Big Band's The Pan American Nutcracker Suite is a brilliant reinvention of a timeless classic for generations to come.

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