

Descarumbiando
Hamlet & His Latin Jazz Experience
Freiaudio Records

Latin Jazz has exploded into an international music in recent years, expanding its initial scope and direction. The music grew from an international exchange that built upon the combined aesthetics of North American jazz and rhythms from Cuba and Brazil. The style's international flavor expanded over the years, bringing in similar ideas from these initial sources - musicians included new jazz angles such as fusion and free improvisation and introduced additional South American rhythms from Peru, Argentina, Columbia, and more. Latin Jazz stretched the boundaries of its original definition, broadened its audience, and continued to thrive through its creative growth. As the style's aesthetics stretched into new territories, it began to reach outside its original home bases in North and South America. Latin Jazz musicians moved into Europe, recordings became widely available through mail order and online downloads, and instructional books and DVDs made learning the style much easier. Musicians around the world began to integrate Latin Jazz into their common vocabulary, and in some cases, they made conscious attempts to build upon the style. Artistic decisions based upon the musical experiences of the European musician pushed Latin Jazz into increasingly new directions. As the international scope of Latin Jazz has widened, the European perspective has integrated distinctly different musical ideas that demand attention. Pianist Hamlet Fiorilli demonstrates the unique vitality of this perspective with his group Hamlet & His Latin Jazz Experience on the album *Descarumbiando*, a collection of original Latin Jazz compositions that balance tradition and new ideas.

Drawing Upon Defined Latin Jazz Traditions

Many compositions draw strongly upon defined Latin Jazz traditions, providing a springboard for the group's creative improvisations. An assertive series of accents lead into an uplifting melody on "Descarumbiando" before transitioning into a piano improvisation from Fiorilli. He pursues an energetic approach, making use of the piano's full range and eventually returning to the main melody. The band falls into an open break, building back into an inspired exchange of ideas from Fiorilli, trumpet player Hans Lassnig, and tenor saxophonist Michael Erian. Band hits over static chords jump into an upbeat blues melody on "Bluesambongo" finding a steady groove over a combination of samba and songo rhythms. Fiorilli leans on blues phrasing throughout his solo until the group explodes into a collection of flamenco-esque clapping, sending him into a rhythmic frenzy. Lassnig and saxophonist Robert Friedl both follow Fiorilli with smart jazz-tinged solos until a timba-influenced montuno inspires a series of percussion statements from drummer Stefan Mörtel and conguero Gianni Battilana. A screaming unison phrase explodes into a driving cha cha cha rhythm on "Ron y Gin," which sets the tone for an aggressive rhythmic melody. Battilana takes advantage of the band's ferocious momentum, building an explosive solo until Fiorilli uses a bluesy lick to push the band into swing for a unique restatement of the melody. A return to the cha cha cha provides an engaging foundation for solos from Lassnig and Fiorilli until the band slides back into swing for a jazz fueled statement from Friedl. These pieces connect the group to their Latin Jazz roots and demonstrate a solid foundation for their further explorations.

Thoughtful Arrangements With Fine-Tuned Arrangements

The group displays a sensitive side to their repertoire with several down tempo pieces that come to life through fine-tuned arrangements. The wind players thoughtfully utilize dynamics and well-planned phrasing over a bolero rhythm on "Gospa (bolero mayor)," building an introspective melody into a bold statement. Fiorilli immerses himself in this setting, playing long, lush, and connected melodies over the steady backdrop. Friedl enters with a brief and smooth improvisation, shaped around expressive articulations and subtle blues tinges. Fiorilli flows rich textures over

Mörtel's consistent snare drum, creating a lively valse feel underneath clarinetist Simon Pibal's melody on "Tocando Mi Oropel." Pibal assertively grabs an album highlight performance with a rhythmic improvisation that cleverly spins jazz fueled lines around the essential accents of the style. Fiorilli contrasts Pibal with textural chordal ideas and long streams of quick runs, pushing the song in a different and interesting direction. The wind players interpret a pop influenced melody over a consistent bolero on "Tranquilo," building it into a full statement with dramatic dynamic shaping. Fiorilli takes a brief and unobtrusive solo before the band returns to the main theme once again. Friedl, Battilana, and Fiorilli each take turns developing ideas over the song's comfortable backdrop, staying within the song's understated mood and commercial tinge. These compositions showcase a different part of the band, displaying the range to move from explosively rhythmic pieces into thoughtfully introspective statements.

Experimenting With Shifting Time Signatures

The group indulges a more experimental side on several tracks, fundamentally altering rhythmic structure to include shifting time signatures. An ominous bass pedal creates tension moving into a busy and rhythmically displaced melody on "Siete Camisa" which wraps smoothly around a seven beat structure. The band shifts into a standard son montuno, allowing Fiorilli to drive a colorful improvisation into a percussion exchange between Mörtel and Battilana. After a return to the odd time signature behind the main melody, the group opens the son montuno section again for enthusiastic solos from Lassnig and Friedl. A lush chordal structure provides a balance to the rhythmically askew melody on "Suite Latina" which twists and turns around a slightly swung Afro-Cuban 6/8 rhythm. The band slows to a standstill as Fiorilli weaves unaccompanied aggressive themes back into the main melody. The rhythm section transitions from the 6/8 rhythm into a heavy funk backbeat, giving Fiorilli another opportunity to improvise over the song's dense chordal structure. Battilana opens "El Fuego Del Padre" with an unaccompanied conga solo before the band jumps into a head spinning display of syncopation against a ten beat structure. Fiorilli bravely spins creative lines through the odd time signature, building quick flowing lines into an exciting climax. Fiorilli drives interesting montunos behind solos from Battilana and Mörtel while the wind players provide rhythmic counterpoint, bringing the song to a powerful close. These pieces do stretch the aesthetics of the original rhythmic styles, but Fiorilli carefully composes time changes and creates a fluid feel to each piece that maintains a consistent flow.

A Distinctly Original Voice

Fiorilli brings a distinctly original voice to the forefront of *Descarumbiando*, drawing upon several musical ideas to expand and explore the outer reaches of Latin Jazz. Fiorilli smartly integrates odd time signatures into Latin music, carefully arranging the original rhythmic structure into completely new settings. The use of odd time signatures isn't really a new idea in Latin Jazz, but Fiorilli tackles this approach with a distinct fluidity rarely heard with this approach. His arrangements offer an almost classical complexity, drawing upon clearly defined dynamic shadings, carefully written rhythmic breaks, and intertwining melodic lines. The arrangements display a unique voice as well, weaving themes between solos and utilizing extensive melodic development throughout each piece. The band handles all these ideas with enthusiastic mastery, establishing addictive grooves through each time change and compositional twist. The rhythm section provides a consistently authentic connection to Cuban styles while the wind players boldly assert themselves as strong improvisers. Although Fiorilli doesn't always follow the defined conventions of Latin music on *Descarumbiando*, he solidifies his ideas with integrity and thoughtful artistry, showing us clearly that Latin Jazz is alive and thriving outside the Western hemisphere.

By: Chip Boaz (Latin Jazz Corner)