

LATIN CROSSROADS



A

s a universal language, Jazz is a remarkable catalyst. Influencing everything it touches, and touched by all it comes in contact with, Jazz is a powerful change agent; an art form whose creative framework is driven by artistic virtuosity and the enterprise of an endless supply of ambition. Occasionally this makes for the rare album that leaps over conventional etiquette, taming the impossible with a level of innovation that explores the subterranean nature of music; places where idioms blur, carefully sculpted by elite musicianship, masterful arranging, and a level of ingenuity that can change how you experience contemporary music.

These particular projects require exquisite timing, an encyclopedic understanding of music and a flare to tango with risk knowing its rewards can lead to transformative art. Even while rule breaking is often the norm in Jazz, few are savvy and stubborn enough to attempt rewriting those rules. With *Latin Crossroads* pianist and master arranger Gino Amato does just that using the calculus of Latin music to tap into the surprising symmetries within classical, chamber music, Jazz, Latin Jazz, salsa, pop and rock. Aided by the flexibility of the clave, Amato has brilliantly charted a unique course for his debut album by honoring composers and compositions he's loved and played throughout his career.

As a middle school piano student Amato first embraced Latin music through the Puerto Rican salsa band *La Sonora Ponceña* and their gifted pianist Papo Lucca. Transcribing Lucca's solos led to opportunities to play and arrange for a variety of bands as Amato quickly developed an innate ability to navigate salsa and Latin Jazz. Amato's first break came when Lucca asked him to arrange Chick Corea's *Cappuccino* on *La Sonora Ponceña's* album *On the Right Track*. A passion for horns and big bands led to studies with Don

Sebesky and Jim McNeely all while embracing the work of musicians like Dave Grusin and the advanced production methods of pop titans Steely Dan and Tower of Power.

While playing with the Steely Dan tribute band *Royal Scam* (which he conceived) Amato continued to arrange for various big bands and Latin groups, amassing the kinds of opportunities that would eventually inform his ambition to record *Latin Crossroads*. Classically trained and having taught and played professionally for years, Amato continued to sense that there might be an entirely different but strangely familiar way of presenting the range of contemporary music he'd explored throughout his career. For Amato this new alchemy was an intrinsic extension to the inquisitive manner he'd always thought about music. Why not apply the dynamic orchestration found in classical music with the cinematic arranging of Don Sebesky, *and* the meticulous preparation of bands like Steely Dan within musical genres not traditionally explored in Jazz? And then how could this collection of contemporary classics sound if sewn together with the structural freedom and vivacious energy found in Latin music?

Working through "Latinizing" a variety of songs he loved, he quickly realized which compositions thrived through this transformation. Amato set upon arranging with a personal set of rules: "I have to like the song. It has to fit within the context of Latin music, and I want the results to be joyous." Working with this checklist he amassed a group of arrangements that he eventually shared with Oscar Hernández, the Grammy award winning pianist and leader of the Spanish Harlem Orchestra. With Hernández's help, Amato quickly realized his curious alchemy actually worked and thus *Latin Crossroads* was officially underway.

Loving a song is one thing, but *owning* that song is something entirely different. Not wishing to replicate or blindly cover the standards he was working with, Amato set out to make them uniquely familiar but also occasionally indistinguishable from their traditional forms. Shifting the axis of compositions, Amato's brilliance comes from expanding a song's form by accentuating its structure with an alternative variety of contours and colors. With the clave

as his compass, Amato cleverly reframes each song, shifting listener's expectations so that they might rediscover this music through the unorthodox dimensions he's devised. Alternating harmonics, shifting tempos or inserting musical styles where they're not commonly applied, Amato keeps listeners fully engaged by never repeating himself while showcasing the effervescence and structural elegance of Latin music.

Tackling this unique repertoire head on, *Latin Crossroads* opens with Paul McCartney's *Blackbird*. Sporting a catchy piano riff, vocalist Arnold McCuller expertly navigates the tune as Amato lets the composition simmer before going full on *descarga* with the requisite compliment of energetic piano refrains, horn choruses and a powerful solo by trombonist Luis Bonilla. Often accompanied by strings but not traditionally in a Latin format, Michel Legrand's somber *The Summer Knows* gets an uptempo kick, pivoting from cha-cha to swing as Amato's arrangement adds an edge and rhythmic pulse that elegantly allows vocalist Claudette Sierra to add her signature to the song. Percussion and flute announce *On the Street Where You Live*, one of several hits from the 1957 Broadway hit *My Fair Lady*. Married to a cheerful Brazilian beat, the tune drifts forward with a lovely solo by guitarist Ira Siegel as vocalist Kevin Osborne effortlessly navigates this gratifying pairing of styles.

Anchored by a rich *tumbao* by bassist Ruben Rodriguez, Rogers and Hart's bluesy but brash *Bewitched*, *Bothered and Bewildered* represents the second musical (*Pal Joey*) on the album. Manhattan Transfer's vocalist Janis Siegel is in full command and she slaloms through the initial swing and then raucous cascade of Latin tinged horn choruses. Proving that just about anything can be adapted to the clave, Amato remakes the James Taylor's *Shower the People*. Opening with violin and flute, Amato's arranging sleight of hand is on full display as the song feels entirely comfortable within his Latin format. Again featuring Arnold McCuller, this pop classic is complimented beautifully by solos from saxophonist Lou Marini, trombonist Luis Bonilla and vibraphonist Bryan Carrott.

Written by the Spanish master pianist Joaquín Rodrigo, *Aranjuez* allows the full magnitude of Amato's

orchestration to soar into action. Free floating with nods to Chick Corea's *Sketches of Spain*, the song's haunting melody is accented with salsa rhythms, breezy strings and Amato's first solo on the record. Amato then pivots to *Bad Things*, the popular soundtrack to the HBO series *True Blood* written by rock/blues guitarist Jace Everett. Sultry, mysterious, featuring vocalist Robin McKelle, the composition snakes through complicated horn lines, punctuated by baritone saxophonist Mitch Frohman and a wonderful solo by the inimitable Joe Locke on vibraphone.

Thelonius Monk's masterpiece *'Round Midnight* gets sped up by transforming this quintessential melody into a infectious hook. Amato decorates the composition with rhythms that allow his version to sound equally at home at a Jazz concert or salsa dance studio. *West Side Story's Tonight* showcases the vigor and remarkable range of vocalist Margo Rey. Amato's arrangement deftly alters the narrative arc of the music, fusing the attitude of salsa and the authority of his unique ensemble to the timeless wonder of this song. Adding to the already impressive list of adaptations on *Latin Crossroads* is Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, a fascinating downsizing of a composition most typically heard as a symphonic score. Featuring the classically trained Latin Jazz pianist Hector Martingnon, and funneled through Latin rhythms and a jazzy reharmonization, Amato augments the famous refrain with elaborate original segments showcasing its celebrated melody in an entirely new light.

Ending on a wildly imaginative note is Amato's ingenious interpretation of Steely Dan's *Green Flower Street*. Paired down to a string quartet and Latin percussion, this pop standard is the epitome of what Amato is trying to accomplish with *Latin Crossroads*. Managing instruments like characters in a play, Amato completely morphs this composition to creatively embrace elements from chamber music, pop, classical, and Latin Jazz. By song's end you're left wondering what you just heard and how it could possibly sound so right.

In an era of stunning big band and large ensemble recordings that have produced brilliant work over the past several years, *Latin Crossroads* stands apart for how it completely captures the imagination in so many thought

provoking ways. Tackling Latin versions of James Taylor, storied Broadway tunes, Thelonius Monk *and* Tchaikovsky?! Who does *that*?! Audacious, defying conventional logic, *Latin Crossroads* arrives fully formed, gracefully mapping out an entirely different musical landscape that feels fresh, invigorating and thoroughly satisfying.

Gino Amato's creative genius here is oddly simple: always position whimsy, and the jovial nature of celebrating innovation, alongside any structural risks you entertain. While his musical imagination breathes new life into this stellar cast of songs, structurally Amato will have your head spinning with the ease in which he applies Latin artistry to the variety of musical styles the album entertains. No longer a proof-of-concept, *Latin Crossroads* fully demonstrates just how influential Latin artistry is to contemporary music.

Making what Amato has accomplished even more impressive is that in their original format many of these songs might not even work on a traditional Jazz or Latin Jazz album. If you simply looked at the basic ingredients of this album, its composers, compositions and the musical idioms they emanate from, you'd be hard pressed to think *Latin Crossroads* could sound as effortless as it does. Without resorting to gimmicks or curbing the appeal of songs so deeply ingrained in our collective cultural consciousness, Amato has made the impossible sound simple, and the improbable a new path for understanding great music on a deeper and much more satisfying level.

By the time you're whistling music from *My Fair Lady*, dancing to a salsa infused version of a James Taylor hit, or thinking Tchaikovsky is actually cool again, it's too late; Amato's got you hooked and hopefully forever changed. Groundbreaking, thrilling, with so many intricate layers to marvel at, *Latin Crossroads* is that rare kind of album; an audacious undertaking, a stunning musical roller coaster ride with no height requirements, a once in a career achievement that will blissfully sweep you away.