

Elio Villafranca - The Source in Between - C.T.M.

The latest—and certainly one of the very best—Cuban pianists to burst onto the jazz scene.

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Elio Villafranca - The Source in Between - C.T.M. 101, 61:52 **1/2:**

Influenced by a long line of inspired Cuban jazz pianists from Frank Emilio to Emiliano Salvador to Chucho Valdés to Hilario Durán to Gonzalo Rubalcaba to Omar Sosa, Elio Villafranca displays a genuinely original voice on this, his second session as leader. It certainly doesn't hurt that his first musical experience was as a percussionist: he brings an uncommonly strong and personally quirky rhythmic sensibility to the piano, almost as unique as Thelonius Monk's. Fully on display throughout this disc, it reaches critical mass on the very Monkish tune "Three Plus One," the deeply swinging "Faces, Not Evil," the rollicking, roiling "The Source in Between" (esp. the Latin remix), and the challenging "Don't Ever Say Never," featuring fellow Cuban Yosvany Terry on alto sax.

What characterizes this music is an urgency - a restless, searching intensity often lacking in modern jazz, where too often competent players either try to conjure power and passion out of rather mundane materials or are content to rely on shopworn post-bop vocabularies. No so here. The tunes, drawing from a deep well of human experience and spinning out evocative tales, lift the listener out of the mundane and into realms opening out into mystery and desire. Take the ballad "Luna." Not only does it evoke dappled nights, it awakens in our souls a longing for a simpler era when times and seasons were governed by sister moon. Almost as evocative is "Resurrection of the Incapacitated," with its mysterious opening bass solo, suspensive piano chords, and edgy vibe. "In the Dark," a haunting ballad graced by poignant arco bass stylings and a lingering sense of loss, calls up sad memories even as it spreads soothing ointment on old wounds.

The musicians are all top drawer. Dafnis Prieto, among the more creative and deftly swinging Latin jazz drummers on the scene, provides powerful rhythmic thrust while punctuating the proceedings with clever percussive details. Eric Alexander on tenor sax is not someone who might naturally come to mind in such a highly stylized Latin jazz context, but he seems perfectly suited to the rhythmically ingenious and moodily

fascinating goes on. Indeed, he sounds entirely energized and inspired by this music. Jeff Carney on bass is a name new to me, but he certainly hangs tough in this rarified atmosphere.

Elio Villafranca is a pianist, composer, and bandleader of prodigious talent and certainly one of the brighter rising stars on the jazz horizon.