

# Latin Jazz Network

By Raul d'Gama Rose

There are few young pianists playing today as skilled in the poetics of the instrument and as versatile as Elio Villafranca, the young, Cuban-born wizard, who now lives and performs in the United States. Like his compatriot, Omar Sosa, Villafranca is steeped in the music of the African and the Cuban traditions. And like Sosa, again, he is also well versed in the idioms of jazz, and the music of the vast Afro-Caribbean Diaspora. Again like Sosa and many of the Cuban musicians of his generation, Elio Villafranca is also a gifted composer, in whose music listeners will find a sensibility that draws from a very deep wellspring of ideas born of a mind that roams like a blithe spirit and stringing sounds that fuse on a score sheet like glittering pearls from the ocean of music around the world.

So when Villafranca decides that it is time to make a record he names *The Source in Between* (Ceiba Tree Music, 2007) you can be sure that it is a musical journey that goes deep inside the very heart of his musical impulses and emerges with a soaring spirit. This is what John Coltrane found most rewarding in the latter part of his career as he showed the way for numerous musicians to follow. And Elio Villafranca does so with wonderful spiritual fervor. In many respects this is a defining album for Villafranca. The music is born of a melding of all the elements of music-rhythm, harmony and the melody, which includes its own special internal rhythms that somehow only those musicians especially with Afro-Cuban heritage seem to have - with his profound sense of the poetics and spiritualism of music.

So the listener can very easily approach this record as a suite of music that seeks to follow an impulse to get at the very heart of what it takes to be a channel of sound, quite apart from the cultural events that color the art. There may be unique rhythms that drive a section of this suite of music: in the title track, "The Source in Between," for instance, which pulsates with Afro-Cuban rhythms that set the melody free into the realm of jazz, or in "Luna," with its surreal elements of harmony that sew the fabric of the song together. Or in the sweeping otherworldly histrionics of "The Lonely One", or "Don't Ever Say Never"... But at its heart is pure sound that relies on nothing but its own dynamics to soar above everything else. Thus even the song titles dissolve into descriptions of or aspects of this musical journey.

It is also no wonder that Elio Villafranca would be assisted on this musical tour de force by a quartet that has provided telling interpretations of the music he has composed. Tenor saxophonist, Eric Alexander is truly magnificent throughout - from the blistering attack on the title song, to through the silken glissandos of his playing on "The Lonely One," and his moody abstractions on "Resurrection of the Incapacitated". Drummer, Dafnis Prieto is much more than merely the percussionist of the quartet. Prieto is the shaman who conjures up the very Muse herself as he thunders or whispers through the charts pushing Alexander to the outer limits of interpretation. And Villafranca is of course the master conductor of the journey to the heart of music. Bassist Jeff Carney is Prieto's alter ego and when they do guest, soprano saxophonist, Yosvany Terry, drummer Ferenc Nemeth and tumbadora, Arturo Stable prove up to this enormously beautiful journey as well.