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Elio Villafranca

Not Dreading the J-Word by Shaun Brady

On the first day of his first University composition class in Cuba, Elio Villafranca's instructor came to him with an ultimatum. "I know you have a reputation as a jazz artist," Villafranca recalls the teacher saying, "and I know that jazz musicians can write very quickly. I warn you that I know a lot about jazz, and if I see something that is not classical, I will not accept it." Though that instructor's attitude seems to draw a hard line between the two genres, Villafranca appreciates the discipline that the course instilled in him, even as his own music increasingly blurs those boundaries.

"When I write music," Villafranca explains, "I try to write from a classical point of view. In classical music the melody has an arc, a beginning, development and end. In jazz, you can write one line, and then from that point on you can develop. I want to feel like the music is complete even if nobody's going to solo. I don't like to rely on soloists, I like to rely on music."

Sitting down for lunch in his former home of Philadelphia, Villafranca was fresh from the debut of his new piece "Renacimiento de un Mariachi" by the Dallas Black Dance Theatre. The suite, which the pianist plans to expand to a full concerto for Mariachi band and orchestra, combines elements of jazz both straightahead and Latin, Afro-Cuban music, and European classical traditions. A few months prior, Villafranca had presented an evening of music extrapolated from several documentary film scores he'd composed, which paired his jazz quartet with the Osso String Quartet for a gorgeous – and altogether seamless - meld of classical and jazz which he hopes to record in the fall with Paquito d'Rivera guesting.

That's not to say that Villafranca is neglecting his jazz side. The pianist's latest CD, *The Source in Between*, on his own Ceiba Tree Music imprint, is a relatively

straightahead quartet date featuring Eric Alexander or Yosvany Terry on saxophone, Jeff Carney on bass, and Dafnis Prieto or Ferenc Nemeth on drums. The disc, recorded in 2006, was Villafranca's attempt to explore a different aspect of Latin jazz, one where his Cuban background emerges in more subtle ways than the usual barrage of percussion.

"The minute you say 'Latin Jazz' to someone," he says, "they think of conga or timbales, because Latin percussion is usually what defines Latin Jazz in this country. But coming from Cuba, I never really needed that kind of association to write music that comes from a Latin background. I write in a way that could feel Latin or could feel straightahead. In the CD title, 'The Source' is what's inside of me from my Cuban background, and the 'In Between' part is between those two genres."

Navigating that middle path is what led Villafranca to form this particular ensemble. "Often when I play with my friends from Cuba," he says, "our tradition weighs so heavy on us that we have a tendency to end up more on the Latin side than the jazz side. That's why I wanted to have Eric, who's a bebop master, and Dafnis, who can do both things beautifully."

Though Villafranca is part of a generation more at ease with these sort of cross-genre experiments, he sees himself in the tradition of his influences. "Monk, Andrew Hill, Coltrane, Ornette, Miles, all of them had to look at classical music at some point or other in order to grasp all of this. Jazz is just an atom in the whole universe of music, and if you only concentrate on jazz, I guess you can be a jazz player, but to be a musician you have to know more."