

## ***JazzNights (74)***

### **Manuel Valera Trio**

**Manuel Valera (p), E. J. Strickland (d), Linda Oh (b)**

Cuba-born and classically trained Manuel Valera burst on the New York Jazz scene in 2000. His first CD, the widely acclaimed *Forma Nueva*, an all-star group with John Patitucci, Bill Stewart, El Negro Hernandez, and Seamus Blake followed in 2004. Since then, fine recordings in many formats, Grammy nominations, commissions, and awards have followed almost every year. The breadth of Mr. Valera's talents can be seen in the wide variety of formats in which he has recorded (see CD list below): solo work ranging from jazz standards to classical-influenced impromptus and Cuban boleros, traditional jazz piano/bass/drums trios, augmented jazz quartets and quintets, as well as works incorporating string and woodwind quartets.

He has been awarded several grants for composition, most notably Chamber Music America's New Jazz Works in 2007 and 2013, and 2005 and 2006 ASCAP Young Jazz Composer Awards.

His working groups include the *New Cuban Express*, an Irakere-influenced mid-sized ensemble, *Groove Square*, a group more oriented to funk and electronic music, and, of course, the trio we will hear in March. I last heard this trio in April, 2015 at the Jazz Standard (Hans Glawischnig was the bassist, not Ms. Oh), where they played tunes from their most recent CD, *Live at Firehouse 12*. My notes remark the cohesiveness of the group, the way they seemed to play each other's parts at times. There were tunes with no traditional solos, for example, just group work.

Here is the New York Times' perceptive Nate Chinen on Manuel Valera:

" The blending of Latin music with jazz harmony and improvisation has produced more than a mere hybrid, as a survey of New York's younger players would reveal. Manuel Valera, a Cuban pianist in his mid-20's, illustrates that evolution handily: postbop and classical romanticism are as integral to his vocabulary as Latin folk forms, and they all find natural expression in his music."

His colleagues on this gig are no mere accompanists. Linda Oh and E. J. Strickland are accomplished leaders themselves. Ms Oh came to this country via Malaysia and Perth, Australia. She studied at the Manhattan School of Music where she now teaches. Like Mr. Valera, she has been a recipient of the ASCAP Young Jazz Composers Award (2008), and she now has three CDs as leader. There are now many, many brilliant young bassists and Ms. Oh is among the very best of them. She'll be at Dizzy's Club Coca Cola March 11 leading one of her current groups (Ben Wendel, Darya Stephens (tenors), Fabian Almazan (piano), and Justin Brown (drums)).

E. J. Strickland is half of the identical Strickland twins. His brother Marcus is an accomplished tenor saxophonist, and they play together often. He comes from Florida where his father was percussionist with the Ft. Lauderdale Orchestra. Like many young drummers, he began on pots and pans, presumably graduating to real drums by driving his family crazy. The jazz world is certainly glad he did, because Mr. Strickland now is one of the most sought after young drummers in New York. He has worked with established stars such as Russell Malone, Wynton Marsalis, George Colligan, and Ravi Coltrane as well as up younger folk: Robert Glasper, Mike Moreno, Sharel Cassity. Here is what he says about teaching and playing:

"I never tell them [students], You have to do this, or that. I try to show them that music is a wide, wide world of possibility. And I try to make it fun. I always try to remember that music is fun."

"You're not going to hear a traditional jazz drummer. You're going to hear someone who's drawing from many different styles, many different approaches. That's what my true voice is."

As a non-musical aside, one might note the origins of the three people in this group: Cuba, Malaysia, Florida. A metaphor for the best of this country? I think so.

Check them out this March – you won't be disappointed.

Some of Manuel Valera's CDs:

Trio:

*Currents* (2009, MaxJazz Records) with James Genus & Ernesto Simpson.

*Live at Firehouse 12* (2015, CD Baby) with E.J. Strickland and Hans Glawischnig

## Larger Groups

*Forma Nueva* (2004, Mavo Records) with John Patitucci, Bill Stewart, Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez & Seamus Blake.

*Vientos* (2007, Anzic Records) with James Genus, Ernesto Simpson, Joel Frahm & a woodwind quintet.

*New Cuban Express* (2012, Mavo Records) with Yosvany Terry, Tom Guarna, John Benitez, Eric Doob & Mauricio Herrera. 2013 Grammy Nominee

*Expectativas* (2013, CD Baby) with Yosvany Terry, Tom Guarna, John Benitez, Paulo Stagnaro & Ludwig Afonso

*In Motion* (2014, Criss Cross Jazz) with Yosvany Terry, Tom Guarna, Alex Sipiagin, Hans Glawischnig, Mauricio Herrera and Ludwig Afonso

*Urban Landscapes* (2015, CD Baby) with Groove Square

## Solo

*Self Portrait* (2014, CD Baby) Solo Piano