

The Agustin Bernal Trio Delivers a “Midnight Picnic”

by Skoot Larson

Jazz is alive and well in Mexico! Too often, when we think of international jazz, we speak of Europe, Japan or Brazil. The trio of bassist Agustin Bernal, with drummer Gabriel Puentes and wunderkind Ray David Alejandro switching between trombone and piano offers more proof that, as Kenny Clarke and Francy Boland declared some thirty years ago, jazz is universal. Creativity is a common human trait across all borders and boundaries, and in their new CD “Midnight Picnic,” the Agustin Bernal Trio demonstrates world class composing and improvising skills from south of our U.S. border.



This thought provoking group of young men may just be the most interesting new jazz sound since Charlie Haden teamed up with Ornette Coleman! Like Haden, Bernal’s playing holds interest with an intriguing and unexpected baseline throughout, always moving beyond the ‘common’ with a tasty extra garnish of notes and riffs. Bernal’s ideas show infinitely more effort than those bassists that just walk the changes. His chosen notes and patterns both fit and compliment the rhythm and the musical structure without question.

Ray David Alejandro provides the perfect front line to Bernal’s contrabass and Puentes’ drumming, with a matchless approach of his own on both his chosen axes. Alejandro has mastered the slide on his cumbersome brass instrument to a degree thought impossible before the late Frank Rosolino broke that horn’s ‘speed’ barrier.

Cole Porter’s “Love for Sale,” provides a perfect demonstration of this group’s unconventional approach. Bernal’s base takes a quick walk through the theme, followed by two solo choruses on Porter’s creation before the rest of the cats enter with a full statement of the melody.

Alejandro’s trombone is featured throughout this number, employing a rough timbre characterized by octave jumping overtones in his horn’s voice. Bernal’s bass is like a

second string of improvisation behind Alejandro, as he lays down a well-balanced interplay with his brass man's statement.

Sam River's "Cyclic Episode" exhibits this groups approach to another type of jazz standard, on which bass and trombone state the theme in unison before launching into their bouncy shared and individual soloing.

Their other celebrated jazz classic on this disc is Oliver Nelson's "Cascades," performed with a tango feel to it. "Cascades" draws special attention as Bernal and company have skillfully woven a series of false endings throughout to keep their audience on their toes.

The other seven tracks are all clever and percipient compositions of Bernal and Alejandro. The writing structure of both men is very tight, but always leaves room for impressions and invention.

A pair of originals worthy of special mention, both featuring Alejandro's piano, are his piece, "Amber" and Bernal's tune "Tivo por Viaje." On the first, piano and bass move as one across the chorus, separating their musical union for a walking bass behind the bridge. Alejandro's solo space shows him to be a strong, two-fisted pianist, equally skilled in creating lines of thought with either hand, and extremely proficient at quick smooth runs up the keyboard.

Bernal's "Tivo" feels like it's in double-time, but a few bars in this statement give the sensation of a standard tempo 4/4. Alejandro's piano work shows influence from Thelonius Monk, with the speed and suavity Jack Wilson. When comping behind Bernal's bass, Alejandro demonstrates some solid and melodious open voicings in his chords.

All in all, The Agustin Bernal Trio has an abundant aptitude for playing 'out' music without sacrificing the dynamics or tonality that signal first class jazz. Their sound is progressive, but in a manner that will appeal to a wide spectrum of jazz lovers across most of the sub-genres of today's improvised music.

"Midnight Picnic" is currently difficult to obtain in the U.S., however, you can contact Agustin directly via My Space, <http://www.myspace.com/agustinbernal> and purchase this fine CD right from the source. Believe me, it will be worth any hassle involved to put this music in you own collection.