



Francisco Mela - Ancestros

Musicians:

Francisco Mela - Drums

Hery Paz - Sax

Kris Davis - Piano

Gerald Cannon - Bass

It's not wise to listen to a Francisco Mela record with pre-conceived notions. But, if you come to listen, the reward is profound. Mela's musical energy is pure and powerful and when you get him in the room with a band this skilled and empathetic, his perspective flows clean from the source.

On the title track, "Ancestros," Hery Paz is playing the Chinese horn, the Suono, which travelled from China to Cuba with migrant workers in the mid-19th Century and became so vital a part of Cuban carnival tradition that it was renamed the "corneta china." Here it bridges an intro and outro into a driving modern and unique piece replete with deft improvisational frameworks in which the musicians are let loose to roam. Francisco's music is fiercely individual, but you can hear how his background and his influences intermingle and how the outlook of the great Paul Motian and Andrew Hill (both also represented on the album on Hill's "Not So" and Motian's "Mumbo Jumbo") shine brightly in Mela's compositions. I'm amazed by the microcosms—worlds of their own—that Mela builds with his compositions.

On every track, the incredibly responsive and intuitive playing of Kris Davis prods at the thematic material from all sides, bringing out every reaction and tendril of an idea from Mela's writing. I love the way she dissects Mela's themes and re-assembles them in her solos. Hery Paz is also a singular voice on the saxophone and bass clarinet. Check out the opening of the record as the unaccompanied melody on solo bass clarinet roots around almost like it's finding its shape as it goes. Paz's tone on the instrument is deep and personal and the record begins almost as if a Prokofiev character is peeking into view. Throughout the record, the accompaniment from Mela is so instantly reactive while being simultaneously supportive that the band dances in lock step, no matter how furious and wild the steps. Of course, from one end to the other, you can hear the huge impact of Gerald Cannon. Gerald and Mela play together worldwide in McCoy Tyner's trio (and the Crash Trio with Newvelle favorite Leo Genovese), so their synergy and swing come as no surprise; but the effortless way in which the tempo can establish itself and then dissolve

and re-emerge is a master-class in poise and feel.

At the end of the loose 5/4 driving feel of “Vino” captured in the video here, you can hear Mela exclaiming, “Wow, I was listening to that in my head for a long time. Just like that!” His vision snaps into focus in the collective improvisation. Just like he imagined it and never to be repeated the same way again.

- Elan Mehler