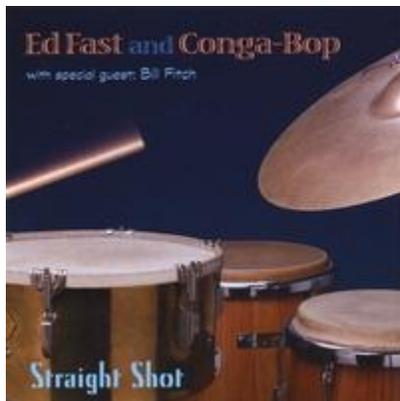


The Latin Jazz Corner

Spotlight: Straight Shot, Ed Fast And Conga-Bop

The Spotlight Series highlights upcoming Latin Jazz musicians that have yet to reach national recognition. Many of these musicians thrive in local scenes and some tour in support of releases. All these musicians contribute greatly to the overall Latin Jazz scene, and they deserve our “spotlighted” attention.



[Straight Shot](#) [Ed Fast And Conga-Bop](#)

The words straight-ahead get thrown around a lot in the jazz world, often leaving a lack of clarity to the concept behind the phrase. Many people associate straight-ahead playing with the use of swing rhythms and standard repertoire from the thirties and forties. Jump into a tune like “All The Things You Are” at a medium swing tempo and many people will classify the performance as straight-ahead. In a related sense, this concept of straight-ahead also correlates to an old school approach to the music. For many musicians, a straight-ahead interpretation of jazz sits in the past and lacks the hip nature of modern jazz. Both of these ideas allude to a certain type of music, referencing it without describing it too accurately. A better way to frame the idea of straight-ahead might redirect the words towards an aesthetic approach to performing jazz rather than a stylistic description. In this light, straight-ahead jazz includes a clearly defined link to history and tradition without diving into esoteric musical grey areas. Musicians could play swing, Afro-Cuban, Brazilian, or funk rhythms underneath jazz harmonies, but as long as they clearly presented the music in a traditional fashion, they’re still straight-ahead. Following this idea, drummer Ed Fast and his group Conga-Bop delivers some outstanding straight-ahead Latin Jazz on [Straight Shot](#), mixing original compositions and standards into a memorable performance.

Strong Originals That Fuse Hard Bop And Afro-Cuban Rhythms

Fast leads his group through a number of uptempo originals, fusing bluesy hard bop with Afro-Cuban rhythms. The rhythm section establishes a driving rumba guaguanco beneath thick chordal patches from the wind players on “Encarnación,” leading into a menacing minor melody that sets a serious tone. Pianist Zaccai Curtis sends the rhythm section into high gear with a powerful montuno, inspiring saxophonist Chris Herbert into an energetic series of racing improvised lines. Curtis enthusiastically charges into an intelligent statement that plays off the rhythm section before laying down a montuno for an explosive solo from conguero Jorge Fuentes. Bassist Luques Curtis provides a slyly

funky bass line before the complete rhythm section jumps into a medium tempo cha cha on “Straight Shot,” setting the stage for a laid back blues melody. Trumpet player Joel Gonzalez attacks his improvisation with a combination of bop flavored lines and short staccato notes, while trombone player Steve Davis mixes rhythmic jabs with legato phrases. Guitarist Greg Skaff cleverly mimics Davis and builds upon that initial idea with a blazing display of hard bop virtuosity, creating a masterful statement. Luques Curtis introduces “Once Upon a Time” with a lyrical bass figure over an uptempo son montuno that becomes the basis for an uplifting melody. Herbert moves onto flute for an engaging solo that grows through smart thematic development which transitions into a busy improvisation from Skaff that winds nimbly through the chord changes. After a return to the main melody, bongocero Esteban Arrufatt takes a quick improvisatory flourish, leading into an attention grabbing statement from Fast on timbales, who displays a knowledge of authentic phrasing and technique. The wind players ride through a melody full of short edgy phrases on “Ring Side” that comes alive through sharp chordal stabs from the rhythm section. A bluesy pick-up from Gonzalez leads into a soulful improvisation, followed by a series of interconnected ideas from trombonist James Burton. Zaccai Curtis slides through a quick improvisation with a modern edge, leading into an interesting moña and a blazing solo from Skaff. These pieces strongly display Fast’s composition skills, that show defined personality while paying respects to Afro-Cuban and bop traditions.

Clever Arrangements Of Classic Jazz Tunes

Fast includes arrangements of classic jazz tunes into his repertoire, presenting them with clever arrangements. The rhythm section establishes an assertive 6/8 rhythm with a bluesy swing on Lee Morgan’s “Boy What A Night,” framing the melody with a soulful edge. The rhythm section builds into a scorching heat behind Gonzalez as the trumpet player bounces his improvisation around the rhythmic basis. Davis follows with an impassioned fire, inspiring response from the rhythm section, while Zaccai Curtis tears through a blues fueled statement. The wind players provide gentle rhythmic hits over a bolero on Bill Evans’ “Detour Ahead” while Fast reflectively interprets the melody on vibes. Davis dances through a tender improvisation full of vitality that touches on both the sentimental and lively aspects of the song. The glistening sound of Fast’s vibes sparkle through a brief, but beautifully crafted statement, gracefully leading back into the main melody. These pieces connect Fast and his group with jazz history and finds them working creatively to place that history into an Afro-Cuban context.

Original Compositions From Fast’s Collaborators

Two of Fast’s collaborators contribute original compositions to the group, adding some variety and flair to the set. Zaccai Curtis lays down a catchy montuno with a bluesy dissonance behind a relaxed floating melody from the wind players on Davis’ “Blue Domain.” Herbert tears into his improvisation with an energetic zeal, followed by a thoughtfully soulful statement from Zaccai Curtis, and an engagingly understated solo from Gonzalez. Skaff jumps into a tasteful solo filled with bluesy licks, until Davis builds some momentum with an energetic solo, and Luques Curtis displays a strong percussive approach to melodic development. Legendary Latin Jazz musician Bill Fitch establishes a somberly serious tone on piano on his composition “Cuban Lament,” placing a classically elegant melody over a slow Afro rhythm. Fitch plays upon the melody with bluesy

embellishments, playing with an insightfully understated touch that complements the entire setting. Fitch echoes the percussion with a vamp that serves as a foundation for a beautifully structured improvisation from Luques Curtis, leading back into an expressive return to the melody. The addition of more compositional voices add some variety to group's repertoire, while reinforcing the overall sound of the ensemble.

A Distinct Artistic Identity Built Upon Historical Precedent

Fast and Conga-Bop present a lively set of straight-ahead Latin Jazz on *[Straight Shot](#)*, creating an appealing musical mixture that glistens with jazz class and Afro-Cuban flair. Fast emerges as a compelling band leader throughout the album, delivering memorable compositions, authentic performances, and a defined concept. As a writer, Fast comes from the hard bop school of bluesy melodies, rich chord structures, and marked rhythm section accompaniment. He cleverly combines this ideal with Afro-Cuban rhythms, placing everything clearly around the clave, creating a stylistic coherence that strengthens the music. Fast sits behind the drum kit with a keen eye on supporting the music, always keeping things aligned rhythmically, but never overstepping his role. This type of band leading sets the stage for some dedicated performances from his musicians, who feel the freedom to express themselves within the defined setting. Zaccai Curtis contributes some outstanding solos that leap out of the recording, overflowing with artistic identity. Skaff adds a skilled bop edge to the music with attention grabbing solos, and Luques Curtis consistently provides unwavering support throughout the album. The presence of Bill Fitch links the group to the greater Latin Jazz legacy, bringing his taste and experience into the mix. Fast and Conga-Bop take the best pieces of a straight-ahead Latin Jazz approach and blend them into an enjoyable musical collection on *[Straight Shot](#)*, leaving us with a clear picture of a group with a distinct artistic identity built upon a strong knowledge of historical precedent.

<http://www.chipboaz.com/blog/2010/04/21/spotlight-straight-shot-ed-fast-and-conga-bop/>