

RICHARD BONA

FROM CAMEROON TO CUBA

HE'S BEEN CALLED "THE AFRICAN STING" AND "THE

African Jaco," but at this point in his career, Richard Bona has long outgrown such comparisons. Ever since he hit New York in the mid 1990s, the Cameroon native's dazzling chops, stylistic versatility, and nimble falsetto have made him a favorite of bass fanatics and bandleaders; his studio and touring resumé stretches from Randy and Michael Brecker, George Benson, and Harry Belafonte to Mike Stern, Stevie Wonder, and Joe Zawinul. Bona's ability to connect to audiences is where he shines brightest, so it makes sense that last year, the 49-year-old teamed up with restaurateur Laurent Dantonio to open Club Bonafide on New York's fabled 52nd Street.

Though Bona is a YouTube sensation—check the four million views of his 2005 improv with Bobby McFerrin—it's the eight solo albums he has released since 1999 that have established the template for each successive outing: dissonance-free, African-flavored compositions whose clean production and stellar musicianship never overshadow his soulful, multi-tracked vocals (usually in Douala, one of

BY E.E. BRADMAN



YASSINE TOUMI

the four Cameroonian languages he speaks). *The Ten Shades of Blues* [2005, Universal Jazz France] explored American, Indian, and African flavors; 2009's *Bonafied* [Universal Jazz France] was mostly acoustic. His latest, *Heritage* [Membran], explores the alchemy of African rhythms in Cuba with a sleek new ensemble, Mandekan Cubano. But whether he's flaunting snappy tone on tunes like "Jokoh Jokoh" and "Cubaneando," inviting Jaco comparisons on "Essèwè Ya Monique," or rocking muted thump and cool unison lines on "Santa Clara Con Montuno," Bona will always be in a class of his own.

What inspired you to make an album of Afro-Cuban music?

My main thing is trying to connect people. What we call Afro-Cuban is not just African and Cuban. So many people—the Spanish, Chinese slaves, the Indians who lived on the islands before the Europeans came—contributed to this music. African slaves came with nothing, but you know what? They still had their voices, they still had dances, and they were able to contribute to this music. Despite going

through very difficult times, they were able to leave us something that we benefit from. Can you imagine what we could do today if we really came together as people? That's my main message.

Did you study Afro-Cuban bassists before diving into this album?

[Laughs.] It's Afro-Cuban music.

I see. So you're the "Afro" in "Afro-Cuban"?

I am the Afro! Although I have dreadlocks [laughs]. There's so much Africa in this music that it doesn't feel strange to us Africans. When we play this music, it's natural.

What have you learned from all your collaborations?

That we learn the most from our differences. People like Joe Zawinul, Mike Brecker—they were born so far away from where I was born, but I learned so much from them. I try to connect all these different places, showing audiences that at the end of the day, we are all one.

No matter who you're playing with, though, you sound like you.

I came to the bass by playing Jaco, so when you



INFO

EQUIP

Bass Fodera

Richard Bona

Imperial, fretless

Fodera 4-string,

1966 Fender Jazz

Rig Markbass Little

Mark Ninja head,

Markbass Traveler

121 Ninja 1x12, Mark-

bass New York 122

Ninja 2x12

Effects Boss LMB-3

Limiting/Enhancer





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mix that Jaco with the African style, you recognize that anywhere [laughs].

How do you balance chops and soul?

It's simple: I sing. The melody has to be heard, and for the melody to cut through, bass has to make some space. To play with a singer, you have to think like a singer.

Even if we don't sing?

When I taught at NYU, I used to always tell my students that no matter what instrument they were on, they should sing every note they played. A lot of musicians say, "Oh, my voice is not good." What do you mean, it's not good? It's your voice! Use it, because it actually helps you play more soulfully.

What is it about Cameroon? There are so many great Cameroonian bass players!

To tell you the truth, nobody knows. But bass occupies such a huge place in our traditional music, because when the electric came to Cameroon in the early '70s, players imported parts we used to play on *balafon* and other traditional instruments to the bass. Nobody will remember a song's melody or lyrics, but if you sing the right bass line at a party in Cameroon, oh! You got everybody up, right there.

Let's talk about your gear. Besides your signature Fodera, you also play a vintage Fender Jazz.

Oh, that's my '66 Jazz Bass, baby! I can't travel with that. I just play it at home and in the studio.

Why did you call your Markbass line of amps "Ninja"?

Because I'm a jujitsu green belt. I could be more if I wasn't touring and doing all this stuff, but I don't compete. I've been doing it for seven years just to stay in shape.

You arrived in New York City in 1994, when things were very different. What would you tell a young musician thinking of moving to New York in 2016?

Just come and do your thing! New York still has that magic. Go out there. Don't have any fear. If you really believe in yourself, and you practice, practice, and work all the time, good things will happen. This city gave me so much. This is where I developed myself, so I owe a lot to this city, too.

Last year, you opened your own venue, Bonafide. Why go through the headache of owning a club in New York City?

The people that built the system built it so well that we see ownership almost as the enemy, like we don't want to be on the other side. Musicians are the only people who—after writing a song, arranging it, renting the studio, getting the musicians together, recording, mixing, mastering—take the final product and then give it to somebody to sell it for them. Eventually—*eventually*—someone will throw some peanuts called "royalties" back at them. They will never own something that's their own property.

I don't want to fall into this trap, and I want to teach young people how to take care of themselves. We need to take control of our business. So I said to myself, you know what? Not only am I going to own my publishing, but when I want to play, I want to play my house and I want to give a chance to young musicians. Ron Carter and Herbie Hancock had platforms to become who they are; who is developing young artists today? I owe it to the next generation to give them the chances I was given. **BP**