

Bradley Bambarger
June 4, 2018

Edward Simon

pianist / composer / band leader

“One of the strongest pianists of his generation, with intuitive empathy and drum-like ingenuity, Simon solos compositionally with passionate elegance.” – DownBeat

Edward Simon, a native of Venezuela, has made a name for himself over decades in America as a jazz improviser, composer-arranger and band leader, with his profile heightening in recent years as he has explored the commonalities jazz can have with the folkloric sounds of Latin America. *JazzTimes* summed up his impact this way: “Simon is less talked about than many other important jazz pianists from the Caribbean and South America, but he may be the most complete creative artist among them.” Based in the San Francisco Bay Area as a member of the all-star SFJAZZ Collective, he has been a Guggenheim Fellow along with being awarded multiple composition grants as part of the Chamber Music America’s New Jazz Works initiative. Simon, a Yamaha artist, has recorded 15 albums as a leader or co-leader. His latest is *Sorrows and Triumphs*, released via Sunnyside Records in April 2018; the album was declared “unmissable” in Nate Chinen’s Take Five column on WBGO.org, and the pianist was featured in an extensive *DownBeat* interview upon the disc’s release. This follows Simon’s 2016 album *Latin American Songbook*, with the four-and-a-half-star *DownBeat* review praising its “grand and sophisticated” sound. *Latin American Songbook* also won Simon an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Jazz Album. *The New York Times* has praised Simon’s “light, warm touch” as a pianist, while *Jazz Journal International* singled out “his deep emotional statements” as a composer and improviser.

Sorrows and Triumphs showcases the long-running virtuoso quartet Afinidad, featuring Simon alongside alto saxophonist David Binney, bassist Scott Colley and drummer Brian Blade. The album’s color-rich arrangements also include several special guests: vocalist Gretchen Parlato, guitarist Adam Rogers and the chamber quintet Imani Winds, plus percussionists Rogerio Boccato and Luis Quintero. The album’s material blends two bodies of work commissioned from Simon by Chamber Music of America’s New Jazz Works: the suites “Sorrows and Triumphs” and “House of Numbers,” their

individual movements re-sequenced to form a holistic listening experience that brims with a lyricism both intimate and majestic. About this music, influenced by his Buddhist practice, the pianist says: “I wanted these compositions to bring joy to the listener, to be direct and accessible, with singable melodies.” Summing up a string of glowing reviews for the album, *All About Jazz* said: “Edward Simon's sensitivity, eloquence, strength and intelligence stand in full view throughout this gorgeous collection.”

Simon first performed the “Sorrows and Triumphs” suite with Afinidad in 2009 at Walton Performing Arts Center in Arkansas and later at New York’s Jazz Standard, with performances broadcast on National Public Radio’s *Jazz Set*. Afinidad and Imani Winds unveiled the “House of Numbers” suite in 2016 at California’s University of the Pacific. Simon Rowe, executive director of Roots, Jazz & American Music at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, attended the premiere of “House of Numbers,” saying afterward that the blend of the five Imani Winds with Simon’s jazz quartet was “mesmerizing,” as the “writing juxtaposed the lyrical and often dense textures of the quintet with the ever-changing, percolating rhythmic drive of Afinidad.”

The music of Latin America has long been some of the world’s most beloved, whether Brazilian bossa nova, Argentinean tango, Cuban bolero or irresistible songs from Chile, Puerto Rico and Venezuela. Simon created fresh, supple interpretations of melodies from all these countries for his album *Latin American Songbook*. Released via Sunnyside in 2016, this album saw Simon leading his working trio with bassist Joe Martin and drummer Adam Cruz. The trio’s subtly virtuosic performances pulse with color and groove, giving instrumental voice to melodies originally made famous by such singers as Caetano Veloso, Mercedes Sosa and Carlos Gardel. Simon created artful piano-trio settings of such songs as Astor Piazzolla’s famously rhapsodic “Libertango” and Antônio Carlos Jobim’s lilting “Chega de Saudade,” as well as the gorgeous Cuban ballad “En La Orilla Del Mundo” (On the Edge of the World).

About *Latin American Songbook*, Simon explains: “I grew up listening to and loving these tunes. This music sings and dances – it’s irresistible. Later, I dealt with this material playing in Paquito d’Rivera’s band in the ’90s and then in my collaborations with singer Luciana Souza. As a mature jazz musician, I wanted to delve into these songs more deeply and make them my own.” Among the reviews celebrating the album’s appeal, NPR said: “The combination of Latin standards and a jazz sensibility is always rich, but this recording really works because an expert musician applies himself so sincerely to songs that were formative for him. Simon puts his head and heart into *Latin American Songbook*, and the album gives Latin standards a rightful and joyful place at the center of instrumental jazz.”

Prior to *Latin American Songbook* came another key release for Simon, his 2014 Sunnyside album *Venezuelan Suite* – which saw the pianist blend the tuneful, buoyant sounds of his native country with the

harmonically sophisticated, forward-looking manner of jazz. The rich compositions featured star saxophonist Mark Turner alongside virtuosos of the Venezuelan folk tradition, with the bright timbre of traditional native instruments – including harp, flute and the guitar with four nylon strings called the cuatro – mixed with the darker sounds of tenor sax, piano, double-bass and trap drums. *New York City Jazz Record* picked *Venezuelan Suite* as one of the Best Latin Releases of 2014, and *All About Jazz* marveled: “*Venezuelan Suite* is pianist Edward Simon’s love letter to his homeland, but that’s not all it is; it’s also the perfect confluence of Venezuelan ideals, jazz language and chamber-esque sophistication. In short, it’s a masterpiece.” *DownBeat* gave *Venezuelan Suite* a four-and-a-half star review, concluding: “Simon doesn’t forcibly create connections – he opens our eyes to natural connections that have always been there.”

Simon’s four-part *Venezuelan Suite* explores four principal genres of the country’s folk music. Each of the suite’s movements is based on a rhythm or song form and titled after a city associated with its origin. “Barinas,” the birthplace of many father figures in Venezuelan music, centers on the *joropo*, the country’s lively national rhythm and dance. “Caracas” is based on the intricately syncopated *merengue* in 5/8 time. “Mérida,” named after the picturesque city in the Andes, is in the style of a Venezuelan waltz. And “Maracaibo” is based on a *gaita*, a style traditionally played during Christmas time. In addition to his original suite for the album, Simon also arranged Heraclio Fernández’s *joropo*-based “El Diablo Suelto” (The Devil on the Loose), first published in 1888 – a standard in Venezuelan culture akin to “All the Things You Are” in jazz.

“Jazz has been informed by Latin traditions from the very beginning, as Jelly Roll Morton knew,” Simon explains. “Then Dizzy Gillespie did so much with the Afro-Caribbean tradition. I’ve always been inspired by that history. Latin American music has such rhythmic vitality, and when you combine that with the harmonic richness and real-time invention of jazz, it yields a profoundly beautiful mix – a real best of both worlds. I hope *Venezuelan Suite* helps whoever hears it to discover some of the riches of Venezuelan music. People all over the world love so many different kinds of music from Cuba, Argentina, Brazil. Some of the same beauties and joys are there in the tradition of my native country.”

Simon – who first came to the U.S. in 1981 at age 12, then settled permanently stateside after attending the Performing Arts School in Philadelphia – grew up in a musical family in the oil-refinery town of Punta Cardón. His father planted a musical seed with young Edward and his siblings, the kids raised on the strains of their dad playing guitar and singing boleros with his drinking buddies. Chucho Valdés was Simon’s first big influence on piano, then he got the jazz bug watching a VHS tape of Dizzy Gillespie and Stan Getz playing at the White House – with “the freedom of jazz” forever instilled in him as an ideal. After graduating from the Performing Arts School at age 15, Simon received a music

scholarship from the University of the Arts, where he studied classical music. Later, he transferred to the Manhattan School of Music, where he studied jazz piano. As a young striver in New York, Simon was inspired by the innovative Nuyorican jazz of Jerry Gonzalez & the Fort Apache Band, and he eventually played with the group.

From 1989 to 1994, Simon occupied the piano chair in Bobby Watson's Horizon, touring and recording with the band. He moved on to become a member of the Terence Blanchard Group from 1994 to 2002, making several albums with the band and appearing on multiple Blanchard film soundtracks. The pianist also contributed to albums by the likes of Mark Turner, Greg Osby, Kevin Eubanks and Herbie Mann. Simon made his leader debut on record in 1994 with *Beauty Within* (Audioquest); that same year, he placed third in the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition. Simon has recorded a sequence of albums under his own name: *Edward Simon* (Kokopelli, 1995), *La Bikina* (Mythology, 1998), *The Process* (Criss Cross, 2003), *Simplicitas* (Criss Cross, 2005) and *Danny Boy* (2010). Simon has also worked at the head of his All-Star Trio with bassist John Patitucci and drummer Brian Blade, releasing the studio discs *Unicity* (CamJazz, 2006) and *Poesía* (CamJazz, 2009); the group's most recent album, released by Sunnyside in 2013, is *Trio Live at the Jazz Standard*, which *All About Jazz* described as "a stellar date that combines head and heart." Simon co-founded Afinidad with David Binney around the turn of the century. With the ace rhythm duo of Blade and bassist Scott Colley on board, they released the quartet discs *Afinidad* (Red Records, 2001) and *Océanos* (Criss Cross, 2007). *All About Jazz* described the sound of Afinidad as "wonderful, accessible and deep." Simon and Binney have also worked together as a duo, releasing the album *Fiestas de Agosto* (Red Records, 2008). In 2010, the pianist became a member of the hit SFJAZZ Collective, which comprises what *The New York Times* called "eight of today's most in-demand" performer-composers. A keen collaborator, the pianist recorded a duo album with Argentine-born guitarist Guillermo Rozenthuler, *Agora*, released in 2015.

One of Simon's most recent collaborative projects is the trio Steel House, with the pianist joined by frequent collaborators Colley and Blade for a new kind of group – one that finds these virtuoso improvisers blending acoustic jazz improvisation with electronic-tinged atmospherics for an inviting, song-oriented sound. This collaborative trio has performed at top venues across the country, with *L.A. Weekly* saying: "All-star bands can be a hit-and-miss prospect, but Steel House exceeds expectations... These extraordinary instrumentalists convert their shared histories into poetic, genre-leaping music." The group presented its debut album, *Steel House*, via ArtistShare in 2017; such highlights as "What If..." "Kingpin" and "Country" grab the listener immediately with melodies and grooves that tell a story in music. "The three of us wanted a sound for Steel House that went beyond the traditional jazz trio, to reach outside the box both compositionally and sonically," Simon explains. "Overdubs of synthesizer, electric piano or organ on some tracks lend the music ambience in that way. With just the three of us, we also play a bit differently even acoustically than we would in Afinidad, taking advantage of space and softness. We

still have a wide dynamic range, but this trio is about exploring nuances of phrasing and the subtle details of instrumental sound.”

Simon received fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts (2005), State of Florida (2007) and New York Foundation for the Arts (2008). Since fall 2017, he has been on the faculty of the newly recreated Roots, Jazz & American Music program at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and he has served on the faculties of the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music, City College of New York and University of the Arts. Simon has also taught master classes and clinics at conservatories and universities around the world, including Western Michigan University, where he served as Visiting Jazz Artist. He was honored in 1999 and in 2004 for his teaching work with a Certificate of Appreciation for Outstanding Service to Jazz Education from the International Association for Jazz Education. In 2008, thanks to a grant from the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board and U.S. Department of State, Simon was a visiting professor at the Instituto Universitario de Estudios Musicales in Caracas, Venezuela. In 2010, he was named a Guggenheim Fellow by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He became a McDowell Fellow the next year, with a residency at the prestigious McDowell Colony.

“In my music, I aim to balance the structural clarity of classical music with the moment-to-moment interaction of jazz,” Simon concludes. “I revel in the hybrids that come from combining ethnic rhythms, jazz harmony and improvisation. Of course, the music of Latin America – with its infectious rhythms, poetry and passion – has always been one of my greatest resources, as it offers an ocean of possibilities both rhythmically and melodically. But I’ve also been influenced by the works of minimalist composers, being attracted to the idea of taking an essential idea and exploiting it to its fullest potential. Aesthetically, I’m concerned with directness and economy. I strive to communicate, to get to the heart of the matter by making every note count, just as every word counts in a good story. I think of music as a living art, something that’s constantly evolving.”

— *Bradley Bambarger*

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