



MARK LEVINE

Biography

Since pianist **Mark Levine** founded his masterly Afro-Caribbean jazz ensemble **The Latin Tinge** in the late 1990s, the band has assembled a beautiful and fascinating book by applying a variety of Cuban grooves to American Songbook standards and compositions by contemporary post-bop composers such as Mulgrew Miller, Kenny Garrett, Cedar Walton, and Charles Tolliver.

Levine's new Latin Tinge album, *Off & On*, takes the band's fertile concept into thrilling, uncharted territory, interpreting a dozen exquisite tunes by the late, revered Brazilian composer **Moacir Santos**. Featuring the dazzling rhythm section tandem of **Paul van Wageningen** on trap drums and **Michael Spiro** on hand percussion, expert bassist **John Wiitala**, and Brazilian-jazz veteran **Mary Fettig** on flute, soprano sax, and bass clarinet, the Latin Tinge treats Santos's sophisticated arrangements much like its post-bop repertoire. While the melodies are unmistakably Brazilian, Levine transposes Santos's compositions from "from Recife to Havana."

"It's the same thing we've done with the music of Cedar Walton, Ronnie Mathews, and Joe Henderson," says Levine, who divides his time between Boise and Berkeley. "Without even really discussing it, three-fourths of the tunes ended up being Afro-Cuban. Of course, Spiro and van Wageningen have really studied that tradition. Wiitala has no training in Latin music, but he's got a natural feeling for clave. He's a minimalist who leaves a lot of space. And Mary is just a superb musician who's really versed in Brazilian and Latin jazz. It's a true band sound."

Considering that Levine has performed and recorded with many of the greatest musicians in jazz and Latin music, it's hardly surprising to discover that the pianist played an essential role on 1974's *Saudade*, one of three classic albums that Santos recorded for Blue Note. Raised in the rural northeastern state of Paraíba, the legendary composer and multi-instrumentalist made a name for himself in Rio in the 1950s, when his ingenious, densely structured compositions took Brazilian music well beyond bossa nova. A mentor to future guitar star and composer Baden Powell and pianist Sergio Mendes, Santos moved to Southern California in the mid-'60s looking to break into Hollywood as a film composer. That's where Levine met him. "I knew nothing about Brazilian music, but I was very impressed," Levine says. "Moacir's compositions were so beautiful and intricate."

Though Santos did some film composing, his career never took off. Levine only ran into him twice after the *Saudade* session, and Santos remained in Southland obscurity until 2001, when producers Mario Adnet and Zé Nogueira organized the star-studded recordings *Ouro Negro* and

Choros & Alegria (which were released in the U.S. on Adventure Music). At the time of his death at the age of 80 in 2004, Santos was once again recognized as a seminal figure in Brazilian music, a visionary composer with a capacious harmonic imagination and beguiling gift for melodic themes.

As the first instrumental jazz album ever dedicated exclusively to Santos's music, *Off & On* is another important step restoring his rightful place in the 20th-century composers' pantheon next to Jobim, Piazzolla, Ellington, Monk, and Shorter. Levine notes that one obstacle Santos faced is that his tunes often bear multiple titles. He originally recorded many of his pieces as instrumentals and named them *coisas*, which means "things" in Portuguese. When lyrics were added, they were renamed, so his hit "Coisa #5," for instance, became the gorgeous opening track "Naná." But when Santos moved to California, many of his tunes were given English lyrics and were rechristened again, so that "Coisa #8," née "Navegação" (Navigation), became "Make Mine Blue."

In many ways, Levine is an unlikely musician to undertake the Santos project, as he's rarely explored Brazilian music. Born and raised in New Hampshire (and later Florida), Levine graduated with a music degree from Boston University and started his career in the late 1950s as a dedicated bebopper. Saxophonist Bobby Porcelli sparked his interest in Latin music in the early '60s when he took Levine to see Tito Puente play one night at the Palladium in New York. A few years later while living in Boston, he hooked up with a young band, Los Muchachos, which included promising musicians such as conguero Don Alias, bassist Gene Perla, and saxophonist Dick Mesa.

Levine made the move to Los Angeles in the late '60s, and quickly found work with Latin bands, deepening his understanding of the music through his association with the great Cuban bassist **Humberto Cane**. He spent three years with **Willie Bobo**'s popular band, and three months on the road with protean conguero **Mongo Santamaria**. The gig with the legendary percussionist was long enough for Levine to participate in a sensational recording session along with saxophonists Sonny Fortune and Charles Owens, flutist Hubert Laws, and trumpeters Ray Maldonado and Lew Soloff. Columbia wanted a more commercial record from Santamaria, and put the album on ice for three decades until Sony finally released it in 2000 as *Afro-American Latin*.

While Levine found plenty of work in L.A., he was drawn to the Bay Area and made the move in 1974, joining the acclaimed quintet co-led by tenor giant **Harold Land** and hard-bop trumpet great **Blue Mitchell**. The relocation catapulted him into jazz's top ranks, and he worked regularly with jazz giants such as **Joe Henderson**, **Stan Getz**, and **Bobby Hutcherson**, while spending a year in the band of trumpet master **Woody Shaw**.

Given his success, Levine surprised many people in the early '80s when he gave up the piano to concentrate on trombone, an instrument he had played since grade school. He recorded as a member of **Poncho Sanchez**'s potent Latin-jazz band, but after a few years a painful dental condition forced him to put down the horn and return to the ivories.

"I probably would have stayed with trombone, because I was doing well," Levine says. "I'd just done a record for Concord. The month before I quit, I had my usual six gigs. And then I called everyone I knew, said I have this problem with my teeth, I'm going to have to start playing piano again just to make a living. And the first month I had 28 gigs. I said 'Oh yeah, I remember now. I used to make a living at this.'"

Since his return to the piano, Levine has distinguished himself through his continuing passion for Latin jazz, a journey that reached a creative milestone in 1996 when he traveled to Cuba with saxophonist **Ron Stallings** (to whose memory *Off & On* is dedicated). After two weeks of intensive study with some of the best musicians on the island, including **Hilario Duran** and **Chucho Valdes**, Levine returned to the Bay Area and launched **Que Calor** with Stallings, an all-star Bay Area cooperative sextet that released a superb album on Spirit Nectar in 1998, *Keeper of the Flame*.

Itching to lead his own band, Levine determined to take the synthesis of jazz and Afro-Cuban rhythms to the next level with **The Latin Tinge**, a quartet built upon the powerhouse drum team of **Paul van Wageningen** and **Michael Spiro**. The group released its 2000 debut CD *Hey, It's Me* on Levine's label Left Coast Clave Records. Besides the dynamic interplay between the musicians, what set the group apart is a repertoire that includes tunes seldom interpreted by Latin jazz bands. The quartet's subsequent CDs, 2001's critically acclaimed *Serengeti* and 2003's *Isla* (which was nominated for a Grammy, a rare feat for a self-released album), added Cuban standards to the already heady mix of clarified modern jazz and American Songbook chestnuts.

"A lot of what we do are jazz standards," Levine says. "But we don't follow the usual route of 'Night in Tunisia,' 'Caravan,' and various Monk tunes that everybody has done. I lean toward newer tunes, by people like **Mulgrew Miller**, **Ronnie Mathews**, **Woody Shaw**. Their music doesn't get played enough, and so many of those tunes are right in clave."

Levine is also a distinguished educator who made a national reputation with his popular instruction manuals *Jazz Piano Book* and *Jazz Theory Book* (Sher Publications). A founding faculty member at the Jazzschool in Berkeley, he teaches courses on music theory, the art of comping, and intercultural musical practices. He hasn't abandoned his love of straight-ahead jazz either. His previous release was *Exact Change* (Jazzschool Records), a hard-swinging, consistently captivating trio session with bassist **Peter Barshay** and drummer **Mike Clark**. But with the release of *Off & On* Levine is putting his energy into the music of Moacir Santos, adding a Latin tinge to the music of a Brazilian master.

"It's Brazilian music played with an Afro-Cuban slant," Levine says. "A lot of the arrangements are pure rumba clave. I'm not sure how the local Brazilian scene is going to feel about it, but I think people in Brazil will be delighted that somebody else is delving into Moacir's music." • 6/09

Mark Levine and the Latin Tinge: *Off & On*

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