In the Fullness of Time

Pianist Edward Simon seizes the moment with two new releases.

By Ted Panken
“I want the music to be rooted and earthy, to make the listener want to move the body, but also to invite them intellectually to think about what’s going on.”
Before his 30th birthday, Edward Simon, the Venezuelan pianist-composer, had made two of the most influential recordings of the '90s. The first, simply titled Edward Simon — with tenor saxophonist Mark Turner, bassist Larry Grenadier, drummer Adam Cruz and percussionist Café — earned a “10 Best Of 1995” designation from The New York Times. Three years later, Simon explored similar territory on La Bikina with a slightly larger ensemble that included alto saxophonist David Binney, who released it on his Mythology imprint.

Although the albums were released on obscure and poorly distributed labels, musicians paid close attention. “La Bikina is one of my favorite recordings ever,” alto saxophonist, composer and 2008 MacArthur Fellow Miguel Zenón said. He spoke toward the end of March from San Francisco, where the SF Jazz Collective — which Simon joined in 2010 — was concluding its 2012-13 season. “It changed my life. It opened a new set of doors in terms of composition, arrangement and playing. It’s become a standard for me, and it touched a lot of people in my generation.”

When he made those recordings, Simon was playing with Terence Blanchard, whom he’d joined in 1994 after a five-year apprenticeship with Bobby Watson’s Horizon quintet. Both albums are rich in nuance and intricacy. On them, Simon revealed a fresh voice, melding Afro-Caribbean dance vernaculars, folk forms from his Venezuelan homeland, harmonically rich ballads and effervescent odd-metered rhythms. His instrumental voice refracted a hemispheric array of approaches and influences — crisp montunos out of the playbook of Papo Lucca and Chucho Valdés; the spirit-raising fourth intervals of McCoy Tyner; relentless, blues-idiom swing associated with the pianists in Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers; and the coloristic breadth associated with Miles Davis pianists Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea and Keith Jarrett.

Simon’s efforts converged with a broader ‘90s movement generated by talented, ambitious musicians from around the world who were infusing jazz with a vast array of scales, melodies and grooves from their respective cultures and traditions. Emerging Afro-Caribbean artists like Gonzalo Rubalcaba (Cuba), Danilo Perez (Panama) and David Sánchez (Puerto Rico) put forth experimental hybrids, addressing each dialect on its own terms and finding ways to coalesce them. Connecticut-raised pianist Brad Mehldau, who sidemanned with Sánchez, joined Catalan drummer Jorge Rossy (who had himself assimilated the Pan-American lexicon with Perez and Paquito D’Rivera, who were both taking cues from Dizzy Gillespie) in finding ways to create flowing harmonic motion through uneven metric structures.

Although Simon’s contributions to jazz polylingualism generated less publicity than some of his contemporaries, his peers knew what was what. In a 2001 DownBeat Blindfold Test, Perez described Simon as “a force in breaking up and bridging all the stereotypes about Latinos playing straightahead,” adding that his example was “a great source of inspiration.” More recently, Mark Turner praised Simon as “one of the great pianists of our generation” before offering observations on Simon’s process. “Ed analyzes the things that inspire him in great detail and figures out how to put together these musical ideas,” Turner said. “He’s able to write whether he’s inspired or not. That’s also evident in his playing. It doesn’t just flow out easily, and I like hearing the strain and struggle and tension. When it does come out, it’s riveting, very emotionally intense. I kind of think of Bach or Beethoven like that. They have that work ethic. You can hear it in every note.”

Zenón recalls that he and then-SFJC drummer Eric Harland, Simon’s bandmate with Blanchard for several years, had vigorously lobbied for Simon to join the SFJC after Renee Rosnes left the fold. “He turned out to be the perfect call,” Zenón says. “Not only is Ed a great improviser and reader, and accustomed to playing difficult music and a wide range of rhythms, he also has his own voice, his own way of thinking, a great vision about expressing his own language. He had everything we needed.”

Midway through March, the SFJC — which focused on Chick Corea’s music during its 2012-13 season — launched a four-night run at Manhattan’s Jazz Standard with Simon’s effervescent chart of Corea’s “Spain,” which highlighted his evolution. Barely visible behind the club’s grand piano, positioned stage left, Simon established the ambiance with a kaleidoscopic introductory statement, then guided the band through a series of tempo shifts, time signatures and grooves. He interacted constantly, playing lines that anticipated each soloist’s train of thought, suggesting ideas for them to grab or not. Spreading motifs from the melody throughout the arrangement, he created multi-layered backgrounds. After 15 minutes, it ended where it began, with a statement of the theme of Joaquin Rodrigo’s “Concierto de Aranjuez” — which Corea himself had borrowed when composing the tune.

Two days later, in his hotel room, Simon discussed his impact on the SFJC. “Some people in the ensemble write very complex music,” he said. “I’m able to bring out the technicality without it sounding overly technical. Part of my makeup, my personality, my talent, is that I want to find the music always. Yeah, you need technical ability to articulate what’s there. But always in favor of the musical idea or the story.”

He emphasized other elements of his musical personality in assessing his role with Ninety Miles, a group he joined a year ago that includes vibraphonist Stefon Harris and Sánchez (both SFJC members) and ex-SFJC trumpeter Nicholas Payton. “We’re playing tunes from the records, but in a jazz way with an understanding of Latin music,” he said, noting the band’s shift from an initially Cuban-centric focus. “I’m able to balance the languages. The grooves are in me, so we have the option to go there, but it’s more an underlying current than in-your-face. I want the music to be rooted and earthy, to make the listener want to move the body, but also to invite them intellectually to think about what’s going on.”

Despite his exemplary bona fides and peer esteem, Simon has had difficulty gaining traction as a bandleader since leaving Blanchard in 2002. For one thing, he wasn’t on a major label. For another, his recordings during the aughts — when he lived on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca before relocating to central Florida, where he still resides with his wife and son — documented the refinement of his ideas more than the conceptual daring he displayed during the previous decade. Another factor might be
The Venezuelan Tinge
Edward Simon dedicated the first movement of the Venezuelan Suite, “Barinas,” to his recently deceased brother-in-law, Fidel Alberto Gili, who grew up in that city, situated in the central Venezuelan plains, which is also the birthplace of the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. The region is the source of many of the tributaries of Venezuelan folk music, and the farmers and cowboys who lived there differed culturally from the cosmopolitan inhabitants of Simon’s hometown of Cardón, in the Paraguana peninsula, at Venezuela’s — and South America’s — northwest tip.

“My brother-in-law grew up listening to this music, and it was his main love,” Simon recounts. “Every time I would visit my sister in Curaçao, he would play a lot of it, and we would have long conversations. He was a purist, and he wasn’t agreeable to my having arranged the Venezuelan music that I recorded on some of my early records in a jazz setting. He might have gone back home to Barinas and played it to some of his relatives, and it wasn’t very well-received. When we spoke, I told him that I think there’s a place for purists, that it’s important for people to maintain the tradition intact so that the next generation has people they can form themselves through. But there also needs to be a space for those who want to come along and do something else with the tradition, combining it with other elements that they have studied or acquired through other experiences.”

As an adolescent and teenage keyboardist with his father’s salsa band in Cardón, Simon played music from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Columbia and other Afro-Caribbean cultures. “In Venezuela, everyone knows how to dance,” Simon says. “It’s very common for people to know how to play an instrument. Because slaves were brought to work on the plantations, we have a lot of African influence on the coast, so it’s a very heavy percussion-based tradition as well.”

In coalescing the four movements of Venezuelan Suite into a single piece, Simon utilized both classical and polyrhythmic elements contained within various Venezuelan forms. “I wrote the movements individually,” Simon recalls. “Later I figured out the order. But the basic idea was to represent the most well-known rhythms or song forms of Venezuelan music and bring them to my world.” —TP

Simon’s cool, deliberate, quietly confident persona, reflected in his preference for ensemble-oriented team play rather than house-grabbing idiosyncrasy.

Both Turner and Cruz attribute Simon’s below-the-radar status to his modesty and reserve. “Great musicianship isn’t always readily apparent to people who aren’t really looking for it,” Turner says. “It can take more than being a great musician to be a jazz star of some type. Sometimes it takes a saleable, thespian-type personality.” Cruz, who describes Simon as “subtle, nuanced and laid-back,” wonders if “he has that go-getter energy to be able to thrive as a leader, the ability to present his music and spoon-feed and say, ‘Hey, this is what I’m doing.’”

Simon doesn’t disagree. “I’ve never been a very aggressive person,” he says. “I tend to be on the controlled side, partly because I want the execution to be accurate, clean and precise. When you’re leading, you feel a certain responsibility because you’re steering the ship. Sometimes I’d like to have an opportunity to spend time with someone like Wayne Shorter, who not only will you give you permission, but ask you to unleash the wild, uncontrolled side.”

How expressively Simon might play in such a circumstance is apparent on the recently released Live in New York at Jazz Standard (Sunnyside), culled from five sets performed over two nights in December 2010 by the trio he leads with Shorter’s bassist and drummer, John Patitucci and Brian Blade, which had previously recorded the studio dates Unicity (2006) and Poesia (2008) after an initial 2003 encounter on Patitucci’s Songs, Stories & Spirituals. “I was writing music that was mixing jazz and Afro-Cuban and various musics of the Americas, and I wanted to also be able to turn around and play some swing,” Patitucci says. “Ed has a broad palette. He has a beautiful tone, a beautiful take on that land between jazz and classical music, and some of my music demanded someone whose sound conception had what a classical pianist might go for.”

“Our energies bring the best out of each other,” says Simon of playing with Patitucci and Blade. “John urges me to go ahead and jump off the cliff, and, because he’s a great composer in his own right, he understands the ins and outs of a composition, which allows you to do much more in terms of playing and interpretation. Brian is more introverted, as I am. He’s very expressive and sometimes explosive, but also sensitive to the more subdued, serene qualities of my music, with a knack for orchestrating a drum part that fits just right.”

Of course, Simon isn’t alone in discerning these qualities in his bandmates. Patitucci and Blade are constantly busy and opportunities to convene the threesome outside the studio have been scarce. “The trio has been a sort of stumbling block for me to generate more activity as a leader,” Simon notes. “When you record with all-star musicians like that, promoters expect you to play with them.”

“It’s been hard for Ed,” Patitucci acknowledges, before discussing the challenges of playing Simon’s Venezuelan Suite (scheduled for a fall release on Sunnyside), as he did on its premier performance at the Jazz Standard and a few later occasions. Conceived, Simon says, “to reconcile my Venezuelan roots with my work as an artist, and explore the possibilities of bringing them together,” the four-movement work dates to 2005, but budgetary constraints made it impossible to record until the Aaron Copland Music Fund recently presented him with a grant specifically for that purpose. For the occasion, Simon convened Turner, Cruz, John Ellis and a cohort of Venezuelan virtuosos, including percussionist Luisito Quintero, bassist Roberto Koch and flutist Marco Granados. Each piece, Simon says, is based on “traits of the styles and rhythms” of a separate Venezuelan folk form, “utilized in my own unique way.”

“Of all the Venezuelan artists I’ve heard who are trying either to integrate Venezuelan music and jazz as a language, or to come up with some idea of Venezuelan jazz,” Granados says, “Ed does it the most accurately and seamlessly.”
Not unlike a number of his jazz-obsessed brethren from the Southern Americas, Simon was oblivious to the value of his homeland’s vernacular music until his U.S. career was underway. Raised in Cardón, an oil refinery town where his father, an amateur guitarist-singer, worked for Shell, he played keyboards in a family dance band that also included his older brother, percussionist Marlon Simon. Initially an ear player, he caught the jazz bug after seeing a video of Chick Corea performing at the White House. At 16, Simon’s parents sent him to Philadelphia, where he completed high school and enrolled at the Philadelphia College of Performing Arts. There he studied classical music by day while moonlighting evenings on Latin dance jobs and on jazz gigs with bassist Charles Fambrough, a McCoy Tyner and Art Blakey alumnus who was eager to hone his Latin chops. On separate occasions, Fambrough brought in Kevin Eubanks, Greg Osby and Bobby Watson, all of whom dug Simon, and encouraged him to move to New York City, which he did in the summer of 1988, when he was 19. Soon thereafter, all three artists employed and recorded with the young pianist, as did Herbie Mann and D’Rivera.

“Paquito had some Venezuelan waltzes he liked to play, and he expected me to play them, of course,” Simon relates. “But prior to that I’d never played Venezuelan music in my life. Paquito expected you to do your homework, to be well-prepared. You felt a responsibility to execute your part on a very high level.”

The experience spurred Simon, who is of Spanish, Lebanese and Venezuelan descent, to further investigate Venezuela’s stylistic tributaries. “Some of it has a very classical influence, a baroque sound,” Simon says. “In many ways, it’s very improvisational, like bebop, but with a different language and harmonic motion. Some of the songs sound melancholic and some, which are from people who work with animals in our plains — the llanos — sound serene.”

Perhaps the quality that made Simon so appealing to various leaders, the unitary thread that he contributed to so many different contexts, is his dictum, inculcated during formative years, that, “to feel natural, music should have a strong underlying groove.” Examples are Simon’s creative use of electronic keyboards on two recordings with Eubanks, who was operating on both fusion and straightahead turf, and on three with Osby, then experimenting with applying uneven time signatures — which Simon calls “compound meters” — to funk and hip-hop structures. Another was his ability to “swing without an accent” with Bobby Watson’s Horizon, where Simon demonstrated a fluent, personal take on the various streams of hardcore jazz piano language that would have suited any Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers unit of the ’80s.

“With Bobby and Terence, I set aside my own vision, and wrote in a style that fit the overall repertoire, which was a good exercise,” Simon says. “I learned to incorporate the blues and to pace myself in a solo, shaping the arc to develop it to a climax. It took years to be able to consolidate those elements, to integrate my Latin background into swing in a way that wouldn’t sound out of place or clashing, though you could hear it.”

Another attraction is Simon’s embrace of the notion that jazz is spontaneous conversation. “I was initially drawn to the freedom, the idea of developing improvisation to such a sophisticated level,” he says. “Now, years later, I equally appreciate the high level of exchange between all the musicians onstage when it’s done well, or the interconnectedness, where the rhythm section might shift completely from one soloist to the next to create an entirely different musical environment. Having the freedom to change the makeup of the music as you’re playing it with others is what I enjoy most.”

Simon hopes that the two albums released this year, in conjunction with increased visibility from his high-profile sideman jobs, will attract promoters. “I haven’t exploited myself as a pianist as much as I could have because I’ve had fewer opportunities than some of my colleagues to tour as a leader,” he says. “I’ve been learning over time to get better at pushing myself into the commercial world in a way that still honors my artistic vision and the values that I hold.”

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