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From left to right: Hilary Noble, Boris Kozlov, John Di Martino, Charles Neville, Bobby Sanabria.

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Hilary Noble - Noble Savage
Review/Conversation by Thomas Peña

Admittedly, when I received a promotional copy of producer, percussionist, saxophonist Hilary Noble's debut recording - Noble Savage - I was not aware of his artistry. I became aware of Noble's recording by way of Bobby Sanabria (who I was interviewing at the time). Bobby mentioned that he had just completed a project with Noble and spoke very highly about it.

As it turns out, Sanabria and Noble go way back (they were classmates at Berklee). Sanabria's influence is all over this recording. He had a hand in the production, performs (with his rhythm section - A.K.A. Quarteto Aché) and wrote the liner notes. As it turns out, Noble Savage is everything Sanabria predicted and more.

The first thing that caught my attention was the creative cover-art and the curious title. Here is what Hilary Noble had to say about the title - Noble Savage:

HN: "Noble savage" is the moniker that was given to the idea of the agile, intuitive native first sketched in Rousseau and subsequently developed by other Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment thinkers. In our politically correct times, "noble savage" has come into rather bad odor and been seen as patronizing and colonialist, although great modern thinkers like rock guitarist Ted Nugent and myself are trying to rehabilitate it (if his lawyers ever come after me for stealing his album title, I'll remind them that Noble is my name and I came by it honestly!)

TP: You were born in Switzerland to an Australian mother and father. When did you become attracted to jazz and Afro-Cuban music? Moreover, how did you turn out to be such a (to quote Bobby Sanabria) SUPERB conguero and saxophonist?

HN: Bobby Sanabria is too kind. Correction: American mother and Australian father. There are more wrinkles: some of my formative years were also spent in England, although I was born in Switzerland, and moved back when I was 8 or so. I'm rootless! This may partly explain my attraction to black music of the Americas, as it is one of the most magnificent coping strategies for rootlessness ever devised. My earliest musical epiphany was Coltrane's "My Favorite Things". I can remember asking my parents what it was Coltrane was playing because I wanted to play the same thing. They said "clarinet"! I



Produced by Bobby Sanabria and Hilary Noble
Whaling City Sound

eventually learned that it was a soprano saxophone, but I didn't get around to playing the saxophone for some time. My school had no band program and my parents weren't going to go out and just buy me a horn. At the same time, I was developing an increasing attraction to percussion and finding that instruments were ready-to-hand (pots, pans, tin cans, desks and chairs at school etc.) Eventually my parents did break down and get me a Moroccan darbouka for Christmas (they look a lot like bongos, but are made of clay). It was Geneva, Switzerland; there weren't a lot of Latin percussion instruments or players around in the seventies. But I was listening to Santana, then Mongo, Barretto, whatever I could get my hands on, and I knew I wanted to do what they were doing.

Eventually I got congas and bongos but was largely self-taught from recordings. I started getting a lot of work in my teens in Geneva because there simply weren't very many people even attempting to play Afro-Latin percussion. I thought I was "superb" back then, because I had no real living point of reference. A summer clinic at Berklee when I was sixteen took care of that! That's when I realized that there were Puerto Rican kids from the barrio drumming for fun in the park on a Sunday afternoon who could play circles around me. I went back to Switzerland with my tail between my legs and a lot of drumming in my ears. I knew that I had to learn the language correctly and Patato (on record, of course) became one of my teachers. I made progress during the next year and began playing and touring with Clifford Thornton (expatriate black American musician and early employer of the Gonzalez brothers). After a year I went back to Berklee and that's where I met Sanabria. He was a fellow student who did gigs around Boston with a band called Ascención. He heard me play and when a percussion spot opened up in the band he hired me. I loved playing with the band and hanging with Bobby (even as a student he was a born educator), but the saxophone and Coltrane were coming back around to haunt me. There was no Latin percussion major at Berklee at the time so I had chosen to major in vibes and the instrument was not clicking with me. I was realizing that I wanted to play a melodic instrument and was reading a biography of Coltrane... so even though I was gigging with this great Latin jazz band and learning more about the depths of Afro-Latin percussion with Richie "Pablo" Landrum, I let it all go, changed majors and began all over again as a saxophonist. A little crazy!

Over the years there have been more great teachers: for example, Yusef Lateef on saxophone at UMass and Maximino Duquesne on percussion (in Cuba.)

TP: In the liner notes for Noble Savage, Bobby Sanabria refers to your "deep ties" with Cuba. At the end of (track 2) RUMB'AZUL you invoke Yemayá, the Orisha (diety) of the waters in Yoruba and French. This is purely speculation on my part, however, I get the impression that these "deep ties" represent a connection with (the West African religion) Santeria. Could you please elaborate on how Santeria has influenced the direction of your music?

HN: I have tried to think of a way of describing my relationship to Santeria, and the best I can come up with is "reverent outsider". For me the drumming makes me want to know about the religion. Not just the drumming of course, but also the singing, the colors, the imagery, and just the sheer sound of the Lucumi language, which is about as close to music as a spoken language is likely to get.

It was Sanabria who first made me think that "Rumb'azul" should have a salute to Yemayá, by reminding me that blue is Yemayá's color. There is also a nod to the tradition, if not specifically to Yemayá, in the entrance of the batá drums halfway through the tune.

"Ilé-Olorun", track 7, is meant as another reverential gesture. As I indicate in the liner notes, I was floored to learn from biographer Lewis Porter that at the very end of his life, Coltrane told Olatunji that he wanted to play Yoruba chants on the saxophone. Oh, I wish that I could hear that! In a sense, though, Coltrane was already there: to hear Coltrane play "Alabama" is like hearing a great akpon invoke Eleguá. I hear the same elegant, searing, soulful simplicity in both. I hope that my melody shows the influence of Yoruba song -the reference is certainly clear in the bembé beat that accompanies it.

A lot of what I know I get from books. While in Cuba I picked up Lydia Cabrera's El Monte

and Fernando Ortiz's *La Africanía de La Música Folklórica de Cuba*. I also like John Mason's *Orin Orisa*. One recent discovery is Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*, which is a black literary theory based on the figure of Echu-Eleguá 'the trickster,' and which posits things about interpretation and improvisation that have implications well beyond literature.

TP: Noble refers to his music as "Latin free jazz." I asked him how the term originated. Moreover, I forewarned Noble that the term Latin Free Jazz was going to raise the eyebrows of the "clave police" (staunch fundamentalists)!

HN: OK, I must admit, "Latin free jazz" is a catchy slogan that was waiting to happen. I cannot admit to being its originator, however. The first usage that I am aware of was on the second day of recording my CD "Noble Savage". (Historians and scholars among you please chime up if you know differently! The phrase may have been around thirty years for all I know.) We had just gotten through recording a couple of the more open-ended, "outside" tunes on the record when sound engineer Peter Kontrimas is reported to have said something like: "You know it's rare for Latin cats to play so freely... maybe they're playing Latin free jazz." And the rest is history. Or not.

TP: Reviewer Alex Henderson (allmusic.com) commented that your work shares some commonalities with Coltrane's early work (60's) and "modal post-bop breakthroughs of explorers like Yusef Lateef, Eric Dolphy, Wayne Shorter, etc." In addition, he mentions that you are highly aware of Latin jazz and salsa contributions by artists such as: Ray Barretto, Mongo Santamaria, Willie Bobo and others. Would you say this is a fairly accurate description of your music?

HN: Yes, though it is a little unnerving to have my name mentioned in the same breath as my heroes. I'm glad their influence shows. I am especially moved by the mention of Lateef, as I had the chance to study with him in the mid-nineties, and he became my spiritual hero as well as my musical one. My dependence on Barretto, Mongo and Bobo follows naturally from my earlier answer about my musical upbringing.

I might quibble with Henderson's characterization a little bit: I think he has a tendency to over-emphasize the "modal" aspect of the music. The harmonic structures are too shifty in a lot of my stuff for it to be described as "modal," which is why I think I like "post-bop" better. Anyway, an artist who thinks of himself as creative is always going to be nervous about labels and comparisons, and as an emerging artist I'm not that used to them, but I'd better get used to them. As William James once said of the crab, to his dying day he will protest: "But I'm a crab, not a crustacean!"

TP: You composed 8 of the 11 tunes on Noble Savage. What is your method of composing and/or what motivates you to compose a particular tune. What about those unusual titles such as (N)eurotrash and the Seven Effects of Highly Habitual People?

HN: I have no fixed way to compose. Sometimes things come to me in my sleep. Other times I imagine myself playing with people I know and then I realize that we're playing music that hasn't been played before. Sometimes ideas come to me when I'm practicing the horn. Ideas can come at any time... when they're coming. Because, as most composers probably know, sometimes there just isn't much coming down the pipeline, and you have to take what little you have and force yourself to make something out of it. I'm in one of those periods. I think I'll have to do what I said, work with what little I've got. Then, after a period of forcing myself to write, I may find that I've loosened something up in there and the inner hearing is better, and things start coming again.

Ah, those titles... too clever by half. Perhaps Esu-Elegbara "the trickster" has given me the gift of subverting other people's words. The title "(N)eurotrash" came to me in my sleep, after I had gone through a couple of alternate titles that didn't quite satisfy me. Eurotrash is what I am, technically speaking, except I don't use my cell phone enough. Put the "N" in front of it and you have what sounds like the noxious by-product of a misfired synapse, which is what the track sounds like. In other words, a nightmare.

"The Fire Next Time" is the title James Baldwin gave to a non-fiction work about race relations in America. "God told Noah he had destroyed the earth with water, but would use the fire next time..." goes the biblical riff, and like a prophet, James Baldwin, the African-American writer, was exhorting America to get its house in order in terms of racial and social justice... or else. That he spoke of judgment by fire before the ghettos of Newark, Watts, and Detroit went up in flames in the turmoil of the '60's may indeed qualify him as a prophet (not to speak of LA in '92). I was hoping that the melody of this tune had that kind of heraldic quality.

"Seven Effects of Highly Habitual People" was a title before it was a piece of music (which is another time-hallowed way to compose, by the way.) Stephen Covey's book "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" had been on the New York Times bestseller list for what seemed like an eternity and it was pissing me off. It sounded like another one of those self-help books completely devoid of irony and it was itching for a treatment. I knew that whatever tune wound up with this title, it would have to be a vehicle that allowed the musicians to go crazy, which is what we did.

I sense that the trickster is a bit unhappy with me, now that I have explained these titles and done away with every last shred of mystery and ambiguity in them...

TP: Perhaps the "trickster" will spare you if you promise to come up with a new bag of tricks on your next project! What recordings are in your CD player as we speak? Name some contemporary artists who, in your opinion, are movers and shakers.

HN: Chuchumbé, "Caramba Niño!", traditional music from Veracruz (Mexico); David S. Ware, "Surrendered"; Shelly Neil, "The Blues Runs Through It".

Oh, there are so many great people out there I want to steal from! I don't feel especially qualified to speak about artists who are "moving and shaking" in a general sense; I can speak about what moves and shakes me.

Everywhere I go, I feel the shadow of Jerry González. The comparison is natural, since we are both horn-playing congueros. (There is no causal connection: I started playing saxophone before I knew he was a trumpeter.) Beyond superficial parallels, I feel inspired by what he and his circle have been up to conceptually. Perhaps it is best summed up in the impossibly unwieldy name of one of his earlier groups: "El Grupo Folklórico y Experimental Nuevayorquino" (a more appropriate name for a concept than for a group!) The challenge for the Afro-Latin percussionist who wants to make-forward looking music is precisely that: how to be folklórico and experimental at the same time, and I think he's figured out one way to do it.

One of the other things about him that impresses me is his conga playing. He sounds like three (or four) conga players at once. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he doesn't achieve this effect by playing faster, or harder, or longer than three conga players put together. Instead, like a folkloric ensemble, he single-handedly manages to keep the high, middle and low voices moving in parallel, conversing with each other all the while. At least I think that's what he's doing. Whatever it is, it scares the hell out of me!

As I implied above, the list of contemporaries who move and shake me is too long for this limited space. So rather than ending by rattling off a motley list of names without rhyme or reason, I'd like to say some brief things about some people deserving of wider recognition. Bobby Sanabria, while obviously not unknown to your readers, seems finally to be getting a level of recognition commensurate with his talents, and I have acknowledged my indebtedness to him elsewhere. Some Boston-area people are patiently building an impressive body of work: Jim Robitaille, Dino Govoni and Andy McWain. Robitaille recently won the Thelonious Monk Composition Award: great guitarist, impressive composer! When I listen to saxophonist Govoni, my first impulse is to take my horn down to the pawnshop, then to go practice. McWain (associate producer of "Noble Savage") is a first-rate writer and pianist. A classically trained composer, he has written a

symphony, and also contributed a gorgeous melody to my CD. He has an adventurous, risk-taking spirit. You'll be hearing from him.

TP: Thank You Hilary for being so forthcoming. Good luck with your new recording!

The raw energy and technical proficiency of the rhythm section cannot be overstated. Everyone steps up to the plate handsomely and the result is a high level of musicianship. Call it jazz, Latin jazz, free jazz, Afro-Cuban jazz, whatever you prefer. Put simply, this is great music that deserves to be heard and enjoyed.

Thomas Peña
Co-Editor
Latin Jazz Network
12/14/02

Website: www.hilarynoble.com

Tracks: (click on titles to listen)

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. The Fire Next Time | 7. Ile-Olorun |
| 2. Rumb'azul | 8. (N)eurotrash |
| 3. Relapse | 9. Dream Dance |
| 4. Jelly Roll | 10. Sandunga Mofongo |
| 5. Guiro Moderno | 11. Terra Australis |
| 6. Seven Effects of Highly Habitual People | |



Credits:

All compositions arranged by Hilary Noble and Bobby Sanabria, except "Jelly Roll", arranged by Andy McWain and Bobby Sanabria.

Hilary Noble: Saxophones, Percussion
Boris Kozlov: Acoustic Bass
John Di Martino: Piano
Charles Neville: Saxophone
Bobby Sanabria: Drums, Percussion.

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