

[New Releases](#)

[Press Releases](#)

[Yahoo! Groups](#)

[Calle 54](#)

[Anapapaya](#)

[Jazz Buffalo](#)

[Suggest Link](#)

[Submit Article](#)

[Submit Review](#)

REVIEWS

[home](#) > [reviews](#) > isla

**Mark Levine & The Latin Tinge: Isla**

by Thomas Peña

Pianist, composer, arranger Mark Levine is undoubtedly an individual who sets very high standards for himself (and his musicians). Consider his previous recording, SERENGETI (2001), a critically acclaimed tour de force...

Posted on April 1, 2003



Left Coast Clave Records  
2003

After listening to SERENGETI, I wondered to myself, "How is Mark going to top this one?"

The question is purely rhetorical, however, the answer is a no brainer - Mark will continue to do what he does best - make great music!

What struck me about ISLA is the cohesiveness (tightness) of the band. Or as bassist Allan Johnston aptly states, "From the first chords, you can sense that the arrangement and the quartet itself are also Mark's instrument."

Obviously, Mark Levine and his band have developed an exceptional rapport that comes from years of performing in the trenches, sharing ideas and a deep, mutual respect for one another.

I posed a few questions to Mark via the Internet. First, I was curious to know if Mark had a particular concept in mind when he recorded ISLA.

"I seldom record with a 'concept' in mind, said Mark, "it's only when the CD is released, that a concept seems apparent."

Nevertheless, Mark mentioned a concept that he has been kicking around for some time. He says he would like to record, "a CD of nothing but danzones - or an album of nothing but contradanzas." He mentioned the beautifully written contradanzas of José Maria Vitier as a source of inspiration.

In lieu of the fact that ISLA contains no liner notes, I was curious about the material. Mark was kind enough to give me a rundown:

"Black" is one of Cedar Walton's best tunes, and the first of two of his that we do on Isla. Cedar's "Latin" tunes lie comfortably in clave, much like Mulgrew and Monk's tunes.

The soulful "Ain't Nothing but the Blues" is by Kenny Garrett, who along with Donald Brown and Mulgrew Miller, are my favorite songwriters in today's jazz. Kenny has someone saying "Hey Kenny, Ain't Nothing But The Blues" at the beginning of his version, and I asked old pal singer/ songwriter/percussionist Sheila Wilkerson (Francisco Aguabella, Stevie Wonder, among others) to give it to us in Spanish at the beginning of our version. I first heard Alberto Ruiz' "Corta Ese Bonche" on the classic Grupo Folklorico

y Experimental Nuevayorquino record from many years ago. Bobby Paunetto wrote the original arrangement for them, and I've kept his intro, but changed almost everything else, with bomba and rumba sections, and solos by everyone.

"A Free Man" is composed by Donald Brown, one of my favorite people in the world. The song was originally a waltz, one that Donald recorded on his CD "Cause and Effect." We do it as a bolero, and Donald, please forgive me! The first time I heard José Lugo's "Seis Pa' Chuito," I knew I had to play it. José, the consummate sideman, finally stepped out with his own CD earlier this year ("Piano Con Mata"), and it gets my vote for Latin jazz Grammy. José is one of the most generous people I know, and graciously allowed us to record it, even though his own version was not yet released.

"Hindsight" is Cedar Walton's other tune on our CD, and demonstrates the problems that can occur when you try to play a jazz tune in clave. The intro is clearly in 3/2, the head in 2/3. The usual solution to this problem is to add or subtract a bar, but that would break up the flow of the music, and I didn't want to significantly alter Cedar's line. The solution? Break the rule about not jumping clave. I didn't want to do it, Michael Spiro, our clave guru, didn't want to do it, but then we went ahead and did it. As Juan Formell of Los Van Van once said: "Sometimes it is inevitable, and you find that you must jump the clave for the sake of the flow of the piece. You shouldn't feel traumatized by this, and shouldn't sacrifice the quality of a piece of music simply because the clave direction must be interrupted." Thanks, Juan!

Dizzy's "Con Alma" is a Latin jazz classic. The intro and interlude are fragments from an old Vietnamese song, "Don't You Go Away, My Friend," which I heard on one of my favorite CDs, Nguyen Le's "Tales of Vietnam." The melody of "Tea For Two" is similar to a montuno, so I just play it as a montuno, over a descending bass line (first chromatic, then through the cycle of 5ths, for any musicians reading this). This is a technique that Monk, Cedar, and other jazz pianists use frequently, when re-harmonizing old standards. As stated above, I love danzones, and play the old standard "You Don't Know What Love Is" as a danzón/cha. Duke Pearson's "You Know I Care" has long been in my book, whether as a solo, duo, or trio vehicle, and now for the Tinge. The original version is on Joe Henderson's "Inner Urge," so most musicians will be familiar with the tune. Originally a ballad, we go back and forth between mambo and cha cha cha.

Which brings us to the title track, Ernán Lopez-Nussa's "Isla." First a word about Ernán, who gets my vote for most underrated Cuban piano player. The song is drop-dead gorgeous, with beautiful theme after beautiful theme. I can't think of a more ambitious composition, in either the jazz or Latin repertoire. The format gives Michael a chance to shine, playing everything from bongó to Batá to shakers of various kinds." Mark states that he has been influenced by everyone from "Art Tatum to Peruchín." By now it is no secret that he has performed with just about everyone of importance in the worlds of Latin and jazz: Willie Bobo, Mongo Santamaria, Tito Puente, Cal Tjader, Poncho Sanchez, Joe Henderson, Blue Mitchell, Bobby Hutcherson and Francisco Aguabella to name a few.

Mark comments on some of his favorite artists and recordings:

"John Benitez' "Descarga In New York" (Luis Perdomo is my favorite Latin jazz pianist), Tony Martinez' "Mafererefun," José Maria Vitier, José Lugo, Isaac Delgado, Mulgrew, Kenny Garrett, Nguyen Le, and Karim Ziad. I listen to timba a lot, and I think it has had an indirect influence on me. I love the timba piano players, especially Melón and Rolando Luna. I'm not big on playing timba montunos, but I love to listen to them. The rhythmic essence of timba is rumba clave, and almost everything we play is in rumba clave."

Kudos to the band, a super tight unit that swings with sophistication, sabor and an "all for one, one for all" attitude.

Which brings us back to the burning question, how are Mark Levine & The Latin Tinge

going to top ISLA? For the answer, tune in!

Highly recommended.

Thomas Peña  
Co-Editor  
Latin Jazz Network  
3/22/03

**Tracks:** (click on titles to listen)

- |                                       |                                       |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. <b>Black</b>                       | 7. <b>Con Alma</b>                    |
| 2. <b>Ain't Nothing But The Blues</b> | 8. <b>Té Para Dos (Tea For Two)</b>   |
| 3. <b>Corta Ese Bonche</b>            | 9. <b>You Don't Know What Love Is</b> |
| 4. <b>A Free Man</b>                  | 10. <b>You Know I Care</b>            |
| 5. <b>Seis Pa' Chuito</b>             | 11. <b>Isla</b>                       |
| 6. <b>Hindsight</b>                   |                                       |



**Credits:**

Mark Levine: piano - Michael Spiro: percussion - Peter Barshay: Bass - Paul Van Wageningen: drums - Harvey Wageningen: soprano saxophone and clarinet (Isla and Seis Pa' Chuito) - Sheila Smith: voice (Ain't Nothin' But the Blues).

All Arrangements by Mark Levine and The Latin Tinge.

[Back to top](#)

[About Us](#) | [Credits](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Web Design : DMN Interactive : © 2001-2006 : [Latin Jazz Network](#)