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Swing en 4 - Orígenes

Review/Interview by Danilo Navas

"Swing en 4" is a musical ensemble founded in 1998, in San José, Costa Rica, under the concept of a modern chamber music ensemble. It shows a well-balanced mix of classical, folkloric, electroacoustic and jazz music idioms, especially focused on the thriving force and richness of African heritage in the Americas.

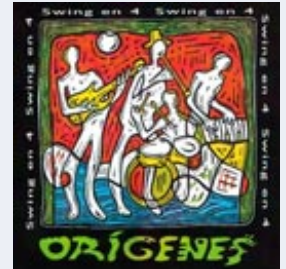
Posted on January 6, 2003

"Swing en 4" is another group we proudly introduce to our readers. A quartet of well-educated, talented and experienced musicians from Costa Rica, they present us their recently released first recording, entitled "Orígenes". With their music, they contribute to enrich the concept of a Pan-American, world-oriented definition of Latin Jazz. Besides, they are making a serious contribution to the musical scene of this small Central American country, combining a wealth of traditions and cultural heritages.

Through Roberto Hernández, Manager of Swing en 4, I sent them a few questions regarding the quartet and their musical work. Luis Monge, on behalf of the ensemble, replied promptly to my questions.

**You call yourself "Cuarteto de Música Latinoamericana Moderna y Jazz". Can you expand on this concept? What does it really mean?**

The history of collective music performance, as opposed to solo performance, has witnessed the birth and development of all kinds of groups, bands, small or big orchestras and instrument combinations. In our time some music groups or ensembles have succeeded and become public's favorites. One of these ensembles is the string quartet, which had a peak in the 18th and 19th centuries of western European civilization. Likewise trios and quartets in today's pop, Latin or jazz music are very strongly established formats even though the voice or instrument combinations have expanded accordingly to current technologies and aesthetic perceptions. Our musical proposal nurtures from the classical European music and it relates to the so called chamber music as well as the jazz quartet, using at the same time all the melodic and rhythmic particularities of modern Latin American and Afro American music in general. Consequently, it made sense to us to define our quartet as



Produced by  
Swing en 4  
2002

SONGS

1. EL DIA QUE ME QUIERAS
2. CALUVIRA
3. LA MASA
4. CON FRUTA Y BOMBA
5. CABALLITO NICOYANO
6. PAJARO AMARILLO
7. PASION
8. VALS (VALS DE SEBASTIAN)
9. SAMBALADA



Produced by Swing en 4. Recorded at G.B. Producciones. Costa Rica.

"Cuarteto de Música Latinoamericana Moderna y Jazz".

**The four members of Swing en 4 bring a great deal of different musical experiences to the group, and all of you share a common high level of education. How it all started... How you guys got together and decided to become Swing en 4?**

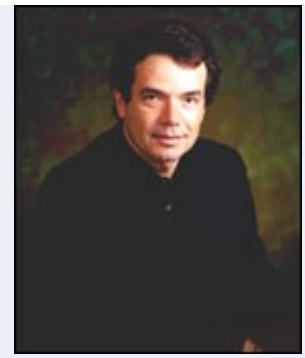
Luis Monge, pianist, composer and piano professor at the University (Costa Rica) started in 1993 a trio called "In Tempo", which included Cuban bassist Carlos del Pino, at the time residing in Costa Rica (now in Boston) and Costa Rican percussionist Ramsés Araya. This trio came along with the same musical philosophy mentioned before. After a couple of years of an interesting performing and recording schedule, Carlos del Pino left the country and it was impossible to uphold the project. The current musicians of Swing en 4 used to meet with some frequency between 1995 and 1998 at different engagements, projects and recordings. Some of those musical encounters were within the classical music scene due to their academical background and wide-ranging interests. Luis Monge and Carlos Sanders finally decided to get together and start a new project.

Swing en 4 was the name that perfectly suited our concept: 1. Swing is an important period of jazz history and a style at the same time. 2. Swing has become an international musical term nearly equivalent to the Spanish term "sabor" and implies motion. 3. The word swing is linked to Costa Rican culture for it means a very specific popular way of dancing. 4. The number four conveniently underlines our quartet format.

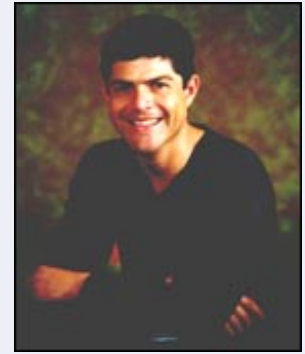
Two promising young Costa Rican musicians, a female singer first and later a guitarist were the musicians that completed our quartet format during 1999 and 2000 respectively. Both of them study and perform now in the States. Carlos Sanders and Luis Monge asked then one of Costa Rica's best musicians and composers to join the group on a more permanent basis. So Vinicio Meza came aboard with his clarinet, which was warmly welcome for both his masterful playing and the interesting color of this woodwind instrument. That is more or less how the quartet came about.

**The Latinamerican music spectrum offers a wide range of styles, rhythms, variations and so on. Your music, being eclectic and experimental, fuses in a delightful way so many of those elements, adding also the jazz idiom and the academic touch. Can you comment on this idea?**

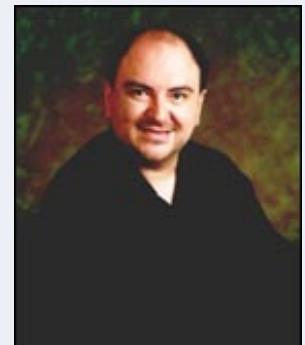
Thoughtful and honest eclecticism is our musical standpoint. Latin flavored jazz phrasing and structures are not exclusively but naturally part of our approach. We feel that there



Luis Monge - piano and keyboards



Vinicio Meza - clarinet



Randolph Jiménez - bass and doublebass



Carlos Sanders - drums and percussion

is still a way to go in order to reach our goals; we aim at refining our improvisation skills, maturing our composition framework while experimenting with modern chamber music. Swing en 4 is already contributing to the projection of Costa Rican musical culture abroad, for we are not only developing and blending different sounds into serious instrumental music but also recreating traditional Costa Rican music.

**Tell us about the richness and the cultural background of your country, Costa Rica. And how popular music, folklore has influenced your style.**

There is a lot to say about Costa Rican cultural background. We would gladly share some information, but it will take a few hours to summarize the most important aspects. Let us say for now that there is a growing audience for more elaborated music, classical, jazz, electronic or experimental. For decades the country has consistently invested in education, maintains stable political conditions, facts that allowed so far a space for the arts. Nevertheless, Costa Rica is a very small country and therefore a very limited market for musical productions. Besides that, it is our perception that it has intentionally been kept away from the larger Latin American and North American music circuits for partly historic but mainly commercial reasons set up by the big producers.

**What are your plans for the future, now that you have a recording of great quality and a very defined musical proposition to offer to the world...**

Our plans: Europe Tour 2003, a new CD and collaborations with other internationally known performers.

**Would you like to add something else?**

We are glad to know that there are friends online enjoying and appreciating our music. Thank you.

On behalf of Swing en 4: Luis Monge  
Pianist, Composer, Professor at Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica.

For more information about "Swing en 4" and/or to purchase the CD contact:  
Roberto Hernández - [swingen4@hotmail.com](mailto:swingen4@hotmail.com)  
Website: [www.swingen4.com](http://www.swingen4.com)

**ABOUT THE SONGS**

1- El día que me quieras - Carlos Gardel & Alfredo LePera, arr: Luis Monge.

This is an instrumental version of a worldwide known Argentinian song showcasing the formally experimental and eclectic ensemble's vision in a keenly woven tapestry with rock, Arabic, Brazilian, Argentinian and Caribbean fibers.

2- Caluvira - Vinicio Meza.

Using the first syllables of the four group members' names as a song title, this composition highlights the creative moods of the players in a blending of be-bop and slightly modified blues form in 3/4 meter.

3- La masa - Silvio Rodríguez, arr: Luis Monge.

Borrowing from both Rodríguez's song and also the profound message of its lyrics, this is a virtuoso-like instrumental arrangement tied up by strong structures of different Afro-American music styles and modern chamber music. Preserving the melancholic mood of the main theme, it includes a handclap section with a certain Andalusian flavor.

4- Con fruta y bomba - Luis Monge.

"Fruta bomba" are the words used in some countries for the tropical fruit "papaya". In a kind of word game over those meanings and the Puerto Rican "bomba" rhythm, this composition portrays a tropical song form with mambo section and a sharper latin tinge.

5- Caballito nicoyano - Mario Chacón, arr: Swing en 4.

Costa Rica's so far protected nature with its symphonic greens and shades, including the "cowboy" countryside of Guanacaste is portrayed in this arrangement. From an indigenous wind musical instrument (ocarina) through valleys and plains quoting from various Costa Rican folk songs this is a

horseback ride in the rhythm of "tambito".

6- Pájaro amarillo - Norman Luboff, arr: Swing en 4.

Here, the flavor of the Afro-Costa Rican calypso serves as an underlay to a sweet Caribbean melody where the group quotes from famous classical works, in its probably utmost example of fine eclecticism.

7- Pasión - Pasión Acevedo, arr: Luis Monge.

This arrangement was inspired in the innocent beauty of a folk song deeply rooted in the Costa Rican peaceful countryside, depicting with a classical spirit its quiet mornings as well as its joyful marimba melodies. A vocal polyrhythmic pad leads into a jazzy final conversation between voices, piano and clarinet.

8- Vals ( Vals de Sebastián ) - Vinicio Meza, arr: Swing en 4.

Pretty much in the spirit of a "joropo" ( a Venezuelan dance), this piece owes its title to the 3/4 meter of the universal waltz and the insertion of the two-voice invention #11 by J.S. Bach adapted to the 3/4 meter which curiously responds to the virtuous melody of the main theme.

9- Sambalada - Vinicio Meza.

The piano starts out this song with a "tumbao", followed by a short drums solo leading into a happy instrumental samba, which on rich harmonic grounds calls for a carnival fiesta with the irresistible parade of African flavored rhythms.

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