

Afro Bop Alliance Big Band *Revelation*

Even to someone not intimately versed in the rigors of the music business, the feat of keeping a talent-packed jazz ensemble together for 16 years shouldn't fail to impress. On *Revelation*, the sixth album by the DC-based Afro Bop Alliance (ABA), we hear drummer/leader **Joe McCarthy** and colleagues reaching still higher levels of technical excellence and compositional adventure.

Formed as a septet, the ABA has swelled to a full big band on two of five previous releases — first in 2008 with *Caribbean Jazz Project: Afro Bop Alliance Featuring Dave Samuels*, again in 2011 with *Una Más*. That makes *Revelation* the third big-band outing, and its sheer sonic force is readily apparent. **Victor Provost**, the steel pan virtuoso who came aboard the ABA for its marvelous 2014 release *Angel Eyes*, returns to play on two compositions of his own, “Magharibi” and “Soufriere.” The blend of steel pan — three additional steel pan players, in fact — with such powerful, resonant big band voicings is one of *Revelation's* delights. A revelation indeed.

Tenor saxophonist and ABA principal **Luis Hernandez** contributes “Dialed In,” originally a small-group composition, heard here in an expanded version bursting with harmonic color, in a slow, loping 12/8 feel. And the opening “CuBop,” co-composed by McCarthy and ABA alto/soprano saxophonist **Vince Norman**, is a nod to the band's original name and a celebration of its unique take on the legacy of Afro-Cuban jazz. Guitarist **Jim Roberts** emerges as a key melodic voice early on, his clean electric tone bringing to mind elements of John Abercrombie and Joe Beck.

The balance of the program is devoted to the work of **Roland Vazquez**, whose involved and boundlessly imaginative scores establish him as one of the major jazz composers of our time. Vazquez's accomplishments (as drummer and composer) stretch back to the mid-1970s, including a pivotal stint with his mentor Clare Fischer. A seasoned educator as well, Vazquez has amassed a varied output including works for big bands, orchestras, chamber groups, percussion ensembles and more. His 2010 release *The Navigator* earned wide acclaim and brought much-deserved attention to this great and underrated voice in large-ensemble jazz.

The three tracks conducted by Vazquez in the studio are “No Rest for the Bones of the Dead,” “Family of Four” and “Créencias” (“beliefs”), each just over 10 minutes long. The first opens with a yearning melody from Hernandez in the foreground, with subtle accelerandos and tempo slippages moving the piece along its path toward a fine Hernandez tenor solo. The second features **Alex Norris** on flugelhorn, in a beautiful flight early in the song, with **Matt Stuver** returning for an impassioned tenor sax feature on the rideout vamp.

On the third, “Créencias,” the declarative block chords of the opening yield to an inescapably tight, grooving theme and a dense and glorious thicket of angular line writing and labyrinthine sectional counterpoint. Solos follow by trumpeter and ABA principal **Tim Stanley**, trombonist **Victor Baranco** and then McCarthy, in a stirring, complex call-and-response section with the band. A brief but effective romp from pianist and ABA principal **Harry Appelman** brings the piece home, as the dynamics shift downward, the mood calms, and the piece — the album — draws to an enigmatic, hovering close.

From start to finish on *Revelation* is the clavé in all its elasticity and permutation, animated by a rhythm section of consummate clarity and finesse. McCarthy's lithe interplay with percussionist **Roberto Quintero** (on the Vazquez tracks, **Samuel Torres**) is beautifully captured by the mics. The solid beat and versatility of the bassists — ABA principal **Tom Baldwin**, on the Vazquez tracks **Oscar Stagnaro** — is crucial to the cohesion

and punch of every piece. And there's no mistaking Appelman's deft handling of the arrangements and his fleet solo turns, notably on "Dialed In."

Baritone saxophonist/bass clarinetist **Darryl Brenzel**, a noted composer and arranger in his own right, is something of a secret weapon on *Revelation*: leaping in to double a muted brass section or bass line or underline a passage for flute, nailing every precise entrance and exit. His instrument jumps out in the mix, one of the many intricate details in the ABA sound palette. Another is vibraphonist **Ed Fast**, who appears on the Vazquez tracks and brings a metallic glint to the orchestrations (similar in some way to Provost on the non-Vazquez tracks).

In terms of depth, sophistication and sheer chops, the ABA might be situated in the lofty realm of concert jazz, but still the band remains rooted in the Afro-Cuban dance rhythm, the primacy of the groove as well as the melody. Despite its penchant for extended forms and bracingly modernist harmony, this is music that carries a very direct appeal to the listener. In a word, it's got soul — in great abundance.

David R. Adler
New York, May 2016