

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/west-side-story-reimagined-review-a-kaleidoscope-of-latin-jazz-1531777752>

MUSIC REVIEW

‘West Side Story Reimagined’ Review: A Kaleidoscope of Latin Jazz

Bobby Sanabria’s Multiverse Big Band brilliantly reworks Leonard Bernstein’s classic score into a two-CD, 20-track blend of Afro-Latin rhythms.

By Will Friedwald

July 16, 2018 5:49 p.m. ET

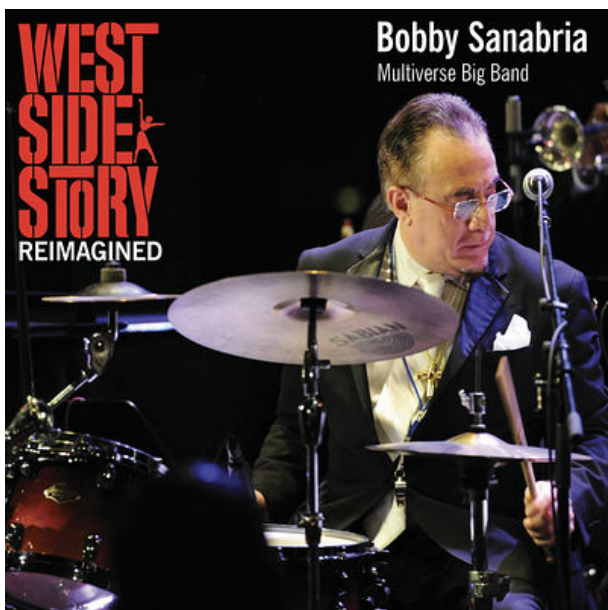


PHOTO: JAZZHEADS

Call me a heretic, but as much as I love Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim’s “West Side Story,” I have never been a fan of the 1961 movie version. For one thing, Richard Beymer as Tony is perhaps the most ineffectual leading man in any major Hollywood musical, and for another, those ballet dancers pretending to be juvenile delinquents never seemed the least bit threatening. I’d much rather listen to the original 1957 Broadway cast album (which features at least three elements that the film sorely lacked: Carol Lawrence, Larry Kert and Chita Rivera) and to the equally

exciting 1961 big-band jazz interpretation by Stan Kenton.

There were other jazz versions too, such as those of Oscar Peterson, Manny Albam, Dave Grusin, and Buddy Rich’s famous “West Side Story Medley.” But the first new album in many decades to challenge the Kenton version is “West Side Story Reimagined,” by the Bobby Sanabria Multiverse Big Band. Mr. Sanabria, a New York-based drummer, bandleader and educator, recorded the album live last November (at Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola at Jazz at Lincoln Center), during the 60th anniversary year of the show’s Broadway opening, and is releasing it this month, in time for the Bernstein centennial. “West Side Story Reimagined” is notable for its ambition and scope: It attempts nothing less than to render nearly the entire score (except, strangely enough, for “I Feel Pretty”) in a dazzling kaleidoscope of Latin rhythms and styles, over 20 tracks and two CDs, employing 20 musicians and eight arrangers.

As you would expect, Mr. Sanabria and company tear into Bernstein's Latin-tinged numbers with gusto and salsa-jazz orchestral fireworks. The "Gym Scene," in particular, combines three distinct themes like ingredients in a Cuban sandwich: "Blues," which suggests a provocative striptease by a dark-eyed *señorita*; "Mambo," which reflects the atmosphere that Bernstein absorbed when studying Afro-Latin rhythms at the New York Palladium; and "Cha Cha Cha," which presents the "Maria" melody in dance tempo, played by flutist Gabrielle Garo.

"America" was a considerable achievement for Bernstein in 1957; no one had ever composed a show tune in a contemporary 6/8 Latin dance rhythm before. (As Mr. Sanabria points out in the notes, Bernstein set the melody in a Mexican huapango rhythm "with elements of the Venezuelan joropo.") Jeff Lederer's arrangement, which also incorporates the song's verse, captures instrumentally the combination of optimism and cynicism that is the stuff of Mr. Sondheim's lyric. Conversely, Andrew Neesley's treatment of "Cool," starting with David DeJesus's erotic-sounding soprano sax and Tim Sessions's driving trombone, is hot and sweaty.

Yet it's possibly even more delightful to hear the Afro-Cuban style applied to the non-Latin numbers; for instance, the ballads "Tonight" and "One Hand, One Heart" have been transformed into romantic boleros. The reanimated "Maria" now begins with a call-and-response chant, a tradition rooted in West African and Cuban religious ceremonies but familiar to jazz listeners from Dizzy Gillespie's "Cubana Be, Cubana Bop." Arranger Jeremy Fletcher's reconception of "Gee, Officer Krupke" is especially original, the famous comedy number now a vibrant salsa that reveals its vaudeville roots when it detours into a lopsided waltz passage.

"Somewhere" has, in recent decades, become de rigueur at both funerals and weddings. It was always a big dramatic anthem, and Kenton made it sound rather like Wagner—more "Tristan und Isolde" than Tony and Maria. Here, "Somewhere" remains reverential, but surprises us with an electric-violin solo by Ben Sutin. The "Somewhere" melody is heard again in the concluding track, "Epilogue/Finale," but in the midst of a rather chaotic free-jazz jumble that, Mr. Sanabria tells us, is meant to reflect the story's violent ending.

"West Side Story Reimagined" proves that a jazz rearrangement of a classic show is still a valid concept. (Coincidentally, the Brazilian pianist Eliane Elias also recently released a Latin jazz treatment of the Spanish-flavored "Man of La Mancha.") There's every reason to hope that Steven Spielberg's remake of "West Side Story" will improve upon the 1961 film, but I doubt if we'll ever hear a more thrilling interpretation of that immortal score than that of the Bobby Sanabria Multiverse Big Band.

— ADVERTISEMENT —



Mr. Friedwald writes about music and popular culture for the Journal.

Copyright ©2017 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.