

Believe the Hype About Donald Vega

Memo to jazz bloggers: if somebody sends you a great album and you sit on it, you might just get scooped by the New York Times. Well, not that often – but it could happen, just as it did when the folks at **Resonance** sent over a copy of pianist **Donald Vega's** new album, *Spiritual Nature*. Not that it needs the Times' imprimatur (although he deserves the press): the album stands on its own merits as one of 2012's most memorable. The Nicaraguan-born, California-educated Vega, a protege of John Clayton and Ron Carter, has listened deeply and absorbed much of the best postbop from the 60s forward along with plenty of salsa jazz and classical, influences he blends with equal parts power and subtlety, gravitas and grace. He has a veteran's touch and a bag of licks to match, so it's hard to think of another player of his generation that he resembles. One comparison from an earlier era, who continues to blend melodicism and improvisational latin-flavored bite as a member of the Cookers, is **George Cables**.

Vega is also a strong composer, as evidenced right off the bat with the album's hard-hitting opening cut, *Scorpion*, from its no-nonsense horn hook (**Bob Sheppard** on alto sax, **Gilbert Castellanos** on trumpet and **Bob McChesney** on trombone) to **Christian McBride's** tersely walking pulse, **Lewis Nash's** counterintuitive drum attack and Vega's lyrical, richly blues-tinged solos. Just the presence of that rhythm section signals how purist and auspicious this session became. The second cut, Ron Carter's *First Trip*, interchanges balletesque syncopation and oldschool swing; they follow that with a balmy take on Monty Alexander's *River*, featuring gossamer violin from **Christian Howes**, McBride anchoring Vega's delicate blend of neoromanticism and the blues firmly in the earth. A second Alexander composition, *Accompong*, gets a considerably brighter, more bouncy interpretation, crescendoing with **Anthony Wilson's** bubbly guitar work trading with Vega's more spiky phrasing.

With its alternately light and dark modal dichotomy, swaying clave pulse and relentlessly crescendoing intensity from Vega, the title track – another Vega composition – is a standout here. Vega amps up the ambiguity and suspense on a Neils Henning-Orsted Pedersen jazz waltz, *Future Child*, before taking it in a more genial yet restrained direction, as he does a little later with his ballad *Contemplation*, moving from spare and wary and then relaxing as an artfully arranged series of distinct horn voices emerges. Makato Ozone's *You Never Tell Me Anything* gets a straight-up jump blues treatment: Vega's exuberant flurries leaping onto the tail end of a bustling Nash drum break are one of the album's most characteristic examples of the rich, purist interplay here.

Vega's arrangement of Scriabin's *Etude, Op. 8., No. 2* is both lyrical and great fun, incorporating both Ethiopian melodic tropes and rhythms, a jazz waltz, and an absolutely gorgeous piano solo that Vega sends spiraling downward to darker terrain. A Jobim diptych, *Falando de Amor; Tema de Amor* gets a similarly third-stream, expansive take, while Vega's *Child's Play* has the feel of a jazzed-up Caribbean folk song, with its carefree violin and Nash's playful conga-flavored groove. The album ends with Benny Golson's Clifford Brown homage *I Remember Clifford*, building slowly and methodically to become more of a fond wee-hours reminiscence than an elegy. As far as both the compositions and the playing here are concerned, this album is head and shoulders above 99% of what's come out this year. It's deep stuff. It takes a long time to get to know and all of that is a pleasure.