

EARSHOT JAZZ

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Fred Hoadley of Sonando

Photo by Daniel Sheehan

Sonando



Sonando: (from left to right) Ben Verdier, bass; Junior Medina, timbales; Pedro Vargas, bongos; Tom Bergersen, congas; Fred Hoadley, piano; Chris Stover, trombone; Jim Coile, tenor. Photo by Daniel Sheehan.

BY MOLLY MANOR

They have been described as “vastly underappreciated,” but in January of 2008, Latin jazz group Sonando received the recognition it deserved when it was awarded the Earshot Golden Ear Award for Best Acoustic Jazz Group of 2007. This recognition came surprisingly late to the group that has been performing at festivals, clubs, and concerts throughout the Northwest for nearly two decades.

Pianist Fred Hoadley founded Sonando in 1990 when he wanted to experiment with jazz after spending more than a decade on the salsa and dance band scenes. His first experience with Latin jazz came in Boston in 1975, and his first impression was: “Oh, there’s only two chords – this is kind of boring.” His

attitude soon changed when he joined a band in Portland and discovered what he and other members of Sonando call the “rhythmic complexity” of Latin jazz. “I found that there was all the danceable energy of rock ‘n’ roll that I had been interested in when I was a kid, and the cerebral complexity of jazz that I got into when I was in college – it was the perfect mix for me,” he says.

While generally classified as a Latin jazz band, Sonando is well known for its experimentation with Afro-Cuban jazz. Cuba holds a unique position in the history of Latin music, contributing such styles as *son*, *changuí*, and *rumba*, and there is a very natural blending, Hoadley believes, of Cuban music and classic jazz. Indeed, experimentation with these genres dates back to the 1940s, when musicians like Dizzy

Gillespie and Stan Kenton began combining the forms and rhythms of Afro-Cuban music with the instruments and improvisational styles of jazz.

Other members of the group share Hoadley’s passion for this blend of styles. Ben Verdier, the bass player, explains: “I come from a jazz background, but also from a rock background; [I’ve] played in a lot of salsa bands... and the music in this group combines all of the best elements: the strength of the rhythms that come from Cuba and Puerto Rico and other places, the improvisational aspects of jazz, and the harmonic stuff that comes from even classical music. This is the pinnacle of what you can do with music right now.” Chris Stover, who plays trombone with Sonando, has a similar background in jazz, classical music, and rock ‘n’ roll,

and started playing with Latin and salsa bands because “that’s what just about every horn player does at some point. What I did differently from a lot of horn players is that I fell in love with the music and began to study it very seriously. I like the fact that it takes a lot of different elements and fuses them together in interesting ways – African rhythms, Latin American rhythms, European harmony.”

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—Ben Verdier

As in any broad category of music, there are numerous styles of Afro-Cuban music, and Sonando’s repertoire includes a variety of both traditional and modern. Similarly, the group uses traditional instruments of the Afro-Cuban style, in addition to more familiar instruments such as flute, saxophone, trombone, piano, and bass. Because these “folkloric” instruments are not common, they provide a niche for those musicians who are skilled at them.

Tom Bergersen, for instance, plays conga drum, a specialized instrument unto itself, but he also plays traditional instruments like the *chekere*, a hollow gourd covered by a net of beads, which is shaken, and the *güiro*, another hollow gourd with corrugated sides, which is played by scraping it with a stick. The varied and specific techniques for playing these instruments pose a challenge to the musicians, primarily the percussionists, who tend to be adept at many instruments. “You hit the drum with your hands,” says Bergersen, “and you use your hands to play the *chekere*, but it’s completely different, and that’s what

drives some percussionists nuts! But it is fun, and it keeps things interesting.” Because there *is* such a variety of percussion instruments and techniques, it is common to find more than one percussionist in an ensemble. Sonando actually boasts three: Bergersen, Junior Medina, who is also *timbalero* for Latin Expression, and Pedro Vargas, leader and *timbalero* of the timba band Grupo Ashé, who plays congas, bongos, and

timbales. The variety also makes the player highly sought-after, as few players, certainly in the Northwest, are that specialized.

Hoadley has played piano in all of his ensembles, but with Sonando, he also plays the *tres*, a Cuban-style guitar with three courses of double strings. The *tres* lent its name to the group’s latest album, which was released in May 2006 on Origin Records. The title of the album, *Tres*, is a play on words—so named not

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only because of the instrument pictured on the cover, but also because it was the group’s third album. *Tres* was enthusiastically received, praised for its use of varied and sometimes unconventional instruments, while blending elements of Afro-Cuban music and classic jazz.

Because of the degree of specialization of Latin jazz musicians, there is a great

deal of overlap between the groups of this genre—a sort of mix-and-match of personnel. Medina explains: “There are probably 10 or 12 Latin bands in Seattle, and probably 25 or 30 musicians total, so you don’t have a lot of musicians to choose from.” Every member of Sonando is in multiple ensembles, some playing with salsa bands, and others playing rhythm and blues or more classic, straight-ahead jazz.

Although all of the members have played or currently play with bands featuring vocalists, most feel that there is something special about an instrumental ensemble. Jim Coile, flute and saxophone player with Sonando, comments that some audiences feel that if there is no vocalist in the band “they don’t think it is the real deal. If we had a vocalist in this band, I think our audience would be a little more substantial, but I don’t think the music would be served by incorporating that aspect into the music.” Bergersen adds: “Some audience members might relate to a vocalist more than they would a tenor (saxophone) player. ... If the tenor player is taking a solo, they don’t have any idea about that, but they can relate to the vocalist. People are comfortable with vocalists because they can speak the language.”

Hoadley recognizes that they do not follow the standard formula for jazz

compositions, which is to say: play the head melody, everybody takes a solo, play the head again, and finish. “We have some tunes where the melody is hinted at, and hinted at a little bit more, and then by the time we finally play the melody, we’re done. The whole process is about hinting at that melody,” he explains. He acknowledges that while

there is certainly an improvisational jam session aspect to their music, in that they don't always know what's going to happen next, he believes that their

bring in the actual tune, but then the percussionists will have their way with it. It doesn't always end up the way we *thought* it was going to!"

"In Sonando we approach our music in a way that makes *us* happy, and when we find an audience that appreciates the same thing, that's great."

—Fred Hoadley

style is different the other jam sessions in town. Again deviating from the "standard formula," they have recently added a call-and-response folkloric piece to their repertoire. In this style, each soloist has an opportunity to improvise, unaccompanied, with only an *implied* chordal structure, and at the end of the improvisation, the soloist "calls" in the song, and the rest of the group responds as the chorus, before the next soloist takes over. Hoadley accepts Adam Greenberg's description of their music as "understated Latin jazz" as a compliment. "I think so much of Latin music is over the top. It's all about higher, faster, louder ... and we don't always fit into that mold. Sometimes we have something that's a little subtle," says Hoadley.

He also emphasizes that Sonando is absolutely *not* a commercial venture: "I think one of our strengths is that we play what's close to our hearts, and the joy and the beauty of this band for me is the fact that we play the music that we hear and that we feel. We all play commercial music in other groups, and I love playing commercial music – I love getting paid for it. But in Sonando, we approach our music in a way that makes *us* happy, and when we find an audience that appreciates the same thing. That's great."

Some of their pieces are, in fact, original compositions, contributed mostly by Hoadley and Coile. Hoadley notes: "Tom and the rest of the percussionists always have something to add. Usually it's the harmonic and melodic guys that

The make-up of Sonando has, inevitably, gone through changes over the years. "I am a firm believer that musical style follows the personnel,"

says Hoadley. "Each individual brings a bit of themselves to the band, and the band is a little bit greater than the sum of its parts. Every combination of musicians is different, and we have our own personality. In the old days people had 'their own sound,' more so than in modern times, when everybody kind of sounds the same. I'd like to think we don't kind of sound the same. We sound like us."

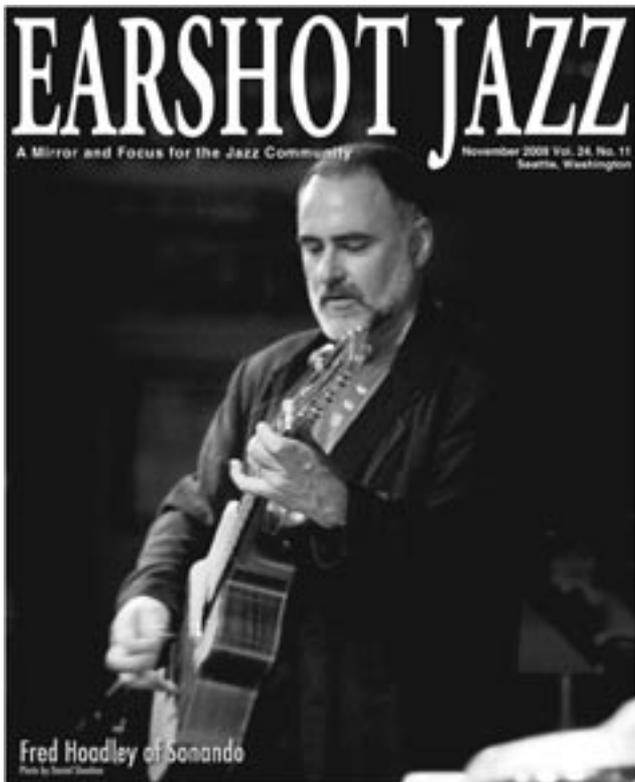
For more information about Sonando, including their performance calendar, visit their website at www.sonando.org



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