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Jazzheads

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By [Elliott Simon](#)

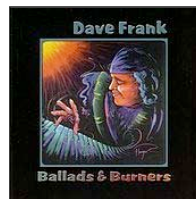
Discuss



It is difficult to define the Jazzheads philosophy in categorical terms. What stands out from its diverse catalogue of Latin, world, vocal, free and new age jazz is the world-class 'chops' found on each session. A pianist and composer, Randy Klein began the label in 1991 with his own *Jazzheads*—a presentation of original vocal compositions in the context of a piano/sax quartet. In addition, two instrumental cuts featured touching duets between Klein and bassist Harvie S. They were expanded upon and the resultant *Love Notes from the Bass* (1995), an emotionally powerful yet delicate engagement of two instrumental voices, became the label's second offering.

Since these beginnings and with over 45 releases to date, Jazzheads has provided a forum for both cutting-edge projects from established artists and defining debuts from new musicians. All who are affiliated with the label benefit from Klein's wide-ranging musical background, years of experience and personal attention to each release. As he relates, "I like being around these musicians. I am a musician and so I demand the same things of myself as all these players do and I try to keep that level right up there." Musical and sonic excellence is very apparent across the Jazzheads catalogue, but as a whole what makes it stand out among small independent labels is its ability to maintain these qualities across seemingly unrelated genres. Klein points to his varied musical roots as partly responsible for this: "I come from such an eclectic background. ...I live in a lot of different worlds but...it is all music...that is maybe why the records that I choose are all over the place."

When it comes to 'chops,' pianist Dave Frank definitely has them and his two solo releases, *Power of the Piano* (1997) and *Ballads and Burners* (2006), are reflective of the awesome attention to both sonic detail and musicianship at the heart of the Jazzheads ethos. The former is Frank's recording debut and it highlights a player who is able to convey myriad emotions through the piano's incomparable harmonic and melodic possibilities. The latter is a tour de force that presents both sides of the piano's passion—fragile intimacy and intense no-holds-barred fervor—through original compositions and improvisations. Klein partly attributes such prowess to pianist Lennie Tristano's singular teaching approach. "...We both studied with Lennie Tristano and Lennie was the person who taught me to play the piano without looking at it. ...I started practicing with a sleep mask and I did that for a couple of years until I got very used to hearing what I was doing. He was responsible for developing my ear... Dave Frank and I have that in common, then he studied with Charlie Banacos up in Mass,



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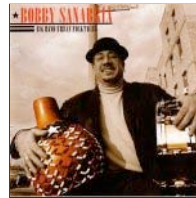
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who is amazing in terms of teaching bebop functionality on the piano."

"I like being around these musicians. I am a musician and so I demand the same things of myself as all these players do and I try to keep that level right up there. That is really where it stems from."

— Randy Klein

One doesn't have to look very far through the Jazzheads inventory to be impressed by the quality of its Latin jazz releases. This year, that excellence was recognized by the greater music establishment with the label's first Grammy nomination for Bobby Sanabria's *Big Band Urban Folktales* (2007) as best Latin jazz album. Well suited to the Jazzheads aesthetic, Sanabria's offering is grand in scope and sonically thrilling. He expands the Latin big band tradition—across a varied music program that includes Frank Zappa's "Grand Wazoo" and a beautiful treatment of the classic ballad "Since I Fell for You" alongside hot Latin compositions—while maintaining respect for the music's NYC salsa roots.



Trombonist Chris Washburne, who appears on Sanabria's release, is also creating new and exciting music under the Jazzheads banner. His Syotos band's latest release *Land of Nod* is refreshingly political without sacrificing musicality. Washburne feels that Jazzheads has allowed him to do what no other label would: "I have now recorded six CDs on Jazzheads and my relationship has lasted close to ten years... a number of other labels have approached me, but I remain loyal because the support and artistic latitude that Randy Klein has generously given me over the years is something that I prize. The strength of Jazzheads comes from the fact that Randy Klein is a musician and a true 'jazzhead.' He is dedicated to making music on the highest level first, selling records second. His long track record in the business gives us all hope. Keeping the music first."



As a trombonist, Mark Weinstein was a seminal part of the '60s Latin jazz revolution that combined the complexities of jazz with traditional AfroCuban rhythms. His *CubanRoots* (Musicor, 1967) with Chick Corea on piano remains one of the most significant Latin jazz fusions of all time. As a flutist he has continued to redefine the genre and he views Jazzheads as an atmosphere that encourages freedom and experimentation: "Randy is incredibly supportive and a source of sound musical and business advice. Having a record company owner who is a friend to his artists is rare in music, but part of a tradition in jazz that has



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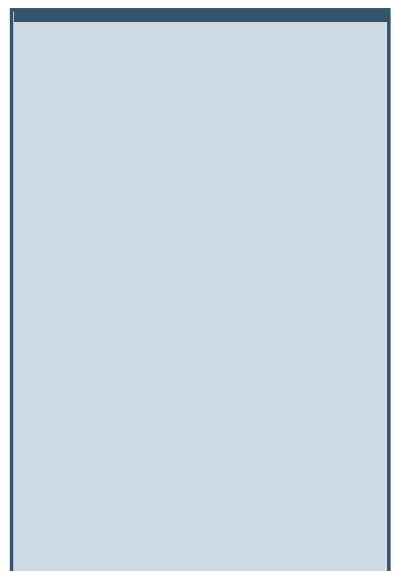
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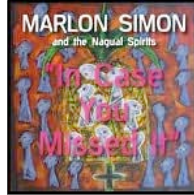
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been lost... Randy is always willing to support artistic risk-taking." Weinstein's three Jazzheads releases present very different takes on the Latin jazz idiom. As Weinstein tells it, "I am most influenced by sax and trumpet players. Although I sometimes address the flute tradition in my solos, my influences are Coltrane and Miles. After *Algo Mas* (2005), which is an avant garde folkloric album and *O Nosso Amor* (2006), which is a Brazilian jazz album—I wanted to give Randy something that would fit in the mainstream of Latin jazz [the forthcoming release *Con Alma*]."

Offering broader exposure for cutting edge projects is also a part of the Jazzheads mission and three of their strongest offerings are from percussionist Marlon Simon and the Nagual Spirits, saxophonist Rent Romus and Lords of the Outland and percussionist Ian Dogole and Hemisphere. Simon, through a brilliant blending of African rhythms and beautifully-arranged strings, has created a new and elegant take on the Latin jazz tradition entitled *In Case You Missed It* (chosen as one of 2007's [Best Latin Jazz Releases](#)). Romus, playing alto and soprano saxes, at times concurrently, lets it all hang out live on *You'll Never Be The Same!* (1995) and partners with avant garde godfather saxophonist John Tchical for *Adapt...or Die!* (2004). Dogole, utilizing diverse percussive instruments, multireedists Paul McCandless and Sheldon Brown with bassist Bill Douglass, places Mid-Eastern, Eastern and Eastern-European musical traditions within a jazz framework to fashion a contemporary global musical statement. Reflective of its NYC base and Klein's overall commitment to superb sound and musicianship Jazzheads continues to release some of the finest contemporary improvisatory music across a wide array of jazz genres.



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A Staff writer for AAJ-NY, Elliott enjoys music with energy, chops and tension; whether it be from the mainstream or the outermost fringe.
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