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## Omar Sosa at Yoshi's

Posted: 2005-03-13

By Forrest Dylan Bryant



"Another world is possible."

When those four words bubbled to the surface of Omar Sosa's modern jazz stew at Yoshi's on March 2, they summed up the career of a musician who has spent years opening new vistas in Latin jazz. Weaving a magic circle of rhythm and invention around the packed club in a 90-minute first set, the Cuban-born pianist demonstrated not only the possibility of another world beyond the tidy pigeonholes of musical genre, but its immediate reality.

Sosa's playing can be ethereal or driving, but it is always capable of direct communication with the listener. While some artists seem to erect invisible walls around themselves, Sosa invites the audience in for tea. He grins and giggles as he plays. When the music reaches just the right intensity or emotion, he'll twist twist up his whole body, nearly sliding off his bench. Or he'll climb on top of it, punctuating his statements by jabbing his hands in the air like a streetcorner preacher. And like Thelonious Monk before him, Sosa seems to be constantly surprised by his own pianistic discoveries.

Along for the ride were acclaimed percussionist Mino Cinelu and sax player Eric Crystal, who proved to be perfect foils for Sosa. Cinelu began the proceedings solo, working behind an impressive array of traditional, modern, and electronic instruments. Cinelu constructed a deep polyrhythmic pattern with tabla, trap drum kit, and live sampling, and Crystal provided an insistently introspective melody on tenor sax, followed by placid tones from Sosa. As Crystal's playing slowly rose from slow and soulful into a blistering barrage, Cinelu kept pace, eventually playing with brash rock 'n' roll power as Sosa peeled off manic, scrambling runs of his own.

***"The crowd's reaction was visceral, going beyond hipster head-nodding into foot-stomping, grunts, and the occasional 'wow.'"***

In the next piece, Sosa pulled back into a gentle Impressionist style, a quiet late-night scene set upon Cinelu's lush carpet of bells, cymbals, and hand drums, until Crystal again pulled the band into a more aggressive posture, this time on alto sax.

Sosa revealed another side of his personality in two funky pieces built loosely on North African themes. Twiddling the knobs of several effects boxes tucked discreetly into the top of Yoshi's Steinway grand, Sosa went minimal and electric. Hip-hop-style scratching and recorded vocal snippets calling for "justice, freedom, and peace" were chopped up and inverted as Sosa's piano slashed through Crystal's sinuous sax.

As an artist from the Latin jazz tradition, steeped in the spirituality of his African forefathers, rhythm is at the heart of all Sosa does. And in keeping with that spiritual lineage, he treats rhythm not as an inviolate stone idol, but as a living, organic thing, a friend and guide. At times the groove runs too deep even for the piano. During one duet break with bassist Geoff Brennan, Sosa left his instrument entirely, choosing to snap his fingers instead. He soon had the entire audience snapping along as if choreographed.

Brennan had the stage to himself late in the set, turning in a fast, unpredictable solo — alternately abstract and earthy — before stopping abruptly and deadpanning to the crowd, "that's what it's like working with these guys!" Returning to the stage, Sosa playfully waved his hands at Brennan as if putting him under a magic spell.

If Brennan was under a spell, then so was the club's cosmopolitan audience. The crowd's reaction to the band was visceral, going beyond hipster head-nodding into foot-stomping, grunts, and the occasional "wow." When Sosa led the house in a Yoruba-language sing-along at the end of the set, it was just one in a series of spiritual affirmations offered up throughout the evening.

In recent years, Sosa has become a mainstay of the European festival scene. His two-night stop in Oakland came in the midst of a whirlwind US tour, sandwiched between longer trips through France and Germany. The Bay Area visit was something of a homecoming, since Sosa spent five highly productive years here before relocating to Barcelona in 1999. His returns to the area are always welcome, and always too brief.

Visit [Omar Sosa](#) on the web.

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Jos L. Knaepen

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Forrest Bryant is a jazz journalist and radio dj based in the San Francisco Bay Area. [More about Forrest...](#)

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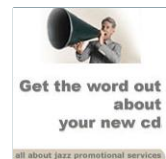
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