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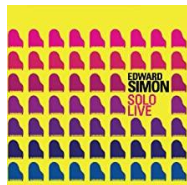
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Edward Simon – Solo Live

On his 15th album as a leader pianist Edward Simon delivers a gorgeous statement with Solo Live, his first unaccompanied recording

Edward Simon has been at the center of the jazz scene for the past quarter century, helping shape the music's evolution through a series of seminal ensembles and recordings. Now acclaimed as a pianist, composer, arranger, educator and bandleader, he provided a jolt of inspiration as a young sideman in bands led by Bobby Watson, Greg Osby and Terence Blanchard. As a leader, he's recorded a series of groundbreaking albums featuring renowned peers similarly devoted to merging kindred currents in jazz and Latin American music. But he's never made an album like Solo Live, which is scheduled for release on Ridgeway Records on October 15, 2021.

Recorded at Oakland's Piedmont Piano Company on his 50th birthday in 2019, Solo Live is Simon's first unaccompanied recording (and only his second album documenting a concert). Unedited, it's a ravishing portrait of one of jazz's most eloquent improvisers investigating a setting that's become one of his primary outlets during the pandemic. Long leery of performing alone, a situation that leaves a pianist "really exposed," he described the Piedmont Piano date as "a leap of faith. But I plan to be doing more solo piano playing and recording."

The Venezuelan-born Simon is best known for all-star collaborations such as the collective trio Steel House with bassist Scott Colley and drummer Brian Blade. Holding down the piano chair since 2010, he's the longest-serving current member of the SFJAZZ Collective. In 2020, Ridgeway Records released 25 Years, a two-disc anthology drawn from 13 earlier albums focusing mostly on his original compositions and arrangements designed for players such as tenor saxophonists Mark Turner and David Sanchez, altoists Miguel Zenón and David Binney, bassists Ben Street, John Patitucci and Joe Martin, and vocalist Luciana Souza and Gretchen Parlato.

Without an illustrious supporting cast, Simon was left to his own devices on **July 27th, 2019**, a celebratory night surrounded by family and friends in **Piedmont Piano Company's** piano-filled **showroom**. While **Solo Live** reconfigures the order of the pieces he performed, the album reflects the concert's carefully calibrated ebb and flow, with the first three tracks unfolding in the original sequence. **Opening with a breathtaking version of Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life," Simon gives a master class in dynamics, flow, and melodic invention.**

"It's an extraordinary tune, just one of those timeless pieces that's so profound," Simon said. "You play what's on the paper, but to make it your own you have to internalize it and figure out how to give it a spin that's uniquely yourself."

Simon has clearly assimilated the solo work of piano greats like Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, and Chick Corea, who he credits with providing inspiration for his take on "Lush Life." It's the opening track on Corea's Expressions, a 1994 solo piano album that also turned Simon's ear to **"Monk's Mood," one of Thelonious's most sublime ballads. Simon displays exemplary patience as he strolls inquisitively through the melody, letting the tempo shift to accentuate Monk's reverie.**

"Chick doesn't play it in strict time and that's the approach I took as well," Simon said. "It's one of the beauties of playing solo, it offers great flexibility with respect to how you play time, you can be very articulate about the time or completely free and everything in between because you don't have to worry about being in sync with others."

Simon digs into the knotty rhythms of **"Monk's Dream"** while revealing the tune's steely harmonic architecture. **Swinging with authority, he captures Monk's singular combination of sly, earthy humor and intellectual curiosity.** "His music is introspective," Simon said. "It's one of the things that attracts me to it. It's asking for you to look into it, but not necessarily reaching out to you. There's a mystery to it that I really love. The chords he places around the melody and the harmonic rhythm – where the chords fall, are really unexpected."

Simon's **original piece "Country"** is the album's longest track. Originally recorded by Steel House on the collective trio's eponymous 2015 debut album, Simon evokes an entire ensemble with his joyous rendition. The spritely, spinning melody **evokes the leaping sense of possibility** inspired by moving across a sun-steeped landscape. It's a piece that seems to call out for lyrics, and it's likely Simon will record the tune again with Luciana Souza singing her original verse.

The album **concludes** much as it started, **with a classic American ballad interpreted with patience and deep empathy.** Simon caresses Gershwin's astoundingly sad and beautiful **"I Loves You, Porgy"** with hushed intensity and tenderness. "It's one of those timeless pieces, like 'Lush Life,' if you allow yourself to open up to it, it can take you to those unearthly places," he said. "It takes a certain level of maturity before you can capture that feeling. You have to allow yourself to feel that vulnerability."

Solo Live is both a snap shot of a particular night and a harbinger of future developments for Simon. A relative newcomer to solo recitals, he's spent the past couple of years focusing on the demanding format. "It takes some time to develop your voice as a soloist," he said. "I feel like I'm still finding my way. There are several other pianists who do that really well and have made a strong mark. I'm listening to what the masters have done, taking what inspires me and trying make it my own, which is pretty much the process of jazz. Learn what the masters have done, and take it from there." As his anthology 25 Years vividly documented, Simon is a master himself who has played an essential role in expanding jazz's frontiers in recent decades. At this point he's spent far more of his life in the United States than his homeland, but Venezuela still provides the life-sustaining marrow of his music. Born July 27, 1969 in the oil port of Punta Cardón, he grew up in a household filled with music. His father hailed from Curaçao in the Dutch West Indies, and he instilled a love of music in his sons, percussionist Marlon Simon, trumpeter Michael Simon and Edward. The brothers performed music for dancing at local fiestas and events, tapping into an array of rhythms from Venezuela and beyond. "My older brother played timbales at the time, and we had our band, playing private parties and anniversaries," he says. In a way that strong connection with the dance floor and dancers left a great imprint on me. To this day, a groove is an important element in my music."

Simon was serious enough about the piano that at the age of 15 he left Venezuela and moved by himself to Pennsylvania to enroll at the Philadelphia Performing Arts School, a now-defunct private academy. He continued his classical studies, but he also discovered jazz, and eventually connected with Philly masters like bassist Charles Fambrough and guitarist Kevin Eubanks, who encouraged him to move to New York. Landing in Manhattan in 1988 at the age of 19 he quickly established himself as a vital new voice. A five-year stint with the great altoist Bobby Watson followed a nine-year run with trumpeter Terence Blanchard firmly established Simon as one of his generation's leading accompanists.

While many of his early albums were released on European labels with little North American distribution, his three projects for Sunnyside have earned widespread acclaim. On 2013's Live in New York at Jazz Standard his mastery of the trio format was front and center as he stretched out with Brian Blade and John Patitucci. He followed up with his most ambitious project, 2014's Venezuelan Suite, a groundbreaking synthesis of post-bop and traditional Venezuelan forms and rhythms for his 10-piece Ensemble Venezuela. And on 2016's Latin American Songbook he interpreted songs drawn from all across Latin America with Adam Cruz and Joe Martin. In many ways, Simon is just getting started. Like with 25 Years, an anthology that refocused attention on the sweeping breadth of his work, Solo Live reflects Simon's recently forged role as associate artistic director of the Bay Area nonprofit Ridgeway Arts, an arts organization, label and presenter founded and run by Jeff Denson, the bassist, composer and dean of instruction at the California Jazz Conservatory. Simon has some beautiful surprises in store.

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