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EXPLORING SORROW, EMBRACING TRIUMPH

Nestled between its higher-profile neighbors Oakland and Berkeley, the town of Emeryville, California, is where animation enthusiasts make pilgrimages to visit Pixar Studios. Since 2014, it has also been the home of pianist and composer **EDWARD SIMON**.

Over an al fresco lunch at a bar-and-grill a few blocks from his family's home, Simon met up with DownBeat to discuss *Sorrows & Triumphs* (Sunnyside). His ambitious new album features Afinidad, the quartet he co-leads with alto saxophonist David Binney that includes bassist Scott Colley, drummer Brian Blade, guitarist Adam Rogers, vocalist Gretchen Parlato, the Imani Winds ensemble, and percussionists Rogerio Boccato and Luis Quintero. With echoes of classical minimalism, full-bodied Third Stream grandeur and subtle electronics, *Sorrows & Triumphs* merges old and new traditions in the same way that Simon's thoughtful, measured speaking voice blends with the calming patter of a nearby fountain.





Edward Simon (far left) performing with the SFJAZZ Collective

Born in Punta Cardón, Venezuela, Simon relocated to Pennsylvania to pursue his musical education and graduated from the Philadelphia Performing Arts School at age 15. He studied classical piano at the University of the Arts in the City of Brotherly Love before transferring to the Manhattan School of Music.

Subsequent gigs with the M-Base Collective and trumpeter Terence Blanchard preceded moves to central Florida and then Northern California. In addition to being a member of the SFJAZZ Collective—which he joined in 2010—and leading his own groups, Simon also teaches in the San Francisco Conservatory of Music’s new Roots, Jazz and African Music program.

Your new album contains two suites. Are those suites connected?

You could say these are two collections of pieces. Each “suite” was written at different times.

The first is *Sorrows & Triumphs*. That was actually written in 2008. It was a commission I received from Chamber Music America through their New Jazz Works program, funded through the generosity of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. The grant was to write a series of pieces for Afinidad and guests, which were Adam Rogers, Gretchen Parlato and Rogerio Boccato—all of whom appear on the album.

The New Jazz Works program supports the creation of the work and at least two performances. The premiere took place at the Walton Arts Center in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and that was featured on NPR’s *JazzSet* when Dee Dee Bridgewater was hosting. We also did another performance at the Jazz Standard in New York City.

The second set of pieces, *House Of Numbers*, was basically written between 2014 and 2016. That was another commission that I received from Chamber Music America—to write a

series of pieces that are each framed around different numbers. And the instrumentation was Afinidad plus wind quintet—Imani Winds.

Should fans listen to these pieces in a particular sequence, like one would do for a classical suite?

In the case of these two particular suites, I thought of them as separate. They’re not necessarily connected, other than for the fact that they were written around the same period of time. So, they could be performed out of order.

Now, it does make sense to perform them in a specific order when you’re putting together a live set of music. But that has more to do with how they flow together.

In the case of *Venezuelan Suite*—my first Chamber Music America commission from 2005—those pieces are all part of the same subject. The pieces are connected where they flow nicely from one to the other.

How were you first introduced to Chamber Music America?

I heard about their New Jazz Works program. And interestingly enough, the first grant I ever applied for was Chamber Music America’s New Jazz Works to write my *Venezuelan Suite*. Being awarded the grant initiated me down the path of researching and exploring other grant opportunities.

As a member of SFJAZZ, you have the advantage of rehearsing and touring behind the new composition that each of you writes every season. A commission seems like a version of that process.

When I first came on the jazz scene, before commissions and grants, the only reason you would write is you either had a gig that you wanted to try out some new music on or you had a recording. And typically in jazz, we only have one rehearsal for a recording—two if you’re lucky. You can’t get too involved with your writing, because you’re not going to have a lot of

time to assimilate the music or to rehearse it.

With the CMA grants, because there’s funding for two concerts where people are going to get a reasonable fee to play, you can ask a little more of the musicians. You’re going to have two rehearsals, at least, and a couple of sound checks to fine-tune things. You can get a little more involved with those compositions and plan around the time you think you have.

How is the funding distributed?

You get half of your commissioning fee when you first get approved to just kind of get you started.

So, it’s like an author getting an advance from a book publisher.

Exactly. Then when the piece is completed, you get your other half. And once you have your first two performances set up, about 30 days before, you get the funding for the performances.

There’s still a lot of work you have to do because you have to find the presenters and the promoters and organize the concerts. But when you have support, it makes it a lot easier, particularly for projects of larger scales with a greater number of people.

Saxophonist David Binney is on the album. You and he have worked together for years. How did you meet him?

I moved to New York in the fall of ‘88, and I probably met him that same year, if not the following. He’s always lived on 72nd Street, and I used to go for my lessons with Harold Danko when I was studying at Manhattan School of Music. Dave pretty much lived across the street from Harold, and he’d see me when I used to go for my lessons.

Dave came to a gig somewhere in New York when I was playing with Kevin Eubanks and introduced himself. Shortly after, he invited me to record on his first album, [1989’s] *Point Game*.

You, bassist Scott Colley and drummer Brian Blade have worked together as Steel House.

The trio, Steel House, is a more recent development—within the last couple of years. We released the album *Steel House* last year, on ArtistShare.

Often, the use of strings and/or brass seems to be the default instrumentation for commissions. How did you decide on a wind ensemble?

I was interested in the sound, and I was interested in working with Imani Winds in particular. I had been hearing of them through various other artists and on recordings they appear on. Wayne Shorter is someone I respect and love very much, to name just one. [*Imani Winds* appears on *Wayne Shorter Quartet’s* 2013 *Blue Note* album, *Without A Net*.]

But I knew that they are very much open to collaborations with artists outside of classical music. They’re very adventurous, and I was

thrilled when they decided to work with me.

Vocalist Gretchen Parlato is a great fit for both commissions.

She has a very subtle sound that is really beautiful. She knows how to make the most of a whisper.

Gretchen has a very good feel for Brazilian music; Afinidad always has had a strong leaning towards Latin-American influences. It's really a reflection of the music that both Dave and I love—different styles or genres of music. There's improvised music, of course. But Latin-American music, including Brazilian, has always informed my overall work. And classical music.

Two tracks on the new album have lyrics that Parlato composed. Did you give her any ideas about what you wanted thematically?

I asked Gretchen to write the lyrics for two of the tunes, "Chant" and "Rebirth." Those pieces were inspired by studies of Buddhism. I've practiced Buddhism for years now and continue to practice meditation—the Theravada tradition, which is the oldest of the three main schools of Buddhism.

And as it turns out, Gretchen also loves to read a lot of great Buddhist writers and teachers of our time like Pema Chödrön and Thích Nhất Hạnh. Her lyrics are very much inspired by their writing. So, when I asked her to write the lyrics and told her what the pieces were about, she knew immediately how to convey the message. And she did it beautifully.

Do you have any plans to do a follow-up to your 2016 album, *Latin American Songbook*—perhaps another piano trio album of Caribbean and South American music?

Not any formal plans. But certainly, in my mind, I want to do a follow-up record to that, perhaps with special guests—maybe with percussion. I hadn't really recorded a working trio of mine until *Latin American Songbook*. My trio albums before then had been three all-star dates with John Patitucci and Brian Blade.

I really wanted to start documenting my playing in a trio that I can tour with. So, I'm hoping that I can follow up on that and do more with that trio with Joe [Martin] and Adam [Cruz].

But I haven't really decided what I want to make my next recording project. I'm entertaining the idea of doing that and also making a solo piano record.

Have current events in Venezuela affected your art?

Absolutely. Venezuela is under dire conditions right now, and I have family living there. My mom still lives there, and I have a lot of relatives—aunts and cousins—who are living there.

It affects me deeply to see what has happened and what's continuing to happen, because I have watched the process from afar. I haven't lived there in over 30 years now. I have to send medicines to my mother, because they aren't available there anymore.

I've never considered myself a social activist in any kind of way. In fact, I've always shied away from any politics, overall. But as a Venezuelan, born and raised, I feel like I need to do whatever I can to bring attention to what's been happening there and what continues to happen to the Venezuelan people. They're having trouble finding very basic human needs, like toilet paper. They're rationing the electricity, and they ration the water. And the international community doesn't really seem to be doing much about it.

So, for the first time, I am looking for ways to use my music, my art, to bring attention to what's going on in my homeland. I'm going to propose a project to a different grant-maker. At least for the time being, the working title is "S.O.S. Venezuela." And I want to collaborate with other Venezuelan artists of different disciplines—visual and spoken-word artists and dancers. That's another project that's in the pipeline.

But I'm definitely going to be a little more vocal, using art to bring awareness to what's going on there.