

IVO

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This program of children's songs from Brazil will make you rethink what you know about Brazilian music. Snoozy bossas, mellow crooners, bustling fusion — forget 'em. Ivo Perelman is that rare Brazilian whose music is as bracing as his homeland's coffee, bracing enough to remind you of Albert Ayler. The kinship may be most obvious in his dramatic leaps into, and careening around in, the falsetto register. It's also evident in his creative use of pitches — sometimes whole phrases — that fall between the cracks of a scale. Ivo (that's EE-vo) doesn't sound like Ayler; for one thing, he doesn't have that telltale wide-vibrato. Still, his broad tenor flights, like Albert's, begin with simple melodies, such as the lines whose titles translate as "Slaves of Jo" and "The Carnation and the Rose."

These are tunes catchy enough to whistle — they insinuate themselves into your head. As Ayler knew, and Steve Lacy knows, singsong lines can be the most effective kind to weave complex variations on: the initial shape is so strong, you keep hearing it no matter how aggressively the improviser twists the pattern. Perelman knows how to twist his lines. On the waltz "Terezinha De Jesus," he doesn't even get through the theme statement before he bolts off, sliding into free, flurrying paraphrase. He can barely contain his enthusiasm or energy; on the opening "Nesta Rua (On This Street)," he scoops up his rhythm section in front of him. Reversing the usual practice, he pushes them.

Ivo's variations tend to be melodic/thematic rather than harmonic. In that context, we could trot out Sonny Rollins' name too; Ivo's tenor style, like Sonny's, is brawny and playful. But Perelman is unmistakably his own man, and his varied tacks resist pigeonholing. In jazz, we divide horn players into horizontal (melodic) and vertical (harmonic) improvisers. But the way Perelman cuts across the chords on "Circle Dance" might be considered diagonal. That intellectual feat aside, though, Ivo's ethnic roots — the rhythm of the dance and the majestic yawp of the bowed berimbau — are stamped all over his music. Listening to him blow tenor, contorting his line this way and that, you often get a sense he's letting the melody lead him — he's a lyrical player no matter how impassioned or out he gets.

In a sense, Ivo Perelman has always let the music lead him. Born in Sao Paulo (on January 12, 1961), he was a classical guitar prodigy by age nine, drilled in Villa Lobos and Bach. But at 15, he concluded that guitar wasn't his true voice. He tried cello, piano, trombone and clarinet before realizing that the big sound of the tenor had been calling him all along. In his early 20s, after studying architecture in Brazil, Perelman traveled widely — stopping off in Israel, Montreal and Rome — before coming to the United States. He studied saxophone in New York with the esteemed teacher Joe Allard, despite the fact that Ivo was low on cash — Allard took him in and taught him for free. Perelman also went to Boston to study at Berklee, where they tried to teach him Correct Licks; they didn't get far, and he didn't stay long.

In 1986, he moved to Los Angeles, where he studied flute with Marty Krystall, who produced this session. There Perelman woodshedded, jammed and played odd casuals. Odd in both senses. He didn't quite fit in L.A. either — screeching out a 20-minute solo on "Girl from Ipanema" at a hotel gig on New Year's Eve is not the key to commercial success. At an informal session with local jazzmen, one prominent West Coast drummer leaned over to a friend and commented, "This kid is okay. But what's wrong with him?"

What was "wrong" was that he had all this music inside clamoring to get out. At one point he thought he'd make this debut album a fusion record — he was living on brown rice, and figured a little money would hit the spot. But he couldn't go through with it. The presence here of bestsellers Flora Purim, Airto and Eliane Elias (all Brazilian of course), Peter Erskine, Chick Corea's bassist John Patitucci and a synthesizer player may lead simpler cynics to suspect commercial intent. But Ivo's uncompromising solos should keep this album from becoming too prominent on pop-jazz radio, its melodic bent notwithstanding. (There have been a few — very few — good infusions of reggae rhythm into jazz pieces, but no such piece has been as raucously loose as "Circle Dance")

Fans of those high-profile guests won't feel cheated. Patitucci plays his duff off on "Terezinha"; Erskine pile-drives "Carnation and the Rose"; Airto's percussive layering is both in the pocket and out of the drummer's way. On the tenor-piano duets, Elias's sweet chording coaxes Perelman into his most blatantly romantic playing of the album, though even on "The Day You'll Want Me" he can't keep the rambunctiousness and hard edge out of his sound. (Like Ayler, he can radiate tenderness even when his music's most abandoned.) Elias and Perelman assume feminine and masculine roles, apart from/coincidental with the musicians' genders.

On "Nesta Rua," Flora's falsetto swoops, answering and echoing Ivo's tenor, underscore the vocal conception behind his playing, and the instrumental dexterity of her voice. Her speechlike phrasing elsewhere on the same cut is a perfect verbal counterpoint to his paraphrases too. They egg each other on. "The Carnation and the Rose," another track where Purim appears, confirms that Don Preston is one of the most distinctive synthesizer players around (as anyone who's heard him with John Carter already knows). His solo captures the spirit of Ivo's improvising, without compromising his own style and sound. Preston humanizes his electronics. The use of dual bassists is uncommonly effective, especially given Patitucci's joyful busyness. But then Buell Neidlinger has a rare knack for blending with seemingly any player — which is why he turns up in more varied contexts than any musician anywhere.

With all due respect to his distinguished sidefolk, however, Ivo Perelman dominates this music. That's as it should be — his instrumental voice is too commanding for him to do otherwise. Since I first heard him a couple of months ago, Perelman's sound has haunted me. You may find it has the same effect on you.

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