

Edward Simon 25th Anniversary Extended Album Liner Notes:

On *25 Years*, pianist-composer Edward Simon functions analogously to an artist curating a career retrospective, presenting a bespoke perspective on his distinguished, singular corpus with 17 selections culled from his albums over the last quarter-century. The idea of collating a memoir in notes and tones gestated when Simon turned 50 last year. “I started to listen back to my work and reflect on what I’ve done,” he explains. “I realized that a lot of great music went largely unnoticed because it was released on small, independent labels; I thought a compilation would be a nice way to let people know what I’ve been up to.”

It goes against Simon’s grain to self-advertise, and he leaves unmentioned the consequential impact of his musical production on the broader jazz soundtrack via signpost albums like *Edward Simon* (Kokopelli-1995), *La Bikina* (Mythology-1998), and *Afinidad* (Red-2001), all generously represented on *25 Years*. Born in Venezuela, Simon created these works in a period when talented, ambitious generational peers from the Hispanic diaspora like Gonzalo Rubalcaba (Cuba), Danilo Pérez (Panama), and David Sánchez (Puerto Rico) were documenting an array of hybrid dialects that coalesced jazz with the melodies, grooves and scales of their respective cultures and traditions. His development also overlapped with Connecticut-raised pianist Brad Mehldau, once a sideman with Sánchez, who was workshopping strategies for making harmony flow through uneven metric structures in conjunction with Catalan drummer Jorge Rossy. Rossy himself had assimilated Pan-American codes on gigs with Pérez and Cuban elder statesman Paquito D’Rivera, who themselves (like Sánchez) had taken cues in this regard from Dizzy Gillespie.

When he was generating these masterworks of jazz polylingualism, Simon was better known to the jazz public as the pianist in the Terence Blanchard quintet (1994-2002). He assumed the position after a five-year run with Bobby Watson’s high-profile hardbop unit, Horizon, while also gigging and recording with Kevin Eubanks, Greg Osby, D’Rivera and Herbie Mann. But his peers, who knew what was what, regarded him with utmost respect, as implied by Perez’ remark in a 2001 *DownBeat* Blindfold Test that Simon was “a great source of

inspiration” for “breaking up and bridging all the stereotypes about Latinos playing straightahead.”

In a profile of Simon that I wrote for *Jazziz* in 2013, tenor saxophonist Mark Turner (represented on *25 Years* with two tracks from his debut encounter with Simon on the eponymous Kokopelli date, one from *La Bikina*, and one from Simon’s 2014 tour de force *Venezuelan Suite*) praised Simon as “one of the great pianists of our generation” before offering observations on Simon’s compositional procedures. “Edward analyzes in great detail the things that inspire him; he’s able to write whether he’s inspired or not,” Turner said. “That’s also evident in his playing. It doesn’t just flow out easily. I like hearing the strain and struggle and tension. When it does come out, it’s riveting, very emotionally intense. I think of Bach or Beethoven like that. They have that work ethic. You can hear it in every note.”

In a separate conversation for that same *Jazziz* article, the master Puerto Rican alto saxophonist-composer Miguel Zenón, Simon’s bandmate in SFJAZZ Collective from 2010 through 2019, described his affinity for those early recordings. “*Edward Simon* made a huge impression on me,” Zenón said. “I loved the compositions, the players, the way he put the music together. But *La Bikina* is one of my favorite recordings ever — it hit me straight in the heart. I know all the tunes inside-out. It opened a new set of doors for what I wanted to do in terms of composition, arrangement, just playing in general. It’s the epiphany of what a good modern jazz record should sound like.”

Specifically, Zenón elaborated, he honed in on how Simon “would spread a melody through the arrangement — a little statement, then a section emerging from that statement, maybe a solo, then another statement of the melody, a little motif, then another solo, and then ending the melody at the end of the piece. That minimalistic view — finding all the different cells and different motifs from within the melody — totally changed the way I view and write music.”

Also in that *Jazziz* article, bass icon John Patitucci, represented here on three selections, mentioned Simon's ability "to really play jazz and all its languages, and also access all the rhythmic elements of music from Venezuela and other Pan-American idioms" and his "beautiful sound conception."

In a 2006 conversation, David Binney — a close collaborator since the cusp of the '90s, who plays on five selections contained herein — praised Simon's "musicality." He added: "I like his harmonic concept; it sums up the way I hear things. His rhythmic concept is really strong because of his Latin American roots. It complemented the way I play, because I sometimes have more abandon, while he locks things in; I tend to stretch the harmony, while he stretches the rhythms." Simon himself describes "drawing inspiration from Dave's writing and approach — his eclecticism, openness to all sorts of influences, and ability to find a personal way to put them together and organize them and do something unique."

After listening to himself immersively with an objective, third-person ear, Simon "connected on an emotional, visceral level with my earlier work, in which I found a certain rawness, a spirit of unconcern, whereas my more recent work is perhaps more refined." More granularly, he pinpoints the distinctive components of his musical DNA that thread through the course of *25 Years*.

"I hear three very present traditions in my music and playing," Simon says. "One is Latin American music, particularly the rhythms. Classical music is another element that can be heard in the majority of my compositions, even from the beginning — in terms of structural clarity, constructing a theme and developing it melodically and rhythmically, and also the clarity of the playing, not just my playing, but the players I choose to play with, who have great command of their instruments and a concern for producing a beautiful tone and sound.

"Finally, there's jazz improvisation and the jazz tradition. My early influences come through especially clearly in my earlier recordings. For example, in *La Bikina*, 'Ericka' (which

opens up the first disc), is very much influenced by Keith Jarrett, who I was listening to a great deal — you can hear Keith’s influence in my soloing, the way I improvise, even the way in which the tunes are played. Of the contemporary jazz pianists, Keith is most involved with classical music, which you can hear when he improvises introductions to jazz standards or in his solo piano playing. But I also identify with an intuitive element in his playing — a dedication to documenting the pure improvisational process. He’s one of the few who can go on stage without preconceived or prepared material, and just perform — that takes courage.”

The composer of “Ericka” is percussionist Marlon Simon, Simon’s older brother and childhood partner in a family dance band in Punta Cardón, an oil refinery town in Venezuela’s Paraguaná peninsula. Self-taught on keyboards and piano, Simon emulated Puerto Rican maestro Papo Lucca and Cuban icons Chucho Valdés and Emiliano Salvador early on, then caught the jazz bug circa 1982 after viewing a video of Chick Corea, Stan Getz and Dizzy Gillespie performing at the White House. At the time, Simon was living with his mother and sister in Norman, Oklahoma, where he first studied piano formally.

An extreme devaluation of Venezuela’s currency in 1983 made it impossible for Simon’s family to sustain this American sojourn. But Simon’s father — an amateur guitarist-singer — noticed his son’s palpable development, and soon sent him to live in Philadelphia, where he attended Performing Arts School. Simon then matriculated at Philadelphia College of Performing Arts, studying classical music by day while moonlighting evenings on Latin dance jobs and on jazz gigs at a venue called the Old Temperance House with bassist Charles Fambrough, a McCoy Tyner and Art Blakey alumnus who was eager to hone his Latin chops. On separate occasions, Fambrough brought in Eubanks, Osby and Watson as special guests — each of them dug Simon, and encouraged him to move to New York City, which he did in the summer of 1988, coinciding with his nineteenth birthday.

Perhaps the unitary thread that attracted these diverse leaders to Simon is his dictum, inculcated during formative years, that “music, to feel natural, should have a strong underlying groove.” Examples are Simon’s creative use of electronic keyboards on two recordings with

Eubanks, who was operating on both fusion and straightahead turf, and on three with Osby, then experimenting with applying asymmetrical time signatures — Simon calls them “compound meters” — to funk and hip-hop structures. Another was his ability to “swing without an accent” in *Horizon*, where Simon demonstrated a fluent, personal take on hardcore jazz piano language that would have suited any Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers unit of the ’80s.

Ruminating on his decade-plus with Watson and Blanchard, each a Jazz Messengers alumnus, Simon states: “I set aside my own vision, and wrote in a style that fit the overall repertoire, which was a good exercise. I learned to incorporate the blues and to pace myself in a solo, shaping the arc to develop it to a climax. It took years to be able to consolidate those elements, to integrate my Latin background into swing in a way that wouldn’t sound out of place or clashing — though you could hear it.”

This aptly describes the rhythmic brew that fuels the aforementioned “Ericka” (from *La Bikina*), propelled throughout by Adam Cruz’s percolating straight-eighth beats. “Adam has been a close collaborator since the beginning,” Simon notes. “I played a lot with Victor Lewis when I was with Bobby, and Adam often came to hear us play. You can hear Victor’s influence very strongly here in the way Adam accompanies the solos; the way he connects sections, how he takes an idea from one solo and keeps it going to connect it to the next one.” Turner’s luminous melody reading and anthemic solo precede Simon’s choruses, kinetic and elegant, then the unison horns restate the theme before the leader’s rhapsodic coda.

On the next selection — the second part of a 1914 waltz by Pedro Elías Gutiérrez titled “Alma Llanera” (“Soul Of the Plains”) — Turner’s warm, centered tone, exceptional control of the altissimo range, and penchant for melodic improvisation illuminate the first section; Simon follows with another melody-drenched solo executed with immaculate touch and dance-like phrasing, resolving into a closing vamp that accompanies a melodic drum solo by Cruz.

“It’s considered the unofficial national anthem of Venezuela,” Simon says of “Alma Llanera.” “It’s a *zoropo*, with African roots and Spanish influence and sound; the harmonic motion facilitates improvisation. A lot of Venezuelan folk songs come from Los Llanos (the plains), from people working with animals, being in Nature — they often have a serene sound. The typical instrumentation is a specific harp from the plains, called *arpa llanera*; a *cuatro*, which is a small guitar with four nylon strings; and *maracas*.”

Simon adds that “piano wasn’t used much, except in waltzes, which were closer to chamber music, written for the wealthy people.” For this reason, although waltzes and Venezuelan vernacular repertoire “were part of the soundtrack of my early life,” Simon during formative years performed almost exclusively popular dance music — “boleros, music from Puerto Rico, *cumbia* from Colombia, salsa and Dominican merengue.” In fact, he only began to explore Venezuelan waltzes during his stint with Paquito D’Rivera, who played a repertoire comprised of a congeries of Latin American genres, and expected his band members to address them with idiomatic rigor.

There follows “Govinda,” a lullaby-like refrain built around a 10-note piano part that Simon maintains throughout the tune. It’s dedicated to Simon’s son, who was 6 when it appeared on *Océanos*, a 2007 Criss Cross album co-led by Simon and Binney. “I was aiming to convey the qualities of innocence and fragility you that you associate with a baby,” Simon states. “The tune is very simple, yet these musicians successfully bring out what is really there.”

Supported by Simon’s vamp and bassist Scott Colley’s stately beats, Adam Rogers intones the floating melody on guitar. Then he harmonizes the melody with vocalist Luciana Souza, with whom Simon was then working closely, sharing the space on Patitucci’s recordings *Communion* and *Songs, Stories and Spirituals*, and Simon’s 2005 Criss Cross album, *Simplicitas*. (The latter date transpired not long after Souza collaborated with Simon on *Neruda*, a 2004 voice-piano duo on which Souza — drawing deeply on the *Songs and Dances* of Catalonian composer Federico Mompou — arranged settings for English translations of ten poems by Pablo

Neruda.) Two minutes in, drummer Brian Blade enters the mix with well-wrought rubato rhythm-timbre. Binney enters, the song ascends, then decrescendoes, as Simon restates the original theme in minor key. The song falls away, Souza whispering improvised lyrics in Portuguese over the concluding ritardando.

There follow two selections from *Simplicitas*, for which Simon convened Avishai Cohen on bass, Cruz on drums, and — on “Fiestas” — percussionist Pernell Saturnino. Simon composed “Fiestas” during the late 1990s to portray the fireworks during the Three Kings holiday celebration on the island of Palma de Mallorca, where he and his wife then lived. After a dramatically syncopated statement of the melody, based in F-minor, the environment changes to major mode for the solos. Saturnino and Cruz lock into simmering clave beneath Simon’s intense solo, fulcrumed by Cohen’s one-chord bass vamp in 3/4.

Simon cites Keith Jarrett’s example as an inspiration for the gospel-inflected “Simplicity.” “It’s a diatonic, simple melody in D-major,” he says. “It’s probably the simplest piece I’ve ever written — a repeating theme, with very few variations, mostly reharmonizations, that builds and builds. It expresses the beauty that can be found in simple things in life, if you take the time to notice. Simplicity has always being an important aspect of my aesthetic. I appreciate composers like Mompou, who can say the most with the least notes. It is a good exercise for artists to intentionally set limits and work within tight boundaries. This forces you to work more economically, look more deeply into what’s there and find more. Simplicity is also the first step along the Buddhist path.”

Elementary in structure, complex in execution, grand in scale, “Pathless Path” — recorded in 2013 at Manhattan’s Jazz Standard by Simon’s trio with Patitucci and Blade — begins with an extended free improvisation, then coalesces into a rubato melody with a Spanish feel. Patitucci postulates an anchoring bass ostinato in an A-tonality, gradually establishing tempo, textured by Blade’s grooves in the drumkit’s lower regions. From then until about the 13th minute, the intensity “keeps percolating, builds and builds,” Simon says. “Again, working

with a simple idea and set of parameters, the composition provides both a point of destination for the free improv and an origination point for the solos that follow the statement of the theme and gives you a lot of freedom to go in any direction, forming your own path along the way.”

With the exception of the annual SFJAZZ Collective recordings on which Simon performs, *Live at the Jazz Standard* is his only location album. “In the studio, you always know you could do another take if you don’t like a track,” he says. “Playing before an audience, it exists that way only that one time, so there’s an urgency to the improvising that can be hard to replicate in the studio, even though we try to — jazz is all about what happens in the moment.”

The metrically-modulating “Pere,” named for a Mallorcan friend, is Simon’s most covered composition, with versions by, among others, Bobby Watson (*Horizons Reassembled*) and D’Rivera (*Funktango*). The version on *25 Years* is its debut, from *Afinidad*, eponymously named for the Simon-Binney-Colley-Blade quartet. “It’s built on a 5/4 clave, with a rather involved melody, and it’s fun to play,” Simon explicates. “It’s mostly constructed over an E-Minor modal sound, but then the bridge goes to B-flat-Major and into 4/4 time, releasing the tension created by the static harmony and clave. I composed the structure of the drum solo at the end, as I tend to do on many of my compositions. I loved playing timbales in my early childhood, and I’d say I’m a frustrated percussionist.”

Afinidad marked Blade’s first appearance on a Simon-led recording; on “Pere” he interacts fluidly with Adam Cruz, who outlines the clave on percussion and steel drums. Don’t let it escape your notice that these brilliant musicians perform on all but two of the selections contained herein.

“Much of what I endeavor to do as a musician has to do with tone production, touch, textures, the different colors you can elicit from the instrument, and those nuances can only come through at a certain volume level,” Simon says. “Brian is one of the few drummers I know who has the ability to play with high intensity at a very soft volume. He is an incredibly sensitive musician, with a wide range of dynamics, who is always listening and supporting what the music

wants. Of course, he can also be explosive — in fact, he’s the only drummer I’ve ever had to ask to play louder at times, when I felt it was needed. He understands how to bring out the multiple rhythmic layers contained in many of my compositions. He is a fearless improviser who functions beautifully in a controlled environment, but also plays with abandon, letting go in a way that complements me, because my tendency is to be more restrained. No matter what style you’re playing, Brian makes it his own and manages to create something incredibly musical and beautiful. And while he knows how to provide the traditional function of the drums really well, he is a musician who transcends the instrument. He’s a colorist at heart, like a painter choosing different colors to play with on his canvas.

As on “Pere,” a highlight of “Impossible Question” (from *Océanos*) is Blade’s seamless transitions between shifting metric signatures from section to section. The title references a text by philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti — “If you pose an impossible question, your mind then has to seek the answer in terms of the impossible, not what is possible.” “It’s a great tune, with just the right amount of substance to make it interesting to learn and improvise on,” Simon says. After a sparse piano-bass introduction, Luciana Souza and David Binney interact on the AAB form. Adam Rogers (on acoustic guitar) and Simon solo over the 4/4 A-section; Blade climaxes with a cohesive drum fanfare against a 9/4 B-section vamp, complemented by Simon’s repeating chords, an overlaid rhythmic cycle from Rogers, and brass interpolations from trumpeter Shane Endsley and trombonist Alan Ferber.

Blade’s penchant for dynamic nuance comes to the fore on “What If,” performed by the recently formed collective trio Steel House, in which bassist Scott Colley is the third leg of an equilateral triangle. The theme, which channels the aura of Chick Corea in Simon’s personal argot, uncannily represents the title’s speculative query in notes and tones. Posing the question in the opening section on electric piano, Simon applies his well-calibrated touch, then develops the responses on acoustic, before vocalist Genevieve Artadi’s concluding message.

Colley entered Simon's world circa 1998, when both played on Binney's large ensemble date *Free To Dream*. Simon praises his "beautiful sound, warm tone, and strong appreciation for space in music both in improvisation and as an overall aesthetic — finding ways to say the most with the least amount of notes. That also relates to my aesthetic of simplicity. I always try to view technique as a tool in service of music-making, a way to play things accurately and achieve clarity in the message you're trying to get across."

We return to *Edward Simon* for "Caballo Viejo," by the eminent Venezuelan composer-performer Simon Diaz. "It's a *pasaje*, a traditional folk music genre, and is probably his most popularized song, recorded by artists of various genres, like Ray Coniff," Simon explains. "The Gypsy Kings recorded it under the title 'Bamboleo,' which became a hit. To my knowledge, this is the only jazz rendition of the song, which talks about an older man falling in love with a woman 20 years younger. Mark Turner interpreted the melody beautifully, with such feeling.

"Simon Diaz is an iconic artist who has had a tremendous influence on me, and probably every Venezuelan musician. He was a great singer-songwriter, who also hosted several television shows. Some of those shows were for children; all were geared towards learning about Venezuelan folklore — what it means to be Venezuelan, the music of the plains, our traditions. He also hosted a radio show for I think 25 years and was an actor and comedian. He was probably the most important disseminator of information about Venezuelan music and culture."

Turner also plays on "Barinas," a brisk *joropo* that is the first movement of the 2014 album *Venezuelan Suite*, commissioned in 2005 by Chamber Music America. It's a four-part work performed by Ensemble Venezuela in which each movement is based on a different genre of Venezuelan folk music. Simon founded the group in 2003. "After recording jazz renditions of Venezuelan folk songs, I decided I should delve more deeply into these explorations," he says. "Instead of creating arrangements of Venezuelan folk pieces, why not write compositions that are based on Venezuelan folk music genres, or Venezuelan music genres in general (although the focus is primarily on the folk music), and use jazz improvisation in the mix with that? The

instrumentation is a confluence of those two musical cultures. Edmar Castaneda, who played *arpa llanera* on the recording, is from Colombia, a neighboring country, which shares the *loropo* genre with Venezuela.”

Afinidad joins Imani Winds on “Uninvited Thoughts,” from Simon’s most recent album, *Sorrows and Triumphs*. The title references Simon’s meditation practice — “many people believe the goal of meditation is to stop your thoughts. That is not exactly true. The mind thinks; that’s what the mind does. Thoughts come and go at their own accord. Observing your thoughts and changing your relationship to them so that they don’t take over your life is what we train ourselves to do in meditation practice.”

He continues: “There are many parallels between meditation and jazz improvisation. For one thing, both traditions are transmitted orally. And many of the personal capacities we develop as meditators such as concentration and mindfulness, are those needed for effective improvisation. As improvisers we strive to find a balance between directing our attention both inwards - to what’s happening in our own playing, and outwards, to what’s happening around us, so you can respond, stay in the flow of the moment and create something new.”

Simon conceived “Uninvited Thoughts” as part of a meta-work titled “House of Numbers,” also commissioned by Chamber Music America. “I was interested in finding out how numbers could inform and guide my compositional process, and how the feelings or images a given number evoked in me would manifest in a musical composition,” he explains. ““Uninvited Thoughts’ is my response to the number 4, which for me evokes symmetry, and hence symmetrical forms — a sense of calm solidity.”

There follows “Navigator,” from *The Process*, the first of Simon’s three CDs for Criss Cross. The title implies Simon’s nomadic lifestyle during his 13 years as a busy sideman. “I was moving around a lot, which makes it tough to maintain long-term relationships and marriages,” he recalls. “We’re constantly navigating ways to find balance.” Here, the chosen path in notes

and tones is to tell the story with a swing groove, well-sustained by Eric Harland, Simon's bandmate for several years with Terence Blanchard, and by Patitucci, who, Simon notes, "urges me to jump off the cliff, which complements my tendency to be more controlled — he's a great composer in his own right, and understands the ins and outs of a composition, which gives him so many options in playing and interpreting it." This early 21st century bebop journey begins with a vamp intro of left-hand fifths doubled by the bass before, in Simon's words, "the melody comes in with a quarter note triplet rhythm superimposed over this ostinato. It's an AAB form, punctuated by unison breaks at the end of each A-section. This composition reflects my love of hard driving swing."

Another trio, with Joe Martin on bass and Adam Cruz on drums, offers a luminous interpretation of "Gracias A La Vida," composed during the reign of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet by Chilean singer-songwriter Violeta Parra, a pioneer of the *nueva canción* movement. It's from the 2017 date *Latin American Songbook*, a concept album framed around the notion of interpreting arrangements of songs from different parts of Latin America that, for Simon, are akin to the comfort food of childhood. Simon stays in the rubato space, penetrating the emotional essence of the melody. "I love the title and lyrics of this song. It's a reminder of how much we have to be grateful for in life."

"Triumphs," also from *Sorrows and Triumphs*, gestated in another larger work commissioned by Chamber Music America, in which Simon explored various aspects of his Buddhist studies and practice, specifically a set of meditations intended to elicit the quality of "being happy for others' happiness" and "utilizing music as a way to bring joy into people's lives in a conscientious way."

"The piece illustrates my minimalist influence," Simon says. "It's based on a 3-note cell. It uses a lot of repetition, a percolating idea that changes slightly here and there. Minimalist composers often use the technique, and I've worked with it in my writing for a long time. I combine minimalistic techniques with improvisation as a way to create changing textures for

soloists to play off of — although this piece doesn't have a solo per se in the traditional way we use that term in jazz. To me, the beauty of minimalism is that it focuses the listener's attention, so that minute changes to 3- or 4-note cells become magnified, and the impact is greater."

The proceedings end with "Venezuela Unida," an orchestrationally ingenious composition commissioned by SFJAZZ that Simon recorded on *Sorrows and Triumphs* after the live version by SFJAZZ Collective contained herein, issued on *Original Compositions & The Music of Ornette Coleman, Stevie Wonder and Thelonious Monk*. "It shifts through different tempos and meters and rhythmic feels, reflecting all the social-economic-political changes that Venezuela has been undergoing," Simon says. "I've never been political, but of course I've been affected by what has been happening there and feel a responsibility to bring about more awareness. It was once the wealthiest country in Latin America; now water and electricity are being rationed, people are looking for food in the trash."

Simon reflects on the impact of his decade with SFJAZZ Collective, to which each member contributes a new original every year. "It's been tremendously challenging and at the same time immensely rewarding to have an opportunity to play with and write for these great musicians," he says. "Having the time and space to workshop these pieces and develop them to an optimal form before they are performed in public is a rare luxury. It allows you to write more intricately. Everyone is a bandleader, with a unique and strong artistic vision, so I feel able to use every possible skill in my arsenal. Playing in a collective ensemble such as this has been a great opportunity for growth, both as a player and composer, because serving their music and vision places you in musical situations you might not otherwise find."

That the notion of development and discovery to which Simon refers is a consistent trope of his life in music is palpable throughout the course of *25 Years*. We, his audience, anticipate the pleasure of being witnesses as he brings us along his path during the quarter-century to come.

Ted Panken