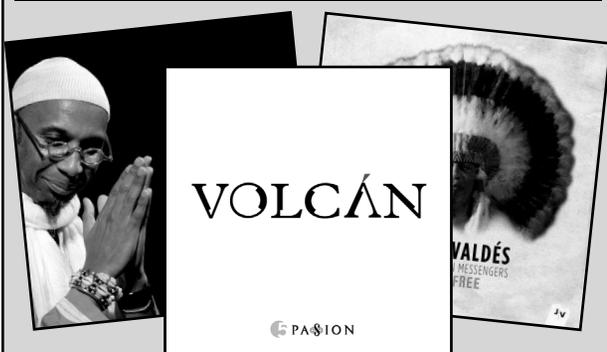


## GLOBE UNITY: CUBA



*Real Live (Live in Japan)*  
**Omar Sosa/The New AfroCubano Quartet (Otá)**  
*Border-Free*  
**Chucho Valdés & The Afro-Cuban Messengers**  
**(Jazz Village-Harmonia Mundi)**  
*Eponymous Volcán (5 Passion)*  
 by Tom Greenland

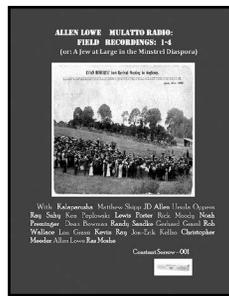
Cuban music, particularly the rumba, mambo, cha-cha and various Cu-bop and Latin jazz fusions, has had a seismic influence on North American jazz while it in turn has been popular on the island since World War II. Three recent releases attest to the continuing compatibility of Cuba and jazz.

Drawing on classical, rap, AfroCuban batá drumming and Afropop, among other musics, pianist Omar Sosa's style is as distinctive as it is hard to pin down. *Real Live* captures Sosa and compadres saxophonist/flutist Leandro Saint-Hill, bassist Childo Tomas and drummer Ernesto Simpson in an inspired mood at Yokohama Motion Blue. A seamless unit (all but Tomas hail from Camagüey), the quartet handles the complex rhythmic interplay of Sosa's compositions with passion and finesse. In less inspired hands, these pieces might suggest radio-friendly contemporary jazz and, indeed, much of this music may appeal to casual jazz fans, but the sheer inventiveness and harmonic audacity of Sosa's improvisations and the ferocity of the percussive onslaught ensures that the record will appeal to a wide range of listeners.

Pianist Chucho Valdés, a maestro-mind behind the Cu-bop sound, is a living legend on both sides of the gulf. *Border-Free*, with a slightly revamped version of his AfroCuban Messengers, includes guest Branford Marsalis on tenor and soprano saxophones. Nodding to Art Blakey's hardbop quintet sound, the album also references flamenco ("Santa Cruz"), Moroccan music ("Abdel"), even a bit of Rachmaninoff ("Caridad Amaro"). Valdés' dazzling technical facility, apparent on cuts like "Congadanza" and "Pilar", never overshadows his aesthetic sensitivity and rhythmic flexibility. Ángel Gastón Joya Perellada deserves special mention for his precocious bass work, as does Marsalis for his solo turn on "Abdel".

Pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba is only a short step behind Valdés in terms of impact and, on *Volcán*, a collective debut with bassist Armando Gala, drummer Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez and percussionist Giovanni Hidalgo, he updates the jazz fusion of Return to Forever and Irakere. Switching between synthesizers and acoustic piano, Rubalcaba draws on a wide sonic palette on an impressive setlist of his own compositions and covers by João Bosco, Dizzy Gillespie, Chucho Valdés and Chico Buarque. More cerebral than Valdés, Rubalcaba is equally proficient and restlessly eclectic while Gala's nuanced electric fretless bass lends an earthy, almost vocal counterpoint to the proceedings.

For more information, visit [melodia.com](http://melodia.com), [jazzvillagemusic.com](http://jazzvillagemusic.com) and [5passion.com](http://5passion.com). Sosa is at *Blue Note* May 1st-4th. See *Calendar*.



*Mulatto Radio: Field Recordings 1-4*  
**Allen Lowe (Constant Sorrow)**  
 by Clifford Allen

New York is still the center of the jazz universe; otherwise, why would we have a homegrown jazz gazette or scores of already well-established musicians relocating to the boroughs to test their mettle? Sure, the music happens on a high level elsewhere, but it's often hard to visualize a non-urban setting as a hotbed of creative music. Saxophonist/guitarist/composer/musicologist/author Allen Lowe has been a vibrant figure on an equally vibrant geographic periphery since the '80s, first in New Haven and now based in Portland, Maine. His collaborators have included multi-reed players Julius Hemphill and David Murray, trumpeter Doc Cheatham and trombonist Roswell Rudd and he has curated vast explorations of American music that would make Harry Smith blush. Lowe visits New York occasionally and has presented his work at such venues as Roulette and the Knitting Factory, yet he's not well known. Perhaps that could change with the latest four-disc offering (like Anthony Braxton, Lowe is known for boxed sets), released on his own Constant Sorrow label.

An alto saxophonist with a dry, squirrely and loquacious approach (certainly out of the Hemphill school), Lowe's compositions are witty, delicate and, in this case, where the traditions of ragtime, funereal marches, Lennie Tristano-schooled modernism and free improvisation blend, incomparable. Across 62 unique pieces, Lowe has convened a diverse who's-who of contemporary music, including pianists Matthew Shipp and Ursula Oppens, saxophonists Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre, Ras Moshe, JD Allen and Noah Preminger, drummer Lou Grassi and clarinetist Ken Peplowski. Lowe's most frequent collaborators are also present throughout - pianist Lewis Porter, trumpeter Randy Sandke and guitarist Ray Suhy - and theirs are names that, like Lowe, should probably be discussed in heavy company.

There are many highlights and a persistent vibe across four rather full discs of music, far more than can be discussed here. "My Little Voudon Babe", which closes out the third disc, is one of several pieces paying tribute to or referencing author Zora Neale Hurston and sets brash tone rows against Grassi's soft tom pummels. Porter is first out of the gate with elbowed lyricism and a staunch left hand while trumpeter Jon-Erik Kellso declaims in wide-barreled, dramatic and compelling swagger with copious use of a plunger mute. Lowe closes the run of solos hanging behind the rhythm and proselytizing with a considered, jubilant rasp. Two tracks earlier, Lowe duets with Suhy's banjo on "Poor Billy in the Lowground", where the latter's grungy and discursive slide commentary is reminiscent of Eugene Chadbourne and the former's gutsy trills are an appropriate paean to a fallen comrade.

As with compositional forebears like Charles Mingus, Lowe's music doesn't require that he perform on every piece; thus the set includes a number of solo piano works performed by Porter. While much of the music was recorded in Maine and uses an electric keyboard (you wouldn't know it from hearing Shipp or Oppens on the instrument), the solo pieces were recorded in a Brooklyn studio and granted attendant classical flesh - witness the rolling pointillism of "Blind Parade", written for Blind Boone, or the roiling and shifty surface of "Descent into the Mailroom", a play

on Tristano. Lowe is rarely the featured soloist even when he's directing an ensemble; "Blues From One Room To The Next" hinges on Suhy's frantic, scrambled blues and Kalaparusha's pathos-laden muscularity (these are the last recordings made by the tenor saxophonist before his passing in November 2013), with a finely grumbling passage for tuba player Christopher Meeder and bassist Kevin Ray.

This is a sizable and minimally edited set of music with an accompanying book of notes to match and engaging the world of Allen Lowe's music and thought is a commitment. Full of self-critical humor and dangerous puns, Lowe's approach to the American sonic landscape is deeper and graced with more heart than he's given credit.

For more information, visit [allenlowe.bandcamp.com](http://allenlowe.bandcamp.com). This project is at *Spectrum* May 3rd. See *Calendar*.



*Callicoon Sessions*  
**Kazzrie Jaxen Quartet (Cadence Jazz)**  
 by Marc Medwin

The composer Dieter Schnebel's innovative transcription of Schubert's G-Major piano sonata includes a layer of harmonies, which, though not heard in the sonata, are present by implication. Pianist Kazzrie Jaxen's treatment of standards on her new quartet disc employs similar complexities. The tunes are there, but Jaxen's harmonies veil them in mystery while simultaneously illuminating them afresh via some of the most vital interpretations they have received in some time.

Jaxen, tenor saxophonist Charley Krachy, bassist Don Messina and drummer Bill Chattin made these recordings over several years, straight to DAT and never intending to make an album from them; but as the group-penned liners make plain, they were aware of something special as the recordings were assembled. There is something ethereal and yet down-to-earth as old tunes are made new, as when, to delve into only one representative example, Jaxen, Krachy and Messina swing into "All the Things You Are", Krachy and Messina in relaxed and flowing counterpoint during the head. Chattin's entrance kicks the swing up to the next level, glittering cymbals and perfectly-timed snare punctuations serving to place rock-solid bass drum and hi-hat in stark relief.

Yet, none of this explains how the music lifts off and floats amidst Krachy's altered tones and over Messina's pizzicato double stops, amazing in and of themselves. Much of the freedom must come down to Jaxen's voicings. Despite her prodigious harmonic language, her allegiance to what the others are doing is always evident and she's not so much pushing beyond rhythmic boundaries as using them as points of departure and return. It is a joy to hear how she weaves fragments of "What Is This Thing Called Love"'s melody into a solo of huge dynamic and harmonic contrast, almost forming a language of varying densities as Messina and Chattin lay the groundwork.

These recordings give new meaning to the words freedom and tradition, juxtaposing them in ways that render them useless. The recording is a no-nonsense audio portrait, leaving room for the playing to breathe and bloom. A great disc from an innovative ensemble.

For more information, visit [cadencejazzrecords.com](http://cadencejazzrecords.com). Jaxen is at *The Drawing Room* May 4th. See *Calendar*.