

MUSIC & ARTS

# Jazz: A stellar rhythm section gives Donald Vega's latest CD a truly 'Spiritual Nature'

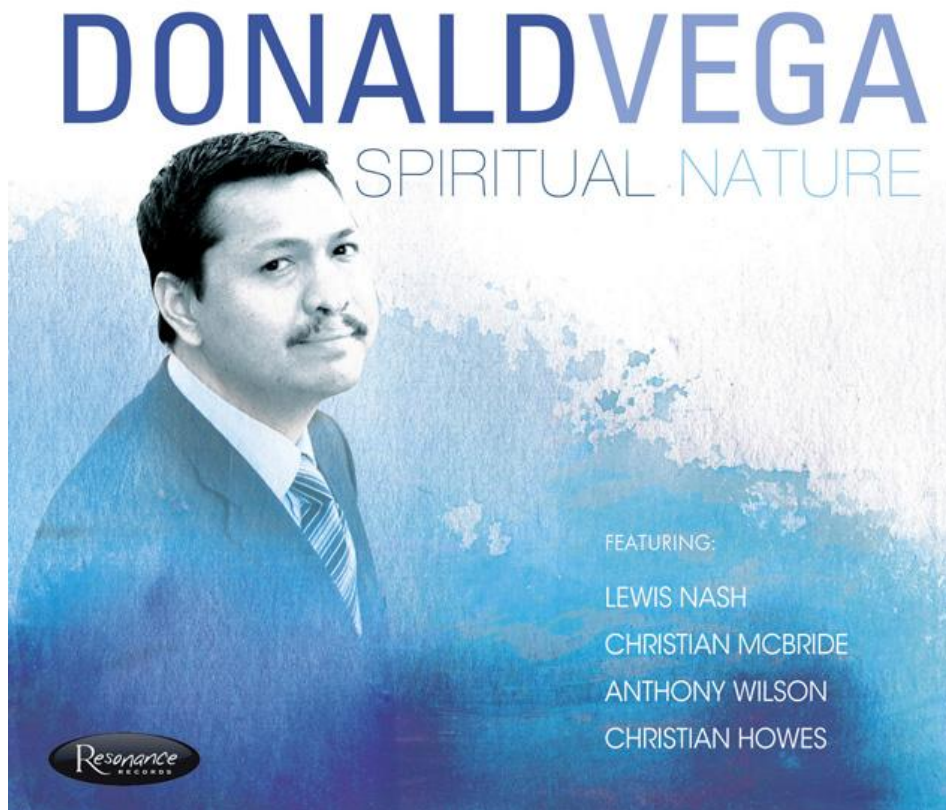
Pianist Vega is joined by bassist Christian McBride and drummer Lewis Nash; also, new music from Jae Sennett and Marcus Miller



NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

PUBLISHED: SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2012, 6:00 AM

UPDATED: SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2012, 6:00 AM



Pianist Donald Vega's 'Spiritual Nature,' one of the best CDs of the year.

Donald Vega  
"Spiritual Nature" (Resonance Records)

To pianist Donald Vega, the name of this recording points to the magic and mystery of nature and the spirit. But the reason that this CD is one of my favorites of the year is no mystery. There's a dream team rhythm section here, featuring bassist Christian McBride, drummer Lewis Nash and Vega on keyboards.

The native of Nicaragua studied classical music until age 14, when his parents moved him to Los Angeles. There he landed in the able hands of drummer Billy Higgins and bassist Al McKibbin, among others. That apprenticeship and journeyman work, plus Master's-level study at the Manhattan School of Music and Juilliard, all prepared him for this moment.

Now he plays with bass legend Ron Carter, who has said that Vega, 38, is one of the next great jazz piano voices. This recording backs up that claim.

An original, "Scorpion," opens this jazz date in a searching manner, along with an implied invitation to join in shared ecstasy. Carter's "First Trip" continues the discussion, followed by the warm flow of Monty Alexander's

"River," on which violinist Christian Howes sings a solo on violin.

Whereas the first number features a tenor sax/trumpet lead section, "Spiritual Nature" highlights an easygoing trombone/tenor sax line, with pauses for reflection along the way. "Contemplation" has Vega on a Fender Rhodes piano for a textural shift that maintains the mood.

This delightful recording is a musical meeting, in which the songs are the agenda items. As a new father, Vega includes two songs — "Future Child" and "Child's Play" — in recognition of that milestone.

This is a CD that somehow feels both highly arranged and free-flowing.

Jae Sinnett  
"Still Standing" (J-Nett Music)

In jazz, there have always been artists good enough to be known nationally and internationally, yet who maintain even more of a local or regional profile. The Virginia-based drummer, composer, radio host and programmer Jae Sinnett fits this description.

On "Still Standing," his 11th recording as a leader, Sinnett's jazz trio is the main focus. He's been playing with bassist Terry Burrell and pianist Allen Farnham for more than 10 years — and it really shows. For instance, the Cole Porter standard "Love for Sale" is given an exhilarating treatment.

Six of the nine songs are Sinnett originals. The title cut, "Still Standing," has an instrumental R&B vibe. On sticks or brushes, Sinnett always glides into the role necessary for the feel of the song.

A favorite original is "Nor Easter," which halfway through features thunderous rains. But the tune is less a literal picture of a storm than a depiction of an attitude of strength, flexibility and caution one needs in the midst of life's storms.

Overall, this music reflects, as Sinnett writes, "the soul and vitality of a seasoned life." It packs an emotional punch with intellectual depth.

Marcus Miller  
"Renaissance" (Concord Jazz)

Marcus Miller is considered a "renaissance man" in music by virtue of his talent as both an instrumentalist (electric bass, bass clarinet), arranger and producer (Miles Davis, Luther Vandross, David Sanborn, to name a few).

So the title of his new recording is appropriate to the man himself.

Even so, perhaps Miller is making another esthetic statement through his title. Considering the prevalence of highly produced pop and rap music, with layers of tracks and the focus on a handful of celebrity artists, "Renaissance" seems to hark back to another era. There was a time when jazz, funk, rock and Latin styling were mixed together for both artistic expression and a desire to reach wider audiences.

In a manner similar to when Motown featured top musicians with heavy jazz chops in the studio, "Renaissance" does too, with younger artists such as Kris Bowers, Sean Jones, Maurice Brown and Alex Han getting big play. Most of the songs are Miller originals, and feature group configurations ranging from solo ("I'll Be There") to trio to septet.

Miller's signature thumb thumpin' appears on several numbers, but hard funk is shared equitably with soul-fusion. The mix happens on "Mr. Clean," the Weather Report-like "Gorée," the Latin rock of "Revelation" and the Brazilian/salsa mix of "Setembro," with guest appearances by Gretchen Parlato and Ruben Blades.

Whether this recording signals a rebirth remains to be seen. But considering the flux of the music industry, one can always hope.

*The writer is the host of "JazzPlus with Greg Thomas" on WVOX 1460 AM and online at wvox.com from 2 to 3 p.m. on Sundays.*

## JAZZ OF NOTE

Alfredo Rodriguez Trio Tuesday, 7:30/9:30 p.m. at Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St., (212) 576-2232.  
To hear live cuts from the Cuban-born pianist's debut recording, "Sounds of Space," check out this rare, one-night appearance.

Victor Goines Quartet Fri./Sat., 8-9:15/10-11:15 p.m. at Jazz at Kitano, 66 Park Ave., at E. 38th St., (212) 885-7119.

A longtime member of the sax section of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, Goines has a big tenor sax swagger and incredible facility on clarinet.

Celebrating the Legacy of Wilbur Ware Sat., 8 p.m. at Merkin Concert Hall, Kaufman Center, 129 W. 67th St. (between Broadway & Amsterdam Ave.), (212) 501-3330.

Gloria Ware, the widow of stalwart bassist Wilbur Ware, has organized this tribute, featuring friends such as Barry Harris, Louis Hayes and Juini Booth, and Rufus Reid and Russell Malone.

## OTHER TOR E



Pro-anorexia website blasts Kate Upton for 'big fat floppy boobs'



Kanye West takes to Twitter to muse about racial, misogynistic lingo in rap music



Im A Diva: 20 Demanding Celebs And Their Over The Top Requirements (Bossip)



Woman Stabs Boyfriend After He Slaps Her Sunburned Bottom (CafeMom)

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