

# Sunny Jain, Dafnis Prieto, & Francisco Mela

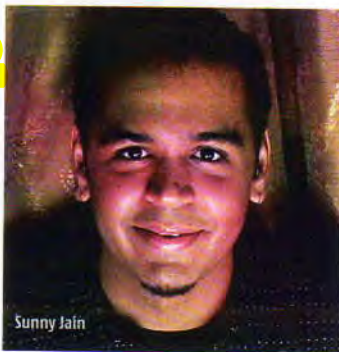
Three NYC drummers explore world jazz

**M**ore and more over the last 20 years, jazz has become an international language spoken by musicians all over the globe. Inevitably, the most talented and highly motivated of these aspiring jazz musicians relocate to New York City, still the jazz capital of the world, to bone up on the Big Apple vernacular. But in doing so, they also bring a little piece of their homelands with them in what they interject into the music. The result is an intriguing new hybrid of world-jazz being carried on by gifted young musicians from abroad. Three New York-based drummers are currently exploring their own personal pan-cultural jazz hybrids in their capacities as bandleaders and recording artists in their own right.

Drummer-composer Sunny Jain is a leading voice for the new hybrid of Indo-jazz currently being practiced in New York by the likes of pianist Vijay Iyer, saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, and guitarist Rez Abbasi. His multi-culti Sunny Jain Collective intertwines jazz with music from his South Asian heritage (Punjabi music, religious songs, North Indian classical, and Bollywood music). On their second CD, *Avaaz* (Sinj Records), Jain mixes swing beats into the exotic fabric of bhajan-inspired originals like "Sialkot" and the infectious groover "Baraat," along with traditional Hindustani numbers like "Meri Bhavana" and the potent title track. The swinging 6/8 vehicle "Pink City" is perhaps the most westernized jazz piece on this ambitious outing, which also features Rez Abbasi on guitar and sitar-guitar, Gary Wang on acoustic bass, Steve Walsh on tenor and soprano saxes, and Samita Sinha on vocals. "Johnnie Black," named for a preferred scotch, is a blistering raga-based fusion romp while "Awaara Hoon" is a re-creation of a 1951 Bollywood classic. (Jain also appears on *Seep*, a new Sinj Records release by the Indian flavored

group Kaash, featuring vocalist Samita Sinha.)

Two young Cuban drummers who are currently making a name for themselves on the New York scene are Dafnis Prieto and Francisco Mela. Prieto, recently named Up And Coming Musician Of The Year by the New York-based Jazz Journalists Association, is a polyrhythmic marvel that apprenticed with alto saxophonist composers Steve Coleman and Henry Threadgill before debuting as a leader last year with *About The Monks*. His second release on the Zoho Music label, *Absolute Quintet*, reflects a myriad of contemporary jazz, rock, and classical influences while keeping his clave roots prominent in the mix. From the funky, rock-imbued opener "The Coolest" to the more serene "Sensaciones" and the romantic 6/8 "Afrotango," Prieto carves out fresh territory both melodically and rhythmically. His frantic funk number "The Stutter" bears the edgy stamp of Steve Coleman's Five Elements (Prieto was a member in 2003-'04) while his cinematic, three-part "One Day Suite" travels from a stately chamber-like theme to an undulating Afro-Cuban ostinato (a platform for cellist Dana Leong and violinist Christian Howes to sail over with abandon). Cuban saxophonist Yosvany Terry adds soaring soprano and alto saxes to the proceedings while the drummer unleashes with fusionesque fury and hip



Sunny Jain



Dafnis Prieto

metric modulation against the slow-moving pulse of his dirge-like "New Elephant." He also displays astonishing polyrhythmic aplomb on the solo drum intro to the complex, clave-fueled "Renew The Elephant." And he closes with a wacky amalgam of styles on "Innocent Bird," which marries baroque passages to "Mission Impossible" spy music and churchy organ music. As the maestro of this Absolute Quintet, Prieto flaunts a refreshingly original vision (and considerable chops) on each and every track of his impressive sophomore outing.



Francisco Mela

Upon arriving in New York, following a stint at the Berklee College Of Music in Boston, Cuban drummer Francisco Mela earned a spot in Joe Lovano's Street Band. Mela's debut as a leader, *Melao* (Ayva Music), is a scintillating and soulful amalgam of styles that showcases the considerable talents of tenor sax great Lovano ("Arere," "Parallel World"), acoustic guitarist and Herbie Hancock sideman Lionel Loueke ("John Ramsay," "Chela"), and tenor-sax legend George Garzone ("Sopressa," "Parasuayo," "Obayoko") along with the up-and-coming tenor saxophonist Anat Cohen ("John Ramsay," "Chela"). Throughout this ambitious hybrid, Mela sounds equally conversant in Cuban clave or American swing, and he brings both to the proceedings with rare authority. Lovano and Garzone engage in a spirited tenor call-and-response on the swinging two-tenor number "Galaxy." An added treat among Mela's polished originals here is a rendition of Ornette Coleman's "Law Years," performed as a trio with bassist Peter Slavov and guitarist Loueke. (Mela also appears on *Junjo*, the recent Ayva Music debut of acoustic bassist and Berklee grad Esperanza Spalding.)

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