

## Ralph Lalama: Steppin' Out, Steppin' Forward

Ralph Lalama's rich tenor saxophone voice has been heard for years on the New York City scene, perhaps most notably with the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra and its predecessors, first led by Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, and later by just Lewis. He's a guy who grew up when rock music was fully bursting on the American scene, but maintains that not much of that music touched him. He came from a family that listened to jazz and the American Popular Song canon, and he chose that direction.

"The feeling of it," is the turn-on of jazz to the Pennsylvania native who has called the Big Apple area his home for several years now. He's not native, but he's a New Yorker, alright. He's got the style of speech, a kind of dry New York Italian sense of humor and a what-me-worry casualness about him. "I love the beat. I'm a beat guy. And I love the interaction--the conversation on the bandstand, musically, of course. I think the U.S. Senate could learn a lot if they just listened to jazz sometime. They really should."

"Some corporations do. They present jazz to their corporations, to show how to get camaraderie and listening to each other and know what everybody else is doing, to make a whole. A couple guys told me this happens. I think Congress should get into it, instead of listening to Bruce Springsteen," he adds with an exaggerated "steeeen" in a semi-gruff but amiable manner. It's a manner that bears no ill will toward Springsteen or anyone, really. Lalama is just direct, that's all, and wears his love of jazz standards and jazz music on his sleeve.

Lalama plays with deep feeling that has carried him through the big bands of Jones and Lewis, Buddy Rich, Woody Herman and the Carnegie Hall group led by Jon Faddis. His muscular sound has also placed him in all kinds of small group contexts around New York City over the years, and earned him a spot in Joe Lovano's nonet when that group gets together for periodic gigs and tours.

Getting back to that feeling, Lalama remembers when he broke up with a girlfriend many years ago and discovered that "every time I would play, I would feel much better than when I wasn't. It was therapy. It never hit me that hard, how really soulful that stuff is. Playing these songs, they meant much more to me than they ever did. It affects you physically and emotionally, intellectually. It's really soothing--not all smooth; I don't mean that. It can be Coltrane, banging it away. It can be Stan Getz playing a ballad. It can be Miles. It can be Miles playing funk. It's great. Wow. The true artists, when you listen to it, then you listen to it eight years from now, you're still turned on. Twenty years from now--the same way."

"I don't feel the same way about the Grand Funk Railroad, that's for sure," he adds with a soft laugh.

The feeling Lalama achieves in his playing has been captured on a handful of recordings under his own name, but the latest example surfaced this year. *The Audience* (Mighty Quinn Productions, 2010) was cut with the saxophonist's working quartet. It was done pretty much live, no overdubs. It's the second album the group has done for the label, whose owner, Jerry Roche, urged the band to record a few years back, the first result being *Energy Fields* (Mighty Quinn Productions, 2008).

Lalama plays largely jazz standards in the company of guitarist John Hart, a tasty foil for his tenor, and the always rock-solid rhythm section of veterans Rick Petrone on bass and Nick Corsello on drums. Listening to the disc is like sitting in a club listening to this very talented group run through its set list, conversing with one another and, in doing so, making a great overall sound with an elasticity, but with a central focus.

Says Lalama, "We set up and we hit. A couple takes on a couple tunes. Some were just one take. That's the way I like to do it, unless it's a big production--that's another story. But this wasn't a big production, just guys playing." As for its natural feel, his response, is simple: "Yeah. Jazz." The two words are punctuated with a chuckle. Uncomplicated.

The disk covers songs like Wayne Shorter's "Marie Antionette," Duke Pearson's "Minor League," and Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City." Notable is a stroll through "I'm an Old Cowhand," a nod to Sonny Rollins who famously did the tune in 1957. "I love Sonny Rollins. He's one of my heroes. I still listen to him," says Lalama.

Playing "Cowhand" isn't just a Rollins thing, however. It's an example of the kind of music Lalama likes to improvise over: simpler melodies, simpler concepts, over which he likes to find more complex ways of expressing himself.

"Today, everybody seems like they're writing all kinds of hard shit and what they're playing over it isn't that--it's less complicated than the song is," he says. "I like to play simple songs and make them more complicated. Add different colors to it rather than have to play all the colors every second. I like to go in and out, personally. I like to still play songs like that--simple, but you can create something on top of it."

Some of the younger musicians, he notes, are writing complex things, sometimes for the sake of being complex. But "when they play, they're not really that complex. ... They kind of play 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' over all that [complex] shit," he laughs quietly. "I like to play 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' and play crazy stuff over it--not crazy, but the stuff I'm into over it." Of his style and approach, he adds, "I'm still workin' on it. Still workin.' It's a work in progress."

Lalama is at his most expressive on the record on the ballad "Portrait of Jennie," which he dedicates to his mother, the late Jennie Lalama, a professional singer who was an early musical influence. On it, he is at his melodic best, and his sumptuous tone brings out the best in the song.

"She sang the American Songbook," he says of his mother. "I always wondered why my appetite for music was at a high level. I always wanted to listen to it or play it. It's what I gravitated toward. Even though I played sports, but music was like ... One day I asked my mother. She said I was born on January 30th. And her last gig before I was born was New Year's Eve. So I was in her womb for eight months hearing these tunes live on the stage. I was hearing that vibration. It happened naturally. ... I like playing the American Songbook. It's in my blood."

Lalama's pal and musical cohort, Lovano, also wrote album notes for the recording. "We go way back. We still argue," he says jokingly. "I met him at a club in Cleveland. I was going to Youngstown State University [Ohio] for a music degree. Lovano lived in Cleveland. There was a great club called the Smiling Dog Saloon in Cleveland. They would have everybody. I heard Stan Getz there. Miles. Chick. Herbie. Freddie Hubbard. Junior Cook. Sonny Stitt. It was a great club--six nights a week, from Monday to Saturday. Sometimes Lovano or different local guys would play a set before the kingpins, the main acts. There was this kid, I didn't know who he was at the time, but it was Lovano. We got talking a few times.

"In 1976, I think it was, I joined Woody Herman's band, and there he was. We've been playing ever since. We played in that band. I play in his nonet. We played with Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra for about 10 years, together. Plus everything else we did here in town [New York City]. A couple things here and there. He's my man. We went to different schools together."

Lovano, for his part, states in his album notes that the group plays "with a joyous attitude that defines what jazz music is all about."

Before the Smiling Dog days, Lalama's musical roots were influenced by his grandfather and his parents. His father, Nofrey, was a drummer and met his mother on the bandstand, so music was bound to ensue. (His brother, David, teaches music at Hofstra University and the Manhattan School of Music.) Like many youngsters, the clarinet became his first experience with reed instruments.

"My grandfather gave me my first clarinet when I was 9. He was a clarinet and alto player. Then I ended up getting a tenor for Christmas when I was 14. I started fooling around with that. Music was in the air in the house. My father listened to Sonny Stitt and Stan Getz. My mother was a singer, so we listened to Ella, the big bands." As rock music became prominent on the scene, it was soul stuff that Lalama preferred.

"I liked James Brown. Not that I didn't like the other. I listened to Stitt when I was 14. It was difficult to figure out, for me, at the time. The groups that I played with at that age--14, 15, 16--we played like James Brown. So I was into Maceo [Parker]. But it evolved from that. Jazz was always there. I wasn't one of these kids that: my parents liked it, so I hated it. I wasn't one of those. I liked it because it grooves. I had that record of Stitt with Jack McDuff. [Sonny Stitt with Jack McDuff; Stitt Meets Brother Jack (OJC, 1962)]. I wore that one out."

About rock music, he explains, "James Brown was so swinging to me. I liked The Beatles and

Jimi Hendrix. That was about it. All of that other music, I couldn't use. Cream and all that stuff, The Who--that didn't make any sense. So I got deeper into jazz then because I wasn't diggin' what was happening with my colleagues. My friends and what they listened to--I didn't like it. It wasn't swinging. James Brown was killin.' The other stuff was too oom-pah, oom-pah for me," he says with a chortle.

"As I got older, I heard Trane: 'What the hell is this?' Sonny Rollins too. I remember this guy turned me onto A Night at the Village Vanguard (Blue Note, 1957), Sonny Rollins playing trio. I was mesmerized. The saxophone's supposed to sound like this? That was it. Forget it, I'm done," he says with respect, adding gleefully, "Life's over as I know it."

At Youngstown State, a jazz program was about to be born, spearheaded by another student and mentor to Lalama, Anthony Leonardi. "He was about 12 years older than me. He was a bassist. He used to play with Woody Herman. He played with Woody with Sal Nitisco. He's the one that turned me on to Sonny Rollins and Coltrane--that kind of stuff. Bird, even. He was a bassist, so he knew about harmony and stuff. He started a one-hour elective [course] at Youngstown. There was no jazz at Youngstown. I was a clarinet major. There wasn't even a saxophone major when I was there. He started this and formed a band. It caught on with the administration. Now you can get a Master's and a Bachelor's at Youngstown in performance and education and arranging, I think. But it started out with that. It led up to what it is now. Tony started it, but I was a big part of it, because I was kind of like the star. We would pack the place. We'd play a concert, there'd be 700 people there. I was also in the wind ensemble and the symphony, except there'd be about 150 people there. The administration started seeing dollar signs. I think that's one of the reasons they made a major out of it. Tony did it. He was my man."

Leonardi also invited Thad Jones to the school for teaching and performing sessions. That proved to be fortuitous for the young Lalama. "One night we did a concert and Thad was out front. I got to play, and I played things in the afternoon with him. He let me play. That was a trip and a half for me. I was talking to Thad, and he said, 'If you want to play, do it seriously; you ought to move to New York.' So I did."

Three months later, Lalama was in New York. "Thad, being the beautiful guy that he was, I would start subbing in the band [Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Big Band]. My first gig in town was in New Jersey. Thad and Mel used to have something to do with William Patterson College. We did three gigs in a little club on campus. They asked me if I wanted to do it. This wasn't with the big band. This was a quintet with George Mraz [bass], Walter Norris [piano] and Mel and Thad. That was my first gig, man. I couldn't believe it. I'm sitting there shaking. I was lucky they played a tune I heard of, let alone knew. It was a dream come true."

In the Jones-Lewis big band, "Frank Foster and Gregory Herbert were in the band at the time, on tenor. So I would sub for them. This was off on the road, doing stints with the big bands of Woody Herman and Buddy Rich. When I came back, I was subbing a lot with Mel's band. It was Mel's band then. [Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra. Jones had departed.] Gary Pribek quit and I got the

chair. I've been there ever since [through its permutation into the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra]. Lovano was in the band at the time. It was Ted Nash, Gary Smulyan, Dick Oatts, Lovano and me. That's the saxophone section that I joined when I finally got the gig."

"The big band experience was extremely valuable. In those organizations, Lalama was able to develop "tone and intonation. Your technique and your blending. It's still very important. I've been doing it a long time, but you learn every day. You get to hear everybody, too. Especially in Mel's band there were great players, soloists. I've been sitting next to Dick Oatts for 27 years. Smulyan, Rich Perry now, and Billy Drewes."

Some wild stories exist about being on the road with Buddy Rich, who had a mercurial temper. But for Lalama, it was just part of the deal. No worries. "I like Buddy Rich. He was crazy. He was a spoiled brat, but he was a real musician. When you sat down and talked with him, he was great. He was one of the cats--like hanging with the cats. He had so many great stories about Bird and Sinatra, just to name a few. He would get in a mood: 'You guys suck. I'm gonna get an L.A. band.' Blah, blah. You had to be cool. We'd sit down and play. Two days later we're hanging on the bus.

"The stories [of his temper] are true, but it's not really. ... When his band sucked, he told you. I remember one time there was this trumpet section from North Texas State, and they weren't that experienced so they were fired right away. But he didn't yell or anything. You know why? Because he knew they couldn't play. But if you can play, and you're messing things up, he gets mad. Like if you're with a corporation and you weren't doing your job, the guy would bring you in his office. Buddy had his own way, of course. He would scream. Cause he was nuts, you know," laughs Lalama, fondly recalling his former boss. "But I liked the guy. I really did. He wasn't my favorite jazz drummer. But he was the greatest drummer, technically. He was like the Michael Brecker of the drums. Technically, he was ridiculous. Ridiculous."

The experience also allowed him to rub elbows at times with other notable jazzmen. "I remember we used to play the Bottom Line in New York a lot. And every time we played, Jo Jones would come in. They were friends. He'd always get Jo Jones to play a tune. We happened to have a John LaBarbera arrangement of 'One O'Clock Jump.' It wasn't what Basie played, it was what Buddy played. We didn't play it that much, but he would call it when Jo Jones would sit in. I happened to play on that tune, so I got to play with Jo Jones about 10 times--'Papa' Jo," says Lalama, with pride. "But they were friends. He had friends. Guys respected him. He was funny. I liked the guy."

Woody Herman was different, he recalls. "He was never on the bus. He was cool. He was nuts, too. I learned a lot. That was my first major-league gig, so to speak. I had played with Thad, but as far as being steady, you had to perform every night. You were on the road--big-time jazz, out there doing it. I learned a lot, man. ... Leaders have to trust you. Just for the normal stuff, like being on time and playing the music, but also the musical thing., They have to trust that when you go up and play, you're going to be cool. I was 22, 23--a kid, or course. You learn these

things, playing with people like that."

Each experience had its own enriching qualities. "The way I look at it--and this is not a putdown--but Woody was like high school, Buddy was like college and Mel's band was like life: the real shit. That's not a putdown of Buddy or Woody at all. That's just the way it happened for me. Every one of them was a strong, strong thing. I learned different things. With Buddy I learned technique. He played a lot of things real fast--a lot of saxophone solos and stuff. Woody wasn't quite like that. It was more like--other than a few things like 'Four Brothers' and stuff--it was ... like high school. And Buddy, like college, fast, learning your saxophone better. And Mel was all of that--even more blending and more musically challenging." He adds with affection, "the jazz part is deep, to play with those guys."

In addition to sitting in the sax section of big groups, Lalama has always played other projects around New York. He plays with just bass and drums. The band on the new CD has been active for a while. There's Lovano's band and also work with his wife.

"I'm married to a singer. Nicole Pasternak. We did a CD together called *In a Word* (Garagista Music, 2003): Don Friedman [piano] and Dennis Irwin [bass]--no drums. She's a great singer. I've played with other singers, of course. Mel Tormé, I used to play with him a lot. When you play with the big bands, you play with a lot of singers too. I can remember all of them right now. Right now, I'm only thinking about one--Nicole Pasternak," he says chuckling. "She's baaad, man. I'm talking about the American Songbook. I think she wrote the American Songbook. I learned tunes off of her."

It's added up to a stellar career jammed with a lot of variety, which is the way the saxophonist likes it. "Big bands, small groups. I was playing in the Carnegie Hall band with [Jon] Faddis. I did that for about eight years. I remember playing at Carnegie Hall on a Thursday night. So I had a tuxedo, playing a gig. I was also running a jam session at the Savoy, on 41st Street. It's not there anymore. But I would go from playing in a big band in Carnegie Hall, and about a half-hour later I'd throw on my street clothes and go to the Savoy and run this jam session. That would be my night. I thought it was pretty diverse. Even the clothes were diverse," he says with a sparkle. "From a tuxedo to street clothes in a bar, having played Carnegie Hall about 15 minutes prior."

So New York City has been good to Lalama, who's pushing age 60. Certainly, the reverse is true as well. And now is a time he's trying to step out more. Lead his own groups and get his name out there as a player, group leader and writer.

"I can't complain. I'm trying to do more now as a leader. I was always pretty much a sideman, which I dug. I learned a lot. I learned business-wise and I learned a lot musically, everything, persistence. But now I'm trying to do a little more as a leader. That's what I feel like doing, right now. No other reason--I just kind of do what I feel, where my brain and my heart takes me. ... I can't complain about New York. I love New York."

He adds, "Things change in New York. That's one thing about it--things change. It's different now

than it was 10 years ago, let alone 20 years ago, let alone 30 years ago. I kind of like that, though. It's just my personality. I like change. But sometimes, when you get older I'm starting to notice things change, but not for the good. Sometimes I feel more uptight and strain than I used to feel at 30. And I don't mean me. I mean the world. Even in the music--like I was saying before, they write these tunes that are ridiculous. It's not that I can't play them. I don't want to play them. They make me uptight." With a laugh, he proclaims, "Relax. You know?"

"But some things are even better. The way of communication is great. You can e-mail Europe without paying a dime. I remember you'd have to play \$20 to talk to somebody in Europe to get a gig. Now you e-mail. That's great."

Part of Lalama's plan is to write more and keep working on improvising. "I'm going to write for me. In the last 10 years, I've been really concentrating on improvising. I do write. I have CDs out and I have tunes on there and I write. But I think I'm going to add more to it. I've been improvising, studying music and finding different things about it. It tickles my fancy to write some different things, too. That's part of being a leader, too. You should move on. You should move forward. I just want to move forward."

He pauses a second to reflect. "But still keep the folk song, which is the blues. Not that I have to play the blues every second. I don't mean that. I don't mean soul licks, but the folk song--because jazz has a folk song. That's my opinion and what I live by, basically." A good thing to live by. So, cent' anni.

-- R.J.DeLuke, [All About Jazz](#)

Ralph Lalama belongs to the generation of aggressive, burly toned tenor saxophonists that arrived on the scene in big bands of the '70s. His path led from Woody Herman to Buddy Rich to, in 1983, the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra (now known as the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra), in which he still plays.

*The Audience* (Mighty Quinn), his second album with guitarist John Hart, bassist Rick Petrone and drummer Joe Corsello, contains sterling ensemble work, just-right grooves and brash, spit-it-out tenor statements. Lalama's New York City tone and headlong, leaping rhythmic maneuvers set the pace. Corsello's drum fills and lead-ins spread the ensemble joy - dig his snare and bass drum tones and rhythmic patterns on Stevie Wonder's funky "Livin' for the City" - and his loose, driving beat keeps the group primed but free from uptightness.

Sam Coslow's "Kiss and Run," with a fast, samba-like beat, is another group highlight as Lalama cruises through the chord changes bolstered by Petrone's slugging bass line. On "Portrait of Jennie," the album's lone ballad, Lalama can't resist swinging, and at the end he uncoils a long, Sonny Rollins-like cadenza.

Hart is an effective accompanist and soloist throughout the album. His solos emphasize the groove, vary phrase lengths and intensity and often refer to the blues. "Livin' for the City" and "Love Thy Neighbor" are fine examples.

-- Owen Cordle, [NewsObserver.com](http://NewsObserver.com)

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While tenor saxophonist Ralph Lalama has been infrequently recorded as a leader, he has found a champion in Jerry Roche, founder and owner of the Mighty Quinn label. Lalama's second release for the label utilizes the same band (guitarist John Hart, bassist Rick Petrone, and drummer Joe Corsello) as on his successful date *Energy Fields*. But the saxophonist doesn't settle for a heavy mix of familiar standards and bop vehicles, instead exploring rarely covered gems like Wayne Shorter's constantly twisting "Marie Antoinette" (though no one on the date loses their head) and an invigorating workout of Duke Pearson's intricate blues "Minor League." The quartet's funky arrangement of Stevie Wonder's "Livin for the City" works very well. One unique feature of the CD is that Lalama devotes one cut apiece to focus on duo improvisations with each of his musicians. The one very familiar song is an extended, loping workout of "I'm an Old Cowhand," made famous in jazz circles by Sonny Rollins' trio version on *Way Out West*, though the additional of Hart's guitar gives it a very different sound and helps to keep it from running out of steam. This is an enjoyable session that is easily one of Ralph Lalama's best dates as a leader.

-- Ken Dryden, [All Music Guide](http://All Music Guide)

Great work from tenorist Ralph Lalama -- a set that follows strongly from his previous gem of an album for the Mighty Quinn label! As on that set, Lalama plays here with an edge that takes us back to a time when tenorists would gladly skirt the space between modern and mainstream -- cutting a sharp edge on a straight tune, and always hinting that they could go farther outside, even while they still kept things inside and swinging! The album's got a classic feel that goes way beyond its cover and contemporary date -- and the group features guitar from John Hart, bass from Rick Petrone, and drums from Joe Corsello. Titles include "Love Thy Neighbor", "Marie Antoinette", "Jome", "Kiss & Run", "Ricme", "Minor League", and "Portrait Of Jennie". © 1996-2010, Dusty Groove America, Inc.

-- [Dusty Groove America.com](http://Dusty Groove America.com)

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Covers can become trite very quickly, but when arrangements are fresh and performance is equal to the task, they can become as endearing as new masterpieces. *The Audience*, by Ralph Lalama Quartet, has that quality with its mix of lesser-known jazz songs, a little pop and some original interludes.

Lalama, a tenor saxophonist, has been a fixture on the New York jazz scene for 30 years, many of them spent with the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. He was also a member of Joe Lovano's

Grammy-winning Nonet. Joining Lalama are bassist Rick Petrone, guitarist John Hart and drummer Joe Corsello.

There's something special about a swinging jazz interpretation of a pop, rock or soul song. The quartet brings that type of flair to Stevie Wonder's "Livin' for the City." Sax and guitar blend for the melody with modest contributions from bass and drums. After the chorus, Lalama solos, with playful support from the supporting cast. Hart's solo is in that hybrid area that bridges jazz and traditional blues. After the two trade a second set of solos, the band returns to the melody. Petrone and Corsello show off a bit during the closing sequence while Lalama and Hart engage in a spirited call-and-response.

"Portrait of Jennie," previously recorded by Nat King Cole and several jazz luminaries, is dedicated to Lalama's mother Jennie, who died in 2005. This tranquil piece features a somber, yet charming lead from the tenor. A dialogue between Lalama and Corsello sets up the ending. "Minor League," first recorded by guitarist Grant Green with saxophonist Joe Henderson, is a lively piece. Lalama's lead is augmented by the play of the sidemen, while Hart again solos with a crafty blend of jazz and blues.

The Audience is the quartet's follow-up to its debut, Energy Fields (Mighty Quinn, 2008). The name is derived from the band's alignment during the recording session—playing as if before a live audience.

-- Woodrow Wilkins, [All About Jazz](#)

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## **Ralph Lalama Quartet - *The Audience* (Mighty Quinn)**

### **A Musical Product Of True Veterans**

After stints with the Village Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, the Carnegie Hall Jazz band, and the Grammy award winning Joe Lovano Nonet, Ralph Lalama has acquired a tenor sax tone that's both muscular and sensitive, and one that's as comfortable navigating a 5/4 hard bop tune as it is a heartfelt ballad. With the help of guitarist John Hart and the rhythm section of Rick Petrone and Joe Corsello, Lalama makes the kind of smart, soulful jazz music that never gets old.

On Wayne Shorter's Marie Antoinette, the quartet keeps things light and swinging, with two impressive solos from Lalama and Hart. On their cover of Stevie Wonder's Livin' For the City, the group replaces Wonder's funky backbeat with an off-center rhythm that gives the song more of a hard bop reading than a "soul jazz" one. Portrait of Jennie is a melancholy ballad that highlights Lalama and Hart's ability to be musically inventive without disturbing a song's dominant

mood. Of the three short improvisations Lalama plays with each member of his quarter (Jonme, Jome, and Ricme), Jonme may be the best, with the two players winding around each other in a game of musical catch-me.

Listening to an album like *The Audience*, it's easy to forget how skilled the players are because they play with such poise and confidence that it all sounds so easy. But make no mistake--this is the product of true veterans, musicians who've honed their craft for so long that you can no longer hear them "working."

\*\*\*1/2 Stars

-- Daniel Krow, AudiophileAudition.com

*The Audience* revisits the decided chemistry that jazz tenor ace Ralph Lalama, guitarist John Hart, bassist Rick Petrone and drummer Joe Corsello displayed on Lalama's 2008 release, "Energy Fields." "Love Thy Neighbor" showcases his meaty tone in an enticing theme reading. After alluring solos from Petrone and Hart, Lalama scores with persuasive, swinging ideas. His phrase trades with Corsello add spark. "Marie Antoinette" moves over a percolating Petrone-Corsello beat, and boasts a series of tantalizing tenor-guitar exchanges - bluesy and otherwise. Lalama plays the ballad "Portrait of Jennie" with profound warmth and musicality. Other winners: the natty minor blues, "Minor League"; "I'm an Old Cowhand" as a sumptuous cooker at medium pace; and "Ricme," a telling Lalama-Petrone free improvisation.

-- Zan Stewart, NJ.com

Art Carney never seemed to have a problem with being a side kick and you have to admire a side kick that that has found his sweet spot and mines it and owns it. They don't have the pressure of being all things to all people, know there's a power in being the power behind the throne and often surprise you when they get the chance to step out. Because they know how to be true to themselves, when they do reach out, that kind of personal work resonates with people that want something personal they can feel and pass along with pride. Lalama hits it out of the park on that score. A slightly left leaning sax mainstream jazz date, there's plenty of low pressure stretching out and just a wealth of good vibes, almost too much for one set to serve up. If you can get away with playing this after hours date in your cubicle at work, Dilbert will never figure out what you're so happy about. Well done.

-- Guido Crosetti, Midwest Record

Tenor saxophonist Ralph Lalama is a respected jazz journeyman probably best known for his

more than 25-year tenure with the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. He's also played and recorded with the Joe Lovano Nonet, the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band and drummer Joe Morello's group, among others. But he's had relatively few opportunities to record as a leader. His 2008 release, the well-received *Energy Fields* (Mighty Quinn), was his first in over a decade and his first ever for a US label. So it's nice to see him back so soon with a worthy follow-up.

Lalama is a powerhouse soloist who has forged his own sound by fusing the styles of various tenor sax forebears, Sonny Rollins being the most apparent. He and his fine quartet (John Hart on electric guitar, Rick Petrone on bass and Joe Corsello on drums) explore a nicely varied set including modern jazz standards like Wayne Shorter's mid-tempo gem "Marie Antoinette" and Duke Pearson's complex blues "Minor League." They even revisit "I'm an Old Cowhand," a tune Rollins helped introduce to the jazz world on his landmark 1957 Riverside album, and dig up "Love Thy Neighbor," a Bing Crosby hit from the 1930s, later recorded by John Coltrane. Lalama showcases his exquisite ballad chops on "Portrait of Jennie," another tune covered by Rollins, and lays down some bluesy, hard-edged funk with Hart on Stevie Wonder's "Livin' for the City." In addition, three brief, duo improvisations spotlight his talented band members.

Throughout, Lalama proves himself a master improviser with a rich, supple tone and an abundance of musical ideas. It's an impressive outing by an underrated jazz veteran with plenty to say.

-- Joel Roberts, [All About Jazz](#)

A few choice items from the American Popular Songbook, tunes by Wayne Shorter, Duke Pearson, and Stevie Wonder, plus three brief duo improvisations, all rendered in a recognizable mainstream style by a band that includes two primary soloists and a bass and drums team. On the face of it, Ralph Lalama's second Mighty Quinn release appears rather modest relative to the ever expanding, unceasing advance of jazz and improvised music in the 21st Century. Nevertheless, throughout the ten tracks of *The Audience* the group delivers something as substantial as their forward leaning colleagues. Lalama and his cohorts, who occasionally play gigs in venues outside of New York City, possess the requisite skill and inspiration to pull off a clean, uncluttered, and coherent group sound that is rooted in bebop but indebted to no one.

Much of what needs to be known about Lalama's tenor saxophone prowess as well as his discerning approach to the music is encompassed in the ballad "Portrait of Jennie." Sporting a sumptuous tone, his lovely interpretation of the head is a textbook example of how to take liberties with a song's melody without distorting its essence. He bursts in at the end of guitarist John Hart's solo and offers clusters of thick set runs. Speeding up and slowing down like a roller coaster, Lalama's ninety second cadenza ends the track in a manner that's both sturdy and spectacular.

Hart has a penchant for making a lot of things happen in the midst of a somewhat cool exterior.

During two choruses on "Love Thy Neighbor," he expertly rides the sure footed, medium tempo swing of bassist Rick Petrone, and drummer Joe Corsello, nimbly scampers away at will, inserts reflective chords, quotes "I've Never Been In Love Before" and "I'm Beginning To See The Light," and offers ample helpings of a blues influenced, soul jazz vocabulary. Frankly, it is hard to think of many guitarists who are as good at fusing so many disparate strands.

Because there's nothing flashy or tumultuous about the support of Petrone and Corsello, it's easy to take for granted their essential contributions to the record. Regardless of the tempo or type of material, they invariably make their presence felt in an unostentatious manner. It's worth diverting attention away Lalama and Hart for awhile to discover just how good the bassist and drummer are at keeping things moving. On a relaxed rendition of "I'm an Old Cowhand," for example, they generate a smooth, flowing, seemingly effortless swing throughout the head and solos.

Contrary to the current glut of jazz recordings composed of bands filled with virtuosic, strong willed individuals who play at one another and compete for attention, The Audience is largely about cooperation and mutual support. Because of a willingness to heed the call of something larger than their own individual talents, Lalama and company have produced a deeply satisfying recording.

-- David A. Orthmann, [All About Jazz](#)

Well known as an educator and as a first call sideman for the likes of Joe Lovano (who contributes the liner essay) and the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, tenor saxophonist Ralph Lalama also has released a string of swinging mainstream jazz albums as a leader. On this album, he is joined by John Hart on guitar, Rick Petrone on bass and Joe Corsello on drums. The album opens up with Wayne Shorter's "Marie Antoinette" (digression: check out Ethan Iverson's excellent blog post about Shorter) which is uptempo swinging hard bop, balanced by a strong guitar solo and deep brawny tenor. There's a soulful version of "Livin' for the City" by Stevie Wonder, that gives Hart a chance to stretch out with a Grant Green flavored solo. Duke Person's "Minor League" is taken at a medium tempo, with the full quartet swinging propulsively before Lalama steps out with a strong and muscular solo. Petrone and Corsello lock in to make an excellent and deep bass and drums pocket. The album closes with a lengthy version of "I'm An Old Cowhand" that swings gently and recalls the classic Sonny Rollins version and includes a lengthy mid tempo guitar solo. This was a consistently good album of swinging hard bop jazz, and both the soloing and ensemble playing was top notch.

-- Tim Niland, [Blogspot Music & Blues](#)

Dexter Gordon achieved a post-bebop tenor saxophone sound that was somewhere between

the sleepy, vibrato-less tone of Lester Young and the falling-off-the-edge wail of John Coltrane. Yonkers native Ralph Lalama comes out of this tradition. On his fifth recording as a leader and his first release since 2008's successful *Energy Fields* (Mighty Quinn), Lalama elbows his way to the center with his virile, muscular tenor tone. Lalama has been an important sideman in several seminal bands, including a membership in Woody Herman's 1976 *Thundering Herd*, a 25-year stint with the [Village Vanguard Jazz Orchestra] and Joe Lovano's nonet. This has provided Lalama the exposure necessary to drive his solo efforts, all of which are uniformly fine. Leading a guitar-based quartet, Lalama mixes up his recital with multi-genre crossovers from the old standards ("I'm An Old Cowhand," hats off to Sonny Rollins), the new standards (Stevie Wonder's "Livin' for the City") and those rising in the mix (Wayne Shorter's "Marie Antoinette" and Duke Pearson's "Minor League"). Lalama's own compositions flesh out this musical map into a three-dimensional topography characterized by craggy, angular heads and equally circuitous solos from the saxophonist and guitarist John Hart. The charm of this recording is the stylistic chances Lalama takes without ever making it sound like he's taking chances.

-- C. Michael Bailey, [All About Jazz.com](http://AllAboutJazz.com)

How many times has a tenor saxophonist fronted a rhythm section comprised of guitar, bass and drums? When does a particular instrumentation cease yielding interesting results? These are sticky questions unintentionally brought to the fore by this latest outing by veteran saxophonist Ralph Lalama's quartet. Like their employer, guitarist John Hart, bassist Rick Petrone and drummer Joe Corsello are all solid players. They all complement one another with keen sensitivity and concentrated creativity. Each brings his respective A-game to the session and spurs Lalama to some splendid tenor work that's at once relaxed and incisive in its dry-toned distillation of past masters. Enthusiastic liner notes by Joe Lovano also help measurably in proving the band's bonafides.

Still, there's the persistent realization of a scene that has countless counterparts in the vast annals of jazz. Lalama hardly seems hindered or bothered by that history. He comes to blow and blow he does on a ten song program that touches on hardbop, balladry and even Motown soul. Interspersed between these pieces are opportunities for the leader to dialogue in improvisation with each of his partners. "Jome" and "Ricme", the pieces with Petrone and Corsello respectively, are particularly effective in this regard, loosening up the participants and sliding over into a loose, quasi-free dialogue.

Hart enjoys equal footing in the solo department, a standing intimated early in the way Lalama defers to him on Wayne Shorter's "Marie Antoinette". It's a rendering that curiously brings to mind Bill Lee's arrangement in his son Spike's *She's Gotta Have It*, though the melody is explicit in only the opening and closing sections. Hart's thickly amplified chording on Stevie Wonder's "Livin' For the City" almost sounds like a Hammond B-3, but he dials it back to an almost acoustic delicacy for the disc's centerpiece "Portrait of Jennie", a tune that also allows for a

gorgeous unaccompanied cadenza by Lalama. The saxophonist nods to Rollins in the finale reading of "I'm an Old Cowhand", but his version has rounder edges and a more overtly soulful burnish. Quartets of this type may be quantifiably numberless, but Lalama and his colleagues point convincingly to that truth as moot when it comes to possibility of quality music.

-- [Master of a Small House.com](http://MasterofaSmallHouse.com)