

Ralph Lalama ▶ *Suburban Expression*

Saxophonist Ralph Lalama often lets his head, shoulders and arms bounce a bit while walking, like the default bob and bobble of a hipster, as he recently coursed around the edge of an overflow crowd waiting to hear him perform with his quartet, not in a club but in the program wing of the Rye, N.Y., library.

After a brief welcome, Lalama started with “Love Thy Neighbor” off his new quartet CD, *The Audience* (Mighty Quinn). Backed by the three same musicians from the album—guitarist John Hart, bassist Rick Petrone and drummer Joe Corsello—Lalama dug right in, quickly helping to establish the song’s lively rhythm and then floating over it with his characteristically exultant and spirited phrasing, bringing his Sonny Rollins influence to mind.

A few days later, Lalama was still musing about the positive library show. “It was an interesting experience for me from the start,” he said. “Because people were really into the music without really knowing what to expect. It wasn’t a jazz crowd per se, but they were really listening—and enjoying the music. I definitely

focus more when the audience is so obviously digging what we’re playing. Who wouldn’t?”

Lalama moves among many activities with apparent ease. Besides his quartet, now in its third year and initially documented on the 2008 CD *Energy Fields*, he also leads a trio called Bop Juice and is a longstanding member of Joe Lovano’s nonet and large band aggregates. Lovano and Lalama became pals while apprenticing with Woody Herman in the 1970s. Six years ago, Lalama was one of the founding instrumentalists—playing tenor sax, clarinet and flute—in the Westchester Jazz Orchestra, and he has occupied a chair in the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra since 1983, back when it was known as the Mel Lewis Orchestra.

“A few years ago I decided to focus again on my work as a leader, and that has brought me a whole new set of rewards in terms of being able to develop my sound and ideas” Lalama said. “Leading the two groups, I’m back to composing more and finding that I have a lot to say about life through my music.”

Born and raised in West Aliquippa, Pa.,



outside Pittsburgh, Lalama’s parents met on the bandstand. His father was a drummer, and his mother was a singer. Lalama keeps his father’s old drum set in the music room of the house in Yonkers, N.Y., that he shares with his wife, jazz vocalist Nicole Pasternak.

“Nicole and I love being in Yonkers,” Lalama said. “It’s a 12-minute car ride to Harlem, and a half-hour door-to-door to the [Village] Vanguard. You can’t beat that. I’m a city guy, but owning a home means a lot to me. It means privacy and a place to really relax.” —Tom Staudter