Sammy Figueroa & His Latin Jazz Explosion
The Magician
Savant

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By Scott Albin

The fact that conguero-percussionist Figueroa has been so busy for over 30 years performing with numerous top jazz and pop artists may explain why he did not form his own band—the Latin Jazz Explosion—until 2002, with encouragement from Ron Weber of South Florida Friends of Jazz and bassist Don Wilner, the musical director of Miami's Van Dyke Café. Figueroa is now among the top locally based South Florida jazz musicians, a list that includes trumpeter Arturo Sandoval, multi-instrumentalist Ira Sullivan, pianist Eddie Higgins and singer-violinist Nicole Yarling.

Figueroa's first Latin Jazz Explosion CD, And Sammy Walked In, won a Grammy nomination, and The Magician could do the same. He has assembled an outstanding band. Tenor saxophonists John Michalak and Troy Roberts are both muscular, intense and polished players, and Roberts also impresses greatly on soprano. Trumpeter Alex Norris is consistently excellent throughout, with an impeccable, rich sound, fertile imagination, and flowing, rhythmically varied delivery. Michael Orta and Silvano Monasterios split the piano duties, and each is a technically gifted, stirring soloist. Bassists Nicky Orta and Gabriel Vivas drive the momentum of the music hard, and Orta is a virtuoso of the electric bass. The drum chair is shared by Ludwig Afonso, Götz Kujack and Nomar Negroni, all able players. Figueroa, of course, holds it all together with his exuberant and tasteful conga work.

The diverse program includes the Miles Davis classic "Seven Steps to Heaven," Hubert Laws' "Together" (as a "jazz boogaloo"), Cedar Walton's memorable "Firm Roots," and Horace Silver's "Gregory Is Here," all refreshingly Latinized. Vivas contributes three well-written tunes, including the Brazilian baihao "Festas do Norte" ("Celebration From the North") and the hypnotic "Healing Man." Monasterios composed the title tune, an ingratiating cha-cha, as well as the vibrant and mysterious "Crossroads."