

A stand-up kind of guy

Toronto jazz bassist Roberto Occhipinti's new CD is an opulent mix of rhythms and textures

Viewed purely as an exercise in logistics, not aesthetics, it seems clear that Roberto Occhipinti's new CD, *Yemaya*, cannot exist. The 50-year-old jazz bassist, born and raised in Toronto, is a nice guy and a fine musician. But record-company economics being the disaster they are, it's hard to imagine anyone assembling a 62-piece string orchestra, a string quartet, and an army of Afro-Cuban percussionists to bolster the work of a half-dozen first-call soloists. All in the service of traditional Cuban tunes and modern jazz originals. All in the name of a string bassist whom even most Canadian jazz fans don't know well.

And yet it exists. More than that, it's really good: an opulent blend of modern jazz harmonies, Cuban rhythms and orchestral textures, *Yemaya* (on Alma records, distributed by Universal Music) is as boldly defined and fully realized as any Canadian jazz album this year. Yet Occhipinti didn't benefit from the largesse of a recording industry giant or a shadowy benefactor to make it. Truth be told, it was all a bit of a stealth operation. Take that string orchestra. Last year, Occhipinti, who grew up in symphonies, chamber ensembles and musical-theatre pit bands, landed a job writing for an easy-listening CD called *Tuscany: A Romantic Journey*. He recorded it in Moscow with the proudly cost-effective Globalis Orchestra. But Occhipinti had motives beyond paying the rent. "I took these gigs knowing I would be able to sneak some tracks onto my own record," he says. Once the orchestra had finished the saccharine work of the day, Occhipinti handed out background arrangements for three of his own tunes..

This kind of layering is common currency in pop records, but still quite rare in jazz, where it's more common to put four guys in a room, count off *How High the Moon*, and roll tape. "These days I'm more interested in a record that takes on a life of its own, something that's a complete statement," Occhipinti says. So one way to regard him is as a musician who doesn't let modest means inhibit sweeping musical ambition. "Musicians are always getting together and saying, 'Man, we should record this.' A lot of the time it becomes, 'Man, we should have recorded that.' I don't like to let that happen."

His models for the record include the albums Herbie Hancock recorded with large ensembles in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the lush string arrangements that were a fixture on albums produced by the CTI label during the same period. CTI's fondness for wrapping opulent string orchestras around jazzers like George Benson, Milt Jackson and Freddie Hubbard could be "cheesy," Occhipinti allows. "But what I admired were the production values. And there's nothing wrong with having something that's beautiful-sounding."

Despite the huge cast he's assembled for *Yemaya*, Occhipinti keeps the focus on a few top-drawer soloists: **tenor saxophonist Phil Dwyer, trumpeter Kevin Turcotte, pianist Hilario Duran, and himself**. Each becomes like a character in an opera, displaying a distinctive personality. Perhaps surprisingly, given his instrument, Occhipinti is the romantic lead. Some of the best tracks feature his deep-toned and achingly lyrical pizzicato bass. It's more of a New York bass sound than a Toronto bass sound, I tell him. "I'll take that as a compliment," he says. "It's funny, when I was travelling with Jane Bunnett, almost everybody assumed I was from New York. It's automatic when you're ethnic with a bit of an attitude, when your name ends in a vowel. We're accustomed to a certain kind of deference from Canadian jazz musicians."