

SEPTEMBER 6, 2006

ERNEST BARTELDES

MUSIC

“I wanted to go out of New York,” says the enigmatic Cameroonian bassist, Richard Bona, about the recording of his latest album, *Tiki*. “I didn’t want to make the record at home—having this luxury, we tend to get spoiled. I then thought about Brazil: The country has a direct link to most of the tracks on it.”

Bona delves into an array of influences on the disc, which was mostly recorded in Rio and in Bahia (other tracks were laid in Paris and New York). He does so, however, by engraving his unique personality and interpretation skills into each tune. For instance, the opening track, “Please Don’t Stop,” hooks its listeners immediately because of its catchy arrangement and the soulful English-language vocals of John Legend.



“Legend is very talented; he wrote the hook right in the studio,” explains Bona. “The song was originally intended for a commercial connected with the World Cup, but that ultimately ended up in the album.”

Another stand-out tune is “Manyaka O Brazil,” which features Brazilian singer Djavan on vocals, who, curiously enough, duets with Bona in the native language of Cameroon, not in Portuguese. “I went to Brazil with the tracks, and he [Djavan] told me that he had never had the chance to sing in another language, so I taught him the words, and he just did it.”

Other guests on the disc include guitarist Toninho Horta, percussionist Marcos Suzano, NY-based drummer Ari Hoenig and guitarist Mike Stern, who Bona regards as one of his best friends.

The creative process in the making of the album was not exactly an easy one. “I spent eight months writing ‘Samaouma.’ I wanted to say something about myself, to get all these lyrical elements. I don’t write words everyday, but I play all the time,” says Bona. “Some ideas were in my mind, and after about six months, something clicked and I said, ‘This is going to be the record.’ I had a lot of fun recording it, and that is what matters—to have fun with the music.”

The bassist is also living a very happy moment in his personal life as he adjusts to life in Brooklyn. “I got tired of living in Manhattan,” he explains. “When I got home, I was still stressed, and I didn’t feel like I was resting. In Brooklyn, I feel so much better: I don’t know what it is, it’s just not Broadway and Ninth.”

His recording studio is, however, still located at his previous address, so he hasn’t completely abandoned the place. “I like living in Brooklyn, but when I need some madness, I go to Manhattan.”

September 6. Joe’s Pub, 425 Lafayette St. (at Astor Place),  
212-539-8778; 7, \$20 + \$ 12 min.

**Volume 19, Issue 36**

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World Music

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## Richard Bona

4 stars Jazz Cafe, London

**John Fordham**  
**Wednesday April 2, 2008****Guardian**

If you can keep a full house hanging on your faintest sound at London's Jazz Cafe - a venue perversely designed to harbour distracting pockets of rival noise - you have to be doing something right. Elegant bass guitarist and singer Richard Bona managed that feat several times in a long set launching his first live album, the follow-up to 2005's *Tiki*.

Bona was inspired to play electric bass by the late Jaco Pastorius, and his balletically light-stepping runs, lazily grooving ostinatos and rhythmic eruptions are what brings in the jazz fans. But Cuban, Brazilian and Caribbean dance music, Afro-beat and African traditional songs, and a searing drive reminiscent of Joe Zawinul's *Syndicate*, give the Cameroon-born musician a much broader appeal.

Bona opened with an almost whispered African folk song that was fragile and intimate, until a climactic falsetto squeal echoed without warning from Taylor Haskins' trumpet (Haskins did a great job of sounding like an entire brass section all evening, sometimes with the help of brass-mimicking keyboards); percussionist Samuel Torres and Cuban drummer Ernesto Simpson delivered an explosive salsa feel. A fast, skimming jazzy theme was constantly punctuated by Bona's pinging accents within a racing bassline. A delicate ballad then hushed the room with its fragile high sounds, and Haskins' trumpet took on a muted Miles Davis tone in a whiplash-accented funk feature.

Bona's unaccompanied duet with his own voice was a highlight of the set (even if a shade tricky for such a warmly eloquent performer), and the inevitable drum and percussion showpiece was made more than usually musical by the remarkable sonorities of Samuel Torres' congas. This is a stylish world-music package delivered by an uncannily tight band. Richard Bona could not make an unmusical sound if he tried.

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- Jul 15 **2007 Umbria Jazz Festival**
- Jul 8 **Diana Krall/Chris Botti**

## Montreal International Jazz Festival

Venue/ Various Venues

Location: Montreal , Quebec Canada

Date(s): June 28, 2007 - July 8, 2007

Written By: Bill Milkowski



Guitar figured prominently in this 28th edition of jazz's Greatest Show on Earth. Such premier plectrorists as Mike Stern, John Scofield, Bill Frisell, John Abercrombie, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Allan Holdsworth and Russell Malone represented the jazzier aspects of the instrument while Buddy Guy, George Thorogood, Bryan Lee, Derek Trucks, Chris Duarte and David Gogo showcased the bluesy side.

Throw in the third annual Montreal Guitar Show, a gathering of luthiers showcasing their beautiful handmade wares—from Canada's Godin, Seattle's McElroy and Oneonta's Vinny Colletti to Pat Metheny's personal luthier Linda Manzer—and you had six-string nirvana happening north of the border.

Of course, there were other things happening in Montreal during these 11 days and nights; namely, Bob Dylan, Wynton Marsalis, Harry Connick, Jr., Roy Haynes, Dave Holland, Wayne Shorter, Keith Jarrett, Billy Cobham, Béla Fleck, Branford Marsalis, Van Morrison, Kurt Elling, Mark Murphy and about 500 other concerts at the festival's 10 free outdoor stages and dozen paid indoor venues. But during my five days of coverage (July 4-8), I focused primarily on two things: the guitar in its many facets and bassist-vocalist extraordinaire Richard Bona (pictured), the featured Invitation series guest during the festival's second week (Mike Stern had that honor during the first week).

Bona helped Stern close out his Invitation series run on July 2 with a quartet gig featuring drummer Dave Weckl and trumpeter Roy Hargrove, then opened his own portion of the Invitation series on July 4 as guest bassist with the Jaco Pastorius Big Band. Under the direction of Peter Graves, Jaco's former employer during the early '70s in the house band at Bachelors III nightclub in Fort Lauderdale, this 14-piece juggernaut ran through expanded arrangements of Pastorius compositions from his landmark 1976 debut album and from his heyday with Weather Report. Bona, who was inspired to pick up the bass as a teenager in Cameroon after hearing that hugely influential Jaco debut record, was the perfect choice to fill those big shoes. While other great bassists, including Victor Wooten, Will Lee, Jimmy Haslip, Gerald Veasley and Victor Bailey have appeared on record and in concert with the JPBB, none has

captured the spirit and essence of Jaco's revolutionary approach to bass playing as profoundly as Bona has.

Kicking off the JPBB concert with the classic *Word of Mouth* big-band opener, "Soul Intro/The Chicken," Bona grooved naturally and effortlessly on this earthy funk medley. His fretless playing on the hauntingly beautiful ballad "A Remark You Made," a poignant piece that Joe Zawinul composed specifically with Jaco's signature bass voice in mind, was marked by a nuanced touch and an uncommonly lyrical, singing quality. JPBB tenor saxophonist Ed Calle also demonstrated his own expressive interpretation of Wayne Shorter parts on this moving *Weather Report* number.

Throughout the set, Bona played with so much in reserve, not only cutting the challenging head to Jaco's chops-busting "Teen Town" with ease but also nonchalantly throwing in intricate filigrees on top. On Jaco's catchy "Opus Pocus," JPBB guitarist Randy Bernsen affected a koto sound with a MIDI guitar synth patch while keyboardist Mike Levine dialed up a steel pans patch on synth. Bona turned in a cleanly arpeggiated rendition of Paul McCartney's "Blackbird," which Jaco covered on his *Word of Mouth* album, and he displayed remarkable care behind each note on a graceful rendition of Jaco's bass anthem, "Continuum."

Bona copped a perfect reggae one-drop bounce on Pastorius' "Good Morning Anya," then demonstrated flawless time and incredible endurance on the volatile "Reza," which also featured Bona ripping it up on an edgy, distortion-laced bass solo. On an unaccompanied intro to Pastorius' classic "Three Views of a Secret," Bona demonstrated his knack for simultaneously scatting and blowing boppish single-note unison lines on his bass (a quality that he may have emulated from listening to George Benson records in Cameroon as a teenager).

They closed out the set with a strutting rendition of "Liberty City" and encoored with a rousing rendition of Buster Brown's blues shuffle "Fannie Mae," with Bona singing the verse in English. In fact, that would be the sole bit of English that Bona spoke throughout his four-night engagement at Jean-Duceppe Theater. While he sang all of his original tunes in his native Duala language, Bona addressed the audience strictly in French. And given the degree of hearty laughter that he invoked with his between-songs banter, he appears to also be a deft standup comedian, as well as an incredibly gifted bassist and singer.

On the second night of his Invitation series run, Bona showcased his own buoyantly grooving sextet, augmented on some tunes by a three-piece horn section (bone, trumpet, sax). His special guests this evening were fellow bassists Esperanza Spalding and Meshell Ndegeocello, who performed to their own particular strengths. Spalding was showcased on a swinging version of "Autumn Leaves," scatting and playing unison lines on her baby upright bass, a la Benson or Bona. Bona's soaring falsetto voice blended beautifully with Spalding's range on his lively "O Sen Sen Sen." Esperanza exhibited an

authentic *tumbao* feel with her baby upright bass on this infectious Bona original, which was reminiscent of Tania Maria's burning, Latin-flavored signatures. The enigmatic Ndegeocello performed with her back to the audience during her two numbers, one heavily influenced by electric Miles Davis music, the other a bit of Sly Stone-influenced funk that segued into Stevie Wonder's grooving "I Wish." One of the highpoints of this second night was an astounding bit of technological trickery in which Bona looped many layers of vocal harmonies until he built up a one-man Ladysmith Black Mambazo choir.

The third night of the Invitation series featured Bona with three special guests, including the great Beninian fingerstyle guitarist Lionel Loueke, yet another raw talent who can simultaneously scat and burn facile unison lines on his instrument. African kora master Toumani Diabate also performed a few pieces with Bona, astounding the crowd with his dazzling virtuosity and elegant musicality on this ancient stringed instrument of African griots. With an all-knowing sense of cool, Diabate played inhumanly fast, nonchalantly double-timing the tempo while introducing levels of sophisticated subdivisions and time displacement. On the tune "Goin' Back Home," Bona couldn't contain his enthusiasm, getting up from his seat to dance spontaneously to the joyous music coming from Diabate's kora. Guitarist Russell Malone, the third special guest this evening, brought out Bona's jazzier instincts. On "All Blues," taken at a furious tempo, Bona walked with the rhythmic assuredness and authority of Paul Chambers. Malone closed out his portion of the show with a burning rendition of "Sunny," his nod to guitar great Pat Martino.

Bona's final night of the Invitation series featured the Cameroonian bassist-singer in some tight harmonies and joyful melodies sung with his charismatic partners Gerald Toto from Martinique and Lokua Kanza from the Congo. Together they reprised material from their 2006 Sunnyside recording, *Toto Bona Lokua*, generating the buoyant appeal of an African Crosby, Stills and Nash on sweet melodies like Bona's "Ghana Blues," the calypso-flavored "Kolo Roko" and Kanza's catchy audience participation number "Nayé." Kanza, who had come out of the audience the night before to sit in on one tune with Diabate and Bona, proved to be an especially commanding presence and a singer of soul-stirring intensity.

On the guitar side of things, Bill Frisell appeared in a trio setting that reunited him with drummer Baron, a key collaborator during the '90s. A Montreal favorite, Baron brings a dynamism and open-eared sense of risk-taking to the kit that allows him to be wholly interactive and intuitive: prodding, pushing and igniting while also supporting the music. More than most drummers, Baron puts the play back in playing.

Whether it's turning the beat around spontaneously, unexpectedly dropping sticks on the snare, surprising his bandmates as well as the audience in the process, or exhibiting tai chi gestures with bare hands on the cymbals, Baron is a sonic adventurer with manic energy. Plus, as he has demonstrated in his capacity as drummer in John Zorn's Masada, he can also hit a backbeat with

the slamming authority of a guy twice his size. With that wide-ranging repertoire of skills on the kit, he is the perfect drummer to underscore Frisell's mercurial, *outré* instincts.

Like no one else, Frisell sculpts tunes in the moment, carving and shaping them with eccentric voicings and a masterful command of his looping devices. Throughout his set, his guitar was alternately moody and noirish, bluesy and twangy or totally psychedelic, like Chet Atkins with touches of Duane Eddy, Wes Montgomery and Jim Hall with a bit of Neil Young thrown in for good measure. With longtime bassist Tony Scherr (a charter member of Steven Bernstein's Sex Mob) and Baron underscoring the music and complementing Frisell's subversive impulses, the guitarist built up crescendos of swirling, speeded-up, backwards guitar loops and distortion-laced licks. His take on Monk's "Misterioso" was more informed by Nashville session guitarist Hank Garland than by any mainstream jazz guitar ace. Baron's steady ride cymbal pulse on this Monk tune was relaxed and strictly old-school.

Like Monk, Frisell's arrangements have an inherent architecture that only he knows and his pieces reveal themselves gradually in layers. Throughout a compelling set, his potent trio turned in wholly unique versions of Bob Dylan's "Masters of War" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," along with a mournful rendition of Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" and a faithful cover of Sam Cooke's gospel-flavored anthem "A Change is Gonna Come."

During his entertaining set at the Spectrum, slide guitar marvel Derek Trucks played a stripped-down Deltafied duet on National Steel guitar with soulful singer Mike Mattison, copping an appropriately earthy vibe on Howlin' Wolf's "Forty-Four." And on an expansive, Trane-inspired rendition of "My Favorite Things" with his full ensemble, the Allman Brothers Band sideman came across like a cross between Carlos Santana and Dickey Betts.

Kurt Rosenwinkel, the most original and imitated guitar voice since Pat Metheny broke out in the '70s, played an inspired set at the Spectrum with his working quintet featuring pianist Aaron Parks, bassist Joe Martin, exciting new drummer Obed Calvaire and his frontline partner, tenor saxophonist Mark Turner, with whom he shares a common harmonic and rhythmic language based on angular lines and odd intervallic leaps. They opened their dynamic set that drew primarily on material from Rosenwinkel's *Deep Song* with a grinding two-chord vamp titled "Our Secret World" that showcased Calvaire's extraordinary drumming prowess. Rosenwinkel's flowing legato approach and echo-laden single note lines have a distinct horn-like quality that recent hordes of Berklee grads have eagerly emulated. He put that signature quality to good effect on the slow dirge "Another Time."

At the intimate, acoustically brilliant Gesu Center of Creativity, located in an ancient stone building that formerly housed a church, guitarist John Abercrombie engaged in a high degree of interplay with his fabulous quartet featuring violinist Mark Feldman, bassist Marc Johnson and drummer Joey

Baron. On "Banshee" they ran the gamut of dynamics from brash bebop to hushed tones underscored by Baron's subtle brushwork and gentle cymbal colorations. Baron's melodic, unaccompanied drum intro to "Roundtrip" triggered an animated reading of that jaunty Ornette Coleman number, which also included a show-stopping solo by violin virtuoso Feldman. The four struck a sensitive accord on Abercrombie's lovely jazz waltz "Class Trip," then closed on a more bombastic note with "On the Loose," a raucous backbeat number that had Baron putting up some funk underneath and Abercrombie dialing in some nasty distortion, showing his Hendrixian roots.

Guitarist Russell Malone, an appealing performer who balances melodic instincts with an infinite capacity to burn, delighted a packed house at the Spectrum with his tight quartet, anchored by the gifted and eminently swinging young drummer Jonathan Blake. A consummate accompanist and gunslinger of the highest order, Malone is coming directly out of the Charlie Christian-Wes Montgomery-George Benson six-string lineage. During his opener, "He Said What?," the guitarist nimbly tossed off a giddy "Tequila" lick in the middle of his burning solo and held fretboard fans in awe on his explosive "Sugar Buzz." But more than just a pyrotechnician, Malone is also keenly aware of a wider audience beyond guitar fanatics. He appealed directly to them on his breezy R&B ditty "Flirt" and also on a lyrical reading of Milt Jackson's bittersweet ballad, "Heartstrings."

Opening for Malone was the new bass phenom and recent Berklee grad Esperanza Spalding. With her bright, beaming smile, vintage Angela Davis Afro hairstyle, angelic voice and winning manner, she charmed the audience during her 40-minute set, which included a fresh, clave-fueled rendition of "Body and Soul" and a poignant original, "Really Very Small." Granted, she has some intonation problems to overcome, both on the bass as well as with her vocals. But the big question is, Can her obvious star quality overcompensate for any musical shortcomings? Judging by the audience response at her Spectrum set (and to festival promoter Andre Menarde's wild enthusiasm for his new "discovery"), the answer is a resounding yes. Indeed, Esperanza seems destined for stardom, if she isn't a star already.

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# THE Arts

## The New York Times

### Richard Bona

"Tiki" (Decca)

The title track of "Tiki," Richard Bona's new album, neatly summarizes his position on the topic of cultural exchange. It opens with a chorus of voices in a West African tongue: they're all Mr. Bona, representing his native Cameroon. Two minutes in, the music gestures toward Indian pop for a guest turn, in English, by the British-born singer Susheela Raman.

Then comes a hip-hop interjection by Davi Vieira, in the slangy Portuguese of his native Salvador-Bahia, Brazil. Finally Mr. Bona returns to the theme, over a light churn of shakers, keyboards and his own electric bass.

In other words, he is an internationalist who finds a common language in groove, however broadly defined. "Tiki" is his fourth or fifth album as a leader — depending on whether you count a collaborative effort with the singers Gerald Toto and Lokua Kanza released last year — and it has the sheen of a global pop production. There are multiple flirtations with South American rhythm, including one with the estimable Brazilian singer-songwriter Djavan. The soul singer John Legend makes a featured appearance on "Please Don't Stop," a Quincy Jones-like confection.

Modesty suits Mr. Bona, who graciously accommodates his guests. Still, his mellifluous singing voice is the album's most distinctive feature, especially when it arrives in a multitruacked chorus, with falsetto providing the uppermost layers. Mr. Bona glosses over another musical asset — his virtuoso bass technique — but that turns out to be a good decision. "Tiki" feels more recognizably human without it.

NATE CHINEN

## Critics' Choice: New CD's

