

It goes without saying: South Florida is



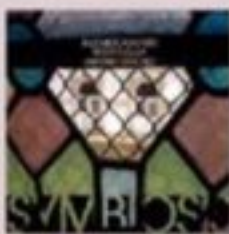
a great place to call home if you play Latin jazz. Just ask pianist and composer Robert Prester. On his 2013 release *Dogtown*

(Commonwealth Ave.), the classically trained former child prodigy recruited first-call Florida sidemen in bassist Nicky Orta, drummer Ettiene Fuentes Jr. and percussionist Dave Schanzer, who also engineered the session. The group, with additional contributions from drummer Jack Ciano, vocalist Terezinha Valois and trumpeter Jonathan Sigel, perform nine lively Prester originals and a dazzling samba arrangement of "Giant Steps." Having played piano from the age of 3, Prester studied privately with Harold Danko, and later earned a graduate degree from the Manhattan School of Music. In recent years, he's teamed up with Brazilian-jazz guitarist and composer Phill Fest, with whom he performs and records, and he keeps a foot in the classical-concert world, as well. Prester's gifts as a jazz writer and player are evident from the drop on *Dogtown*, as he gleefully dances along the keys on the opening "Vincenzo's Blues," our selection. And dig his giddy comping behind Orta's nimble, rich-toned solo or the way he locks in with Fuentes for an exciting finish to the tune.

Finding fresh expression within a fairly standard jazz-



A symbiotic relationship is one that's mutually beneficial for all parties involved. And it certainly describes the connection shared among the members of the Alex Mercado Trio, as displayed on their self-released 2014 album *Symbiosis*. The sophomore effort from Mexican pianist and composer Mercado finds him in the company of like-minded colleagues Scott Colley on bass and Antonio Sánchez on drums. This A-list rhythm team, each a leader in his own right, locks in with the pianist on a variety of grooves and tempos, keeping pace with his lightning runs and accenting and shading the moods



he evinces, from anxious to ebullient, from pensive to poignant. On the quickstepping "Nothing Changes," included here, Mercado romps excitedly alongside Colley's galloping bass lines and Sánchez's speedy sticking. And when the pianist lays out, he hands the baton to his cohorts, who continue the sprint unabated, before all three triumphantly meet