



MAY 2010 ISSUE

Features ⊕ ⊕ ⊕

FROM THE EDITOR

In this Volume 20, Number 4, May 2010 issue of Latin Beat Magazine Online we take a look at Los Angeles' unique women's salsa scene. From the hard-working violinist/bandleader Susie Hansen, to veteran songstress Candi Sosa, and flutist/bandleader Fay Roberts, these ladies all swing to their Latin Beats weekly throughout the Los Angeles metropolis. Also meet newcomers to the scene — the Los Angeles Salsa Divas (an all female salsa band) led by vocalist Ileana García and multi-instrumentalist Iliana Rose. As always, we will also keep you informed with the latest Latin music news, CD reviews, national and international salsa hit parades, our calendar of events and our unique regional music columns. Check out our video corner and streaming music tracks. ¡Bienvenidos to the world of Latin Beat Magazine Online! (lbmo.com) — *Rudy & Yvette Mangual*

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LOS ANGELES SALSA DIVAS

By Rudy Mangual

In a city where at least a dozen salsa bands keep sprouting every week, competing daily for the few gigs available around town, an ingenious marketing strategy is necessary to survive. Singer Ileana García — a fierce road warrior of the local Latin scene— assembled an all-female salsa band to compete with a winning edge. The Los Angeles Salsa Divas comprise the only all-female salsa band in the city and perhaps in the whole state of California. Performing as a sextet or septet, the group features some of the most talented female musicians in Los Angeles salsa and Latin jazz scene.

Meet The Seven L.A. Salsa Divas:

A native of Costa Rica, **Ileana García** (vocalist/minor percussion/composer/bandleader) started working professionally at the tender age of eleven and has not stopped ever since. For the past two decades, she has performed and/or recorded with many bands in Southern California, including Rudy Regalado & Chévere, Mariachi Divas, and Ellas Son; as well as with internationally renowned artists such as Celia Cruz, Joan Sebastian, Cristian Castro, Elvis Crespo and Juan Gabriel. Her passion for singing is mirrored in her original compositions and fiery interpretations.

Born in Miami to Cuban parents, **Iliana Rose** (multi-instrumentalist/vocalist/composer) is the group's piano-playing musical director. This classically trained musician (a graduate of the University of Miami) is an accomplished pianist, percussionist, clarinetist and songstress, who also leads her own band around town. As a vocalist, she captivates audiences — whether performing in Spanish, English, or Portuguese — with her organic and unique phrasing skills, like a jazz singer. Rose is currently enjoying the release of her own solo debut, *Light of the Sun*, while co-producing the L.A. Salsa Divas' upcoming debut recording.

Keiko Okamoto (flutist/composer) was born in Hokkaido, Japan, and began her piano studies at the age of six, before switching to the flute by her 13th birthday. A graduate of Tokyo's Nihon University, Keiko also attended the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston. A resident of Los Angeles since the mid-1990s, Keiko has performed and/or recorded with Orquesta La Palabra, Mariachi Divas, Mariachi Los Angeles, Ellas Son, and Louie Cruz Beltrán's Latin Jazz band, among others. She is also enjoying the release of her debut recording as a leader — *Keiko Okamoto*,



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The approach here for exploring diversity and multiculturalism is really interesting. It's the rhythm of macrambeque, rumba, mambo, guaguanco, bomba, and palo. Rudy Mangual, Latin American...

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A native of Tijuana, Mexico, **María “Coco” Villalobos** (percussionist/singer/composer) started singing and playing guitar as a child, under the guidance of her mother. After relocating with her family to Los Angeles at the age of eleven, she developed a passion for drumming and percussion instruments that continues to this day. Her songwriting skills led to her debut recording, *Hoy Como Ayer*, released in 2000. In 2004, the popular Mexican norteño band Conjunto Primavera recorded Coco's composition titled *Hoy Como Ayer*, making it a mega-hit song and winning numerous awards from the Latin music industry. In addition to performing with the L.A. Salsa Divas, Coco leads her own band.

Originally from Panamá, **Nakeitha “Nikki” Campbell** (conga player) is an extraordinary percussionist who studied with master drummers such as Mamady Keita (Guinea), Juan Calvo Flores, Long John Oliva and Francisco Aguabella (Cuba). She has worked with Ozomatli, Quetzal, Candy Sosa, Mariachi Divas, DIDA, Ellas Son, Balandugu Kan, Bakra Bata, and Amazonas (The Women Master Drummers of Guinea), among others. In addition to performing with the L.A. Salsa Divas, Nikki makes a living as a music supervisor in the film industry (her cinematic credits include “Love and Other Four-Letter Words” and “My Girlfriend's Back”). Nikki is currently working on a documentary about female drummers called “Las Tamboreras.”

Estefanía Badilla (bassist) was born in Alajuela, Costa Rica, where she started playing the electric bass in a classic rock band called “Diesel.” In 2009, she relocated to Los Angeles, to continue her music studies at the L.A. Music Academy. She currently performs around town with various jazz, rock and blues bands. Estefanía is the newest member of the L.A. Salsa Divas.

Rocio Marrón (violinist/composer/arranger) is a native of Southern California who started playing the violin at the age of nine. A graduate of the University of Southern California's School of Music, she has toured and/or recorded with artists such as Marc Anthony, Joan Sebastian, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Pedro Fernández, Los Tigres del Norte, Caravana Cubana, Cachao, Los Lobos, Mariachi Divas, Ozomatli, and Ian Anderson. Rocio is currently a member of the Dakah Hip-Hop Orchestra and the L.A. Salsa Divas. She also teaches violin and guitar at the Silverlake Conservatory.

Chatting with three of the L.A, Salsa Divas:

Rudolph Mangual: What is your role in the L.A. Salsa Divas?

Iliana Rose: I am the musical director and pianist of the band. I also sing lead on some selections, as well as providing background vocals.

RM: How did you ladies come together as a



band?

IR: Well, several of us have been friends for many years here in Los Angeles, working with different bands throughout the years. After a while, we found ourselves working with each other more and more, but always in male-led and male-dominated salsa bands. While there was (and still is) an all-female mariachi band in the city (Mariachi Divas), which several of our members were a part of, there wasn't an all-female salsa band actively working in the local scene. Salsa has been (and continues to be everywhere) a male-dominated music form, regardless of the many talented females in the business. It's our goal to show salseros here in Los Angeles, as well as everywhere in the world, that an all-female salsa band can play powerful music, just as good as any other band in the business. The fact that all the girls in the band are also easy on the eyes is a big plus and an excellent marketing tool.



RM: Who is the band's leader?

IR: Ileana García is our lead vocalist and bandleader, being the most experienced musician in the band. She handles the business part of the band, while I handle the musical direction. I create the charts and make most of the arrangements for our songs, but I'm always open and take everyone into consideration, in terms of the band's inputs and ideals.

RM: How do audiences react to an all-female salsa band?

IR: Everywhere we have performed, the reaction has been awesome and overwhelming. The men enjoy dancing and looking at the all-female cast on stage, while the ladies feel somewhat proud of the fact that females are in control of the music and the party.

RM: Describe the repertoire of the band.

IR: Currently we play a few of my own compositions, as well as some from García (who's an amazing composer) and from our flutist, Keiko Okamoto, but it's our rendition of crowd-pleasing salsa classics ?from Celia Cruz, El Gran Combo, and Fania era artists? that overall dominates our repertoire.

RM: Was the instrumentation of the band planned, or was it something that naturally came together?

IR: García and I simply started calling our female musician friends to determine their availability and interest in becoming part of an all-female salsa band, and that's how the band was created.

RM: Is the band complete at this time, or is there room for it to grow?

IR: The band is complete but the possibility of adding other musicians is also open. I would love to have a trombone or two added. It would be awesome!

RM: Is it difficult to work with an all-female band?

IR: Not really, perhaps because we have been friends for a long time and know how to deal with each other most of the time. There's a no-nonsense attitude amongst us. If someone arrives with an attitude, we simply tell her to snap out of it and play music. We like to hang out with each

other and have a good time, before and after our gigs, as much as our individual schedules allow us.

RM: Ileana García, what's your version of the L.A. Salsa Divas story?

Ileana García: Well, these girls are my family, and making music together with them is just plain wonderful. Keiko Okamoto (our flutist) has been my friend for over 15 years, and we have worked together in many bands throughout the years, finally leading to this very special group. The same is the case with Nikki Campbell (our conga player) and Coco Villalobos (our timbal player). We have been friends for many years.

RM: Who is the bass player?

IG: Her name is Estefanía Badilla. She is the new girl in the band and our youngest member. Iliana Rose was the youngest one, but not any more (LAUGHTER). Estefanía is more of a rocker, but also enjoys playing salsa and is open-minded to learning new things. She continues to study music and is committed to the group, so we are very happy with her.

RM: Keiko Okamoto, how did you get into playing salsa?

Keiko Okamoto: I first heard salsa in Japan and liked it, but was not able to find anyone to teach me how to play it. While studying jazz flute improvisation at the Berklee School of Music in Boston, I started to understand it a little more, but it was after moving to Los Angeles that I really got into salsa. First I started going to the clubs to dance, and then the music got me. Soon thereafter, I met Ileana García and she invited me to a salsa recording and I have been playing it ever since. After playing with many of the local bands for over a decade, I started my own band, performing salsa and Latin jazz.

RM: Are you ladies planning to record any time soon?

IG: We have completed our debut recording's first track, while working on several others. Now it's just a matter of economics to be able to continue to record and finalize the entire production, but we are very positive that we'll finish this recording before the end of the year.

RM: Where can people go to see you perform in Los Angeles?

IG: We perform every Thursday night at El Pescador Restaurant, in the city of Carson. The dancers come and enjoy an evening of excellent food and a full bar, plus the sounds of an all-female salsa band, the L.A. Salsa Divas.



SUSIE HANSEN: THE ORIGINAL QUEEN OF THE LATIN VIOLIN

By Rudy Mangual

Violinist/bandleader Susie Hansen is a long-time favorite in Los Angeles, where she conducts an average of 150 live performances per year. A native of Chicago, Hansen relocated to Los Angeles in 1988 to pursue her Latin music career. She is currently celebrating the twentieth anniversary of her band, as well as the release of her third CD, titled *Representante de la Salsa*. This well-established artist has developed a trademark style that features her electric violin as the lead melodic instrument of a powerhouse ensemble. Drawing from various forms of jazz and Afro-Caribbean rhythms, Hansen and her band play hardcore salsa and Latin jazz guaranteed to make any audience get up and move. As Susie states: "We aim for the feet!"



Phil Elwood of the San Francisco Examiner described the band as follows: "It's a sizzling, swinging salsa band. Hansen can solo as if her bow was afire. The whole room was jumpin' for joy." Don Heckman wrote in the Los Angeles Times, "Hansen is a ball of energy, creating an atmosphere of high-voltage excitement." Mark Holston declared in Jazziz Magazine, "Hansen's violin speaks the language of Latin jazz with total fluency." And in 2004, Latin Beat Magazine's own Nelson Rodríguez selected Hansen's CD *Solo Flight* as one of the Top 100 Independent Latin Jazz Recordings.

A performance by the Susie Hansen Latin Band includes familiar and traditional Spanish-language songs, original salsa and Latin jazz scores, Latin-style interpretations of jazz standards, salsa selections with English lyrics, and traditional Cuban charanga music. Aside from having performed in all the major popular venues throughout Southern California, the Susie Hansen Latin Band has also headlined at events such as the Playboy Jazz Festival, Fiesta Broadway, the San José Jazz Festival and the Newport Beach Jazz Festival. Hansen has also toured nationally with her band, and she has performed and/or recorded with Tito Puente, Los Van Van, Giovanni Hidalgo, Vikki Carr, Orquesta Aragón, Paquito D'Rivera, Francisco Aguabella, El Gran Combo, Orquesta Broadway, Sonora Ponceña, and Rachel Z, among others. The Susie Hansen Latin Band includes the following core members: George Balmaseda (vocals), Joe Rotondi, Jr. (piano), René Camacho (bass), and percussionists Jimmy Branly, Joey de León, Jr., Tiki Pasillas and Arnie Silva. Hansen's two previous recordings, *The Salsa Never Ends* and *Solo Flight*, were issued by her own independent label (Jazz Caliente) and charted very well with radio and club DJs throughout the world. The word out is that the Susie Hansen Latin Band's new CD, *Representante de la Salsa* (to be released in the summer of 2010) is on fire and tailor-made for salsa dancers. Latin Beat Magazine salutes and congratulates the talents and efforts of this amazing bandleader that calls Los Angeles home — Susie Hansen, the L.A. Queen of the Latin Violin. For more information, visit www.susiehansen.com.



FAY ROBERTS' ORQUESTA CHARANGOA



Flutist/bandleader Fay Roberts established Orquesta Charangoa in 1997 in Los Angeles, inspired by the teachings of the legendary Cuban flutist/composer Richard Egües. Roberts traveled to Cuba to study with Egües and returned home with enough music and inspiration to form an authentic Cuban charanga band. This classically trained flutist follows the traditional style of early popular Cuban dance orchestras, a genre called charanga, which was developed from the contradanza criolla string ensembles of Cuban elite society. The instrumentation of a charanga ensemble consists of a lead flute, violins, and a rhythm section of congas, timbal, güiro, piano and bass, plus vocal harmonies. Roberts, who earned a B.A. in Music from the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB), is a Yamaha Instruments endorsee, playing the 800 series wood flute (grenadilla flute). Since 1997, Charangoa has performed in many of Los Angeles' top music venues including the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, the Hollywood Palladium, The Palace, The Conga Room, and The Granada, in addition to its regular gigs at the popular El Floridita Restaurant in Hollywood. A performance by Fay Roberts and Orquesta Charangoa is a musical odyssey of chachachás, mambos, boleros, guajiras, and sones montunos. Her self-produced debut CD, *Fay Roberts y Su Orquesta Charangoa* (2005), showcases the virtuosity of this wonderful bandleader and her talented group of musicians.



CANDI SOSA: THE VOICE OF LATIN MUSIC

Cuban songstress/composer/multi-instrumentalist Candi Sosa has been singing her heart out for several decades throughout the Los Angeles metropolis, showcasing her powerful voice and passionate performances of original scores, popular compositions and Latin American classics. Although Sosa is better known as an interpreter of torch ballads, boleros and traditional Cuban songs, she is just as comfortable performing in the realms of salsa, Brazilian, Latin pop, Latin alternative and top 40 tunes (in either English or Spanish), as a soloist, in duets or with a band of any size. Having worked with everyone around town, she continues to be a first-call vocalist in the L.A. Latin music scene. She is currently performing weekly at the popular Havana Mania Restaurant in Redondo Beach, among other venues, and is enjoying the release of her latest CD titled, *Alianzas* (featuring a repertoire of the many flavors and rhythms from South America and the Caribbean). On May 27th, Candi Sosa will be featured in a documentary on CNBC, as the network reports and follows up on a group of gifted children who were sent out of Cuba and where they are now. Please check your local listings.



We salute all of our L.A.-based female bandleaders, musicians, vocalists, and DJs, with kudos to the Mariachi Divas, Katia Moraes, Malena, Yamila, Janeen Puente, Iris Sandra Cepeda, Thania Sánchez, etc., as well as to our neighboring femmes in Northern California: Bobbi Céspedes, Sheila E, Kat Parra, and Rebecca Mauleón, among others.



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