

Fredy Omar by Dan Stein, Offbeat "Fast Focus 2000"

“Parrandeando”..

Parading, seeing and being seen. There’s nowhere like New Orleans, but there’s nowhere in New Orleans like Frenchman Street late at night on a Friday or Saturday. It’s like “Twisting The Night Away” (at the Peppermint Stick Lounge) immortalized by Sam Cooke. Or Van Morrison’s “Wild Night”, only better: it’s Fredy Omar’s Latin Dance Band en vivo! and not “the inside jukebox” roaring out... making “the people passing by stare in wide wonder”. It’s a high energy, peaceful scene- heterogeneous in every way. Debutantes and street people, millionaires, celebrities, jazz musicians just getting off work, Latin-Americans from all over, tourists, and Crescent City denizens who just love to dance and make or pass a good time. Everybody’s elbow to elbow, on the dance floor and the sidewalk. Some worldly party animals say it’s a scene reminiscent of Miami’s legendary “Callé Ocho”.

An investment in pleasure, Café Brasil has been the venue hosting the most live latin music in New Orleans; and The Dream Palace right across the street, is a good place to catch live tropical music as well. Typically at both venues the cover charge is only a five spot. That has to be the best entertainment (and exercise) bargain around. Something magical happens on Frenchman Street, that’s almost like a time warp, especially on nights when both sides of the street have “gone bamboo”. Yeh you right, there’s dancin’ in the street! Yes indeed!

What Omar has is contagious, and now they’re catching it on Thursdays at Levon Helm’s new place on Decatur Street. Managing partner Carmen Marotta is proud that their Classic American Cafe is both musician and listener friendly, with good acoustics, sound system, and adequate monitors. On the inaugural Latin Thursday he said “There’s no juke box, and there won’t be one here! “We want people to know that this is the place for hearing music live, and the new place where locals and tourists can come to enjoy Fredy for Latin Live Music Night.”...”and let them know that we’re not charging at the door either”. They’ll be there on May 6th with a special guest from N.Y. vibraphonist A.J. Mantis.

Fredy has patiently assembled an all-star lineup. Fredy Omar’s Latin Dance Band works like a finely tuned machine. Up on the bandstand, there’s no fooling around or chitchatting between numbers. Omar counts down the next song almost immediately. If the venue is one where passers by stick their heads in to check out the scene, almost invariably they elect to stay, because unless the band is on a break, they’re cooking.

These guys are pros and purists. While some bands play what they call “latin jazz”, Fredy’s band is a Latin band that plays latin music. They’re jazz musicians all right, and the latin they play is often jazz, but it is latin first and foremost! They are not just playing at playing latin jazz, they are the real deal with credentials to back them up.

Legendary “Maestro of Percussion”, Hector Gallardo, Tumbadora, (conga player) Humberto “Pupi” Menes, and musical director/keyboardist Ralph Gipson are all alumni of the late, great Ruben Gonzalez Band and founding members of “Santiago”. They’ve played together for twenty years. Cris Cruzado is originally from Colombia and a very talented timbalero. Harry Rios, who plays bass and trombone, enjoys relative anonymity in New Orleans, but he’s recognized instantly by music lovers on the street in Puerto Rico, Miami, or New York. He’s a veteran salsero, having worked with Andy Montanez, and many other greats. Rios is also an educator. His approach is accessible in

books that he’s written. Master flautist and sax man Joe Canoura may be the jewel in Omar’s musical crown. Senor Canoura immigrated from Galicia, Spain via New York, Miami, and Puerto Rico before settling here. Joe was part of the original charanga movement dating back to the fifties. Canoura played with Ray Barretto when he had the crossover pop hit “El Watusi” in the 60s as well as with both Eddie, and older brother, Charlie Palmieri before that. He worked with the genius charanga pioneer Lou Perez until Barretto stole him away. Canoura is arguably as good a flautist as any, and better than Johnny Pacheco! At the House of Blues in March, when Joe opened up for Tito Puente with Fredy, it was like old home week. Tito and his gang were so glad to see and hear Joe, that they immediately invited him to join them on the bandstand for both nights. That’s how far back he goes and how fortunate New Orleans is that he’s a recent transplant.

As bandleaders go, Omar seems to be generous to a fault. He pays his guys top dollar, and seems to always keep their situations in mind. Omar’s repertoire is so diverse that he has to customize which Fredy Omar band to assemble for the demands of different gigs. He’s got a separate Fredy Omar Quartet (Cristobal Cruzado on trap drums, Pepe Coloma from Peru on guitar, and John Lutz of Milonga on bass and bajo-sexto) for weekly Friday engagements at the Bombay Club on Conti St. At some venues, (like Wednesday evenings at the Red Room on St. Charles) musicians come in and go out between sets like hockey players changing lines.

There is a lineup for the well-heeled, tailored to create a romantic ambiance for courting; and then there is the hardcore, kickass, pachanga lineup that can get three generations going, with grandmothers dancing up on tables. Rotating the personnel is really often a function of economics. Optimizing resources cost effectively is a demanding art that requires dancing as skillfully as a danzon. They (Fredy and his manager/other half Debbie) know how tough things can be, so they try to schedule work that they book in a way that doesn’t tie their players up a long time for a little money.

Omar’s diverse following seems to be increasingly “brand loyal”. So it follows that they get rewarded with a lot of low profile, special event and private party work.

On the threshold of the millennium, The Fredy Omar Story may be the embodiment of the classic American-dream; but this is an updated version, with Y2K demographics thrown into the mix. The percentage of Latin Americans in the U.S. population is growing rapidly. Latin Americans are increasingly having more and more influence on (North) “American” culture. We really are becoming a more diverse society; and artistically, we are hybridizing gradually. Ethnic immigrant groups assimilate into the main stream, then a new group is at the foot of that ladder, and each of its members aspires to the American Dream.

Fredy Omar was born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. He and his family came from poverty as far back as anyone could remember. His Granddaddy was a poor struggling baker working in somebody else’s bakery to keep his family fed, housed, clothed and together. Then one day he really got lucky and won the Honduran Lottery! (It’s ironic that it had originally been the infamous, scandal-ridden Louisiana Lottery that was exiled to Honduras a century before.)

He bought the bakery and became his own boss. Fredy’s father worked

there and then Fredy did too. Working in his grandfather’s bakery, Fredy used to sing along with the radio and let it be known what his career dreams for the future were. An uncle who also worked there used to tease him, telling little Fredy that he’d never be a singer that his destiny was to work there for the rest of his life. Trying to disabuse him of a young boy’s vision, he advised the aspiring artist to get used to it because that’s as far as he’d ever go.

His grandfather’s luck didn’t catapult the family out of Tegucigalpa’s ghetto poverty, but it narrowed the odds a lot from impossible to slim, and they could afford for Fredy to go to school and to pursue his musical rainbows. He became a music teacher, and that way he could be around instruments and other people who loved music. He was bored though, and wanted to move on; but he had to be patient.

An impresario who had brought a couple of acts to the United States earlier got wind of Fredy’s talent and recruited him for appearances here. The day he arrived, the Honduran-American community of New Orleans was celebrating their homeland’s Independence Day with a festival in the French Quarter. “Y ya se acabo!” (It was all over!) Fredy’s resolve was reinforced. He was only twenty-two back then, couldn’t speak any English, and the sponsoring promoter’s big plans all fell through.

Times were tough for a while for Fredy. He sat in cold (with bands), hooked up with a street guitar player to win a talent show at a dance club, and survived a series frustrating gigs that didn’t pan out.

From '93 to 95' he was Ritmo Caribeno’s lead vocalist. Fredy learned a lot about tropical music and the Big Easy club scene from RC owner Pepe Vasquez who gave him his first break, but still his talents were yet to be displayed to full advantage.

When he joined jazz harpist Patrice Fisher’s latin band Arpa in 96', his singing finally found a context that New Orleans could embrace and appreciate. His voice was like a breath of fresh air on the scene. Fisher’s ensembles are always “tight and quick” attracting some of the most imaginative and diverse musicians from all over. Omar’s appeal transcends language and genre, and he blew everybody away. The rest really is history.

Inevitably though, they parted ways. Arpa is Patrice, and for Fredy to really stretch out artistically, he had to start up his own outfit. In 1997, he came into his own. He became a U.S. citizen and the leader of FREDY OMAR con su BANDA. Y ya!

Fredy still has that same open countenance and youthful innocence, a smile that could disarm “Atilla the Hun”, and a kind of gentle vulnerability. You can tell right off the bat, that the man’s got good karma. He and Debbie, his wife and partner for the last six years were drawn together immediately and they complement each other like red beans and rice. Arguably, were it not for Debbie’s astute business sense, and intuitive faith in her man, we still wouldn’t have heard this extraordinary talent. She manages the enterprise, and Fredy sings. Actually he sings, writes, arranges and leads the band. He’s a perennial award winner now, (Offbeat: “Best Latin Band” ’99, Best New Latin Band ’98; Gambit’s “Best Latin Band” ’98), and undisputed latin music king (La Prensa:”De Frente al Futuro”) of the Big Easy. Omar has paid some dues since landing here in 1992, all the while maintaining his musical integrity.

When (Hurricane) Mitch devastated his homeland, he donated his musical talent time and again, as well volunteering in the relief effort of sending emergency supplies to Honduras.

The diversity of his musical heroes and influences is surprising, ranging from Pavarotti to the Nevilles. “Benny More’ the great sonero from Cuba is the first one that I think of as my favorite singer of all time.” Carlos Gardel (Argentinean Tango god) is right up there too. Oscar D’Leon, and Hector LaVoe.... About Ruben Blades he answered, “I don’t think artists,..singers,...I don’t like when they try to be politicians too much...”

Lately, Fredy’s been knocked out by eighty year old Cuban pianist, Ruben Gonzales (not the late, from NOLA) who’s just now being rediscovered. “When you hear him play, you hear the history of Cuban music. It’s all there his heart and soul, what he plays on the piano, it’s the Cuban heart, the soul of Cuba. I can’t believe how beautiful...”

He said the first time he heard Aaron Neville, “I was really amazed!” He’s been a fan ever since and goes “over to hear him at the House of Blues whenever the Neville Brothers are there and I’m not working somewhere that night.”

Nikki Reyes (Louisiana Jukebox hostess) local TV and radio personality is also Honduran-American. She said that hearing Fredy sing, she “would never have guessed that he’s from Honduras, unless he was singing an Honduran song.” She says, “when he sings Cuban, he is Cuban. Singing merengue he becomes a Dominican, bombas and plenas make him Puerto Rican and if it’s a cumbia, he could pass for Colombian.”

Recently at a fundraiser for WTUL-FM, Fredy sang with three separate bands, doing distinctly different kinds of music. Milonga is a Tango ensemble specializing in Astor Piazola and Carlos Gardel works. Son del Pantano celebrates Cuban roots music featuring the tres (fretted twelve string guitarlike acoustic instrument). Fredy’s band headlined, but he made sitting in as guest vocalist sound and look easy. He’s got the chops to be a “divo”, without the attitude.

He was first classically trained before immersing himself in the tropical Latin idiom. Fredy and his band have a repertoire of well over eighty songs. They ignite dancers’ fires with an array of lively and passionate dance rhythms: mambo, rumba, cha cha cha, guajira, guaguanco, guaracha, salsa, tango, cumbia, bolero, merengue, bomba, plena, the son ... and the list goes on. They lived up to their 1998 Jazz Festival appearance rating of “must see”, and for 1999’s show, Joe Cuba’s vibraphonist A.J. Mantis will return to play with the band for a second year and Pepe Coloma will be on guitar. Omar’s tendency is to pull out all the stops so that they can put on the best show possible. Fredy and his band will be in the Lagniappe Tent on the first Sunday of Jazz Festival, April 25th. Later that evening they’re playing a double bill with native son, R&B legend Walter “Wolfman” Washington uptown at Jimmy’s.

Fredy Omar con su Banda have one CD out, available locally- appropriately titled “Musica para Bailar” recorded live at Tipitina’s some time ago and released in '98. (The dance rhythm is next to each song title in parenthesis like records used to be, and how it should be.) Fredy Omar’s Latin Dance Band has just improved so much and the lineup now is much stronger so their new disc’s release is eagerly awaited. It’s dynamite.

For more info, expanded schedule postings, and updates, or to contact Fredy Omar, he can be found on the web at www.fredyomar.com.