

Omar's Latin rhythms get a little N.O. in the mix

By Keith Spera, Offbeat Music writer

In his native Honduras, romantic ballads and bolero music made up the bulk of vocalist Fredy Omar's repertoire. But in the seven years since he moved to New Orleans and relaunched his professional career, Omar has discovered a truism of local audiences: They'd rather dance than listen, especially if they don't understand the Spanish lyrics.

"I played beautiful bolero ballads with a quartet in Honduras," Omar said recently. "We toured all over the country, and it was wonderful. But it's different when people understand what you are saying. When I came here, I started promoting my ballads. People used to say, 'I think he has a beautiful voice, but what's he saying?' After that I realized that New Orleans is a Carnival kind of city."

Soon after he arrived, Omar began making pilgrimages to Frenchmen Street, listening to Ruben "Mr. Salsa" Gonzalez and other bandleaders who played traditional Latin music. "The good thing about old-school Afro-Cuban music is that it has beautiful melodies and lyrics," Omar said. "It's not like the new stuff that is mostly screaming and no content. And there was this mix of Latin jazz musicians and the Afro-Cuban musicians, and they improvised a lot. I really liked it. That's how I got into this thing."

Omar joined local Latin band Ritmo Caribeno and gained more insights into the sorts of rhythms that moved New Orleans dancers. After Gonzalez died, Omar approached Gonzalez's musicians and suggested they work with him. Omar cut his first CD several months later; most of the material was drawn from the repertoire of Gonzalez's band.

But on his new, second CD, "Desde Nueva Orleans," released by Louisiana Red Hot Records, Omar and his band step out with a program of mostly original material refined during three years of performing three nights a week. "We realize now what is good for the musicians and what is good for my voice," Omar said. The new CD is something that is really for me."

To accommodate the diverse crowds Omar attracts at different clubs, he is hosting two CD release

parties this week for "Desde Nueva Orleans": Tonight at Cafe Brasil and Wednesday at the Red Room.

Fredy Omar con su Banda, as he and his band are billed, has developed into a tight unit with Ralph Gipson on piano, Jose "Pepe" Colomba on bass, Joe Canoura on flute and tenor sax, Pupi Menes on tumbadoras, and Cristobal Cruzado on timbales and drums (Cruzado suffered a heart attack prior to New Year's Eve, and is currently not performing with the band). Canoura is the most experienced player, having shared stages with a host of Latin greats, including Ray Barretto, Eddie Palmieri and Tito Puente.

"He's played with all the big-time Latin jazz musicians in New York," Omar said. "He totally changed the sound of my band. Jose Canoura is a very important part of my new sound. The first CD was really an experiment; we didn't think about it. This CD is original; the only song that is not is the tango, 'El Choclo.' I have a big tango following, so I really have to have one of the standard tangos."

Omar and company cover a wide spectrum of traditional and popular Latin rhythms on "Desde Nueva Orleans," including merengue, cha cha cha, son montuno and cumbia.

"In the Latin field, you usually have to play salsa or merengue," Omar said. "But my case, I'm from Honduras, in Central America. When I grew up in Honduras, my grandfather had this huge collection of music. He had all these traditional cumbias and salsa and merengue. He was a really good dancer, and he'd put together these big parties on the weekends. He was almost like a deejay; he had really good taste in music."

"So for me, I had been listening to all these styles all my life. When I came here, I realized some bands play just salsa or just merengue. When I started working, I felt that in my personal taste I prefer to be in a party where I can dance to different styles of music. That's why I started playing all of these rhythms, and that's the reason I can reach a bigger crowd than other bands."

"I get a lot of Cuban people that go to my shows

and Colombian people. They wait to hear *their* cumbias and *their* merengues. I have all these rhythms in my repertoire, but sometimes you don't have time to cover each rhythm in a set. During the break, people say, 'Hey, man. I hope you play a cumbia in the next set. You played mostly cha cha cha.'"

The title of the new CD translates as "from New Orleans," a qualification that should be used to describe Omar's style of Latin music. "Mambo #504" is Omar's salute to Mardi Gras (the title also notes that both New Orleans and Honduras share the same area code); in the song, he trades lines with local jazz vocalist John Boutte. But that song is only the most overt reference to Omar's adopted hometown; other more subtle clues are sprinkled throughout the music.

"It's Latin music with New Orleans accents," Omar said. "It has a New Orleans sound; people feel it. You don't realize when you play here, because you're not looking at that stuff. But when you go (out of town) and hear other bands, they all have the same sound. We have some kind of different flavor... from New Orleans."

"The sound is in your head, and it comes right at the moment and you play it. You don't realize that you are doing some New Orleans stuff. But that's what makes the sound different."