

The Latin King of Frenchmen Street

FREDY OMAR

Story by Bunny Matthews Photo Dwight Marshall

Since leaving his Honduran homeland a decade ago, singer FREDY OMAR has emerged as the Xavier Cugat of Nueva Orleans. It's no surprise that Fredy Omar, born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras on April 15, 1970 (and named, as were his three brothers and two sisters, after characters in Spanish soap operas), loves his adopted home of New Orleans, where bananas are mostly grown for ornamental reasons: "Living in New Orleans, for a musician, is like Disneyland for a kid. It's wonderful.

"Honduras is a tiny country, it's very poor. So we don't have a Bohemian scene there. I used to sing in like three or four places. When I left my country, I needed something new. I needed new air, more inspiration. So from day one, I felt lucky to come to New Orleans."

On that proverbial first New Orleans day in 1992, Fredy landed on Frenchmen Street, directly across from Cafe Brasil, where he resided until emigrating to the Ninth Ward two years ago. He didn't speak English and he had only a vague idea about the difference between Marigny and Metairie. Because of myths perpetuated by Anne Rice and her ilk, Fredy imagined a blood-sucking vampire around every creaky corner.

"In Honduras, I was a romantic singer - a balladeer," Fredy explains. "So I thought, okay, in New Orleans we have 100,000 Hondurans living here so I thought, I'm just going to go and sing ballads.

"When I went to the National School of Music [Escuela Nacional de Musica in Tegucigalpa], I went for the voice lessons. When I used to sing, it was just feeling. I really didn't know the technical things about singing. Before I was going on stage, I felt like a blind man with no direction. You know that you're going on stage and the band is playing and you'd better sing.

"At the National School of Music, I took piano lessons, guitar lessons, harmony, percussion lessons, but my main goal was voice lessons. I studied with a Uruguayan singer, Lucila Zambrana, who had an Italian technique. After I finished my regular voice lessons, I took private lessons with a young singer from Japan, Mamouro Hayakawa, who had a totally different technique. From him, I learned what to do when you're sick and you have to sing.

"I perform - it doesn't matter what. For example, sometimes you cannot reach notes. What you do is place your mouth almost like you're laughing and with that you can reach higher notes. You have to imagine your head, like you have a cape, and you have to project your voice from behind. I only do that when I'm sick. Regularly, I don't make the weird faces. I like to look good.

"Also, when you're playing with a Latin jazz band, you can do that: if you miss something - 'Okay, guys, I'll meet you after the bridge.' There is this language that you understand. But when you play with a cover band, if you miss something, there's no way to stop the train. I didn't like that pressure.

“My first job was with Ritmo Caribeño, a cover band. They play for people in Metairie and Kenner [home to many of the area’s Hondurans]. At the beginning, it was good because, even though I was doing covers, I was still doing the music thing and keeping my dream going.

“The thing is you don’t have the opportunity to do your own version or your own arrangement. The audience really wants you to sing like the original is. We were doing Los Hermanos Rosario, Oscar D’Leon, Los Bukis - all the Top Ten Latin hits. It’s okay to throw two or three covers in a set but it’s better to do your own stuff. It’s something creative in you.

“After two years, I quit and I didn’t have another job lined up. Really when you are not feeling it, it was hurting me a lot.”

FRENCHMEN STREET SPANIARDS

On Frenchmen Street, at the Dream Palace (now the Blue Nile) Fredy encountered the Cuban singer Ruben “Mr. Salsa” Gonzalez y su Conjunto: “Most of the guys that were playing at that time with Ruben, they are laying with me now. What I really respect about them, it was that they were doing Latin music before the macarena and Ricky Martin and all that. A lot of musicians, they play whatever is hot. If Latin is hot right now, then let’s name the band Los Taqueros del Norte.

“Those guys were playing Latin because when they heard Ruben, they realized that he was a great singer. He used to sing only in Spanish and the crowd was mixed - a lot of Latinos and Americans. For me, it was a dream to play with those guys. When Ruben died [in 1994], they put together different bands. They used to have a band called Santiago. The leaders were

Ralph Gipson - he used to play sax with Santiago and now he plays piano with me - and Pupi Menes, the conga player.

“Pupi is from Matanzas, Cuba and he played with Ruben for 20 years. For all the Santeria rituals, he’s the guy they call to play the drums. When Ralph and Pupi were doing really good with Santiago, the Iguanas called and offered Pupi a tour. Pupi left and went with the Iguanas for a while and Santiago broke up.”

Upon landing a music conference showcase in 1997, Fredy needed a backing ensemble. The various members of Santiago, unbeknownst to each other, were summoned and Fredy Omar con su Banda was born. Shortly thereafter, Fredy and comrades began a long series of performances at Cafe Brasil and a five-year run at the now defunct Red Room: “since my first gig at Cafe Brasil, we’ve had a huge crowd. Now I’m playing at the Blue Nile. The Blue Nile is more sophisticated; as the Dream Palace, it used to be like this neighborhood kind of feeling. Now it’s like this elegant place and the lighting is great for bands and I love the space. Everything on Frenchmen is just perfect for a band. If you cannot make it on Frenchmen Street, I don’t know where you can make it.

“I think that the audience that I get wants to hear a great solo but they also want to dance. It’s not like let’s go sit and listen to the music. On Frenchmen Street, we get a lot of locals who go to see us every weekend. And you get tourists. I play Afro-Cuban music, music from the Dominican Republic, merengues, I play salsa, cha-cha-chas, cumbias from Colombia, tangos, romantic boleros, a little bit of everything so when I play, I make sure everybody feels at home. People realize that, on stage, we are giving 100 percent. For people to give me all

the love when I play is just the best gift they can give me. I'm so happy."

Besides Ralph Gipson and Pupi Menes, Fredy's band features saxophonist/flutist Joe Canoura, percussionist Michael Skinkus, violinist Matt Rhody and bassist Jose "Pepe" Coloma. Not exactly "boy toys" and Fredy would have it no other way. "Sometimes people tell me, 'Get ride of the grandpas! If you want to make it, you have to have a really hot girl shaking her ass right in front of the stage!' I really love those guys, I admire them, and they play with me because they're great. I truly feel that I am playing with the best. A lot of people just want the fast track to get things. In my case, I'm really happy in New Orleans - that's the bottom line. I'm having a great time. Every time I play, I get paid. If I have extra budget, it's for the musicians. We share everything.

"A lot of people ask me, why don't you tour? We used to play at the Beau Rivage [Casino in Biloxi] - great food, great rooms, great audience, great pay and the guys in the band were mad. They didn't want to do it because it was a one-hour-and-fifteen-minute drive to the Gulf Coast. They are so spoiled. The most important thing for me is that the musicians are happy and comfortable. We are not one of those teenage bands where it would be okay if they had to eat hot dogs. These guys are adults."

Joe Canoura's great claim to fame is that he was featured on Ray Barretto's Latin crossover hit, the boogaloo "El Watusi," which went to Number 17 on the American pop charts in 1963. Fredy was aware of Joe's fame, but opening for Tito Puente put an exclamation point on his respect for Joe Canoura. "Before Tito Puente died [in 2000], we opened a show for him at House of Blues and when we got there, Tito

Puente's band was doing a soundcheck. The pianist, Sonny Bravo, he was going, 'Joe? Oh my God! Joe Canoura!' Tito Puente had a lot of veterans playing with him and all the guys knew Joe.

"Joe is someone who knows Latin music from A to Z. He can play Latin music and he can play jazz. Latin jazz is Latin-American rhythms and jazz. After Latin went mainstream, I think there's a lot of confusion. Latin jazz is not reggae and jazz or music from Haiti and jazz. People think everything that has drums is Latin jazz. It's not like that. It's something really pure - the combination between Latin American music and jazz. So Joe has both worlds - he knows practically everything about Latin music and he has a deep knowledge of jazz. For me, it's such a wonderful thing to have him playing with me.

"Michael Skinkus played with me from the beginning. When I used to live on Frenchmen, I used to hear these Cuban drums late at night. I would get out of the house and go see. It was Michael playing on the sidewalk with Hector Gallardo - Michael on congas and Hector on timbales. It was unbelievable. That's the kind of thing we don't have in my country - the luxury to look out the window and have this beautiful musical show on the street. Michael studied in Cuba with El Panga [Tomas Ramos Ortiz] and Regino Jimenez [musical director of Danza Contemporanea de Cuba]. He recorded with Dr. John and traveled with Michael Ray. He's one of the greatest drummers in New Orleans.

"Pepe Coloma is from Peru. He played guitar and studied jazz here with Hank Mackie. The problem I had with him was that I had a piano and I didn't have enough budget to have a guitar. I said to Pepe, 'If you really want to play, you should learn how to play the bass. We don't have

that many bass players who can play Latin music here.' Jimmy Buffett invited me to open a show for him - a millennium party at the Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles. A month before, my bass player said, 'I'm sorry - I've got to go to Puerto Rico. I don't know when I'm going to come back.' So I called Pepe and said, 'If you want to play bass with me, this is the time!' He practiced and after a while, he was playing with me. He wrote the arrangements for all the songs on my last record and co-wrote some songs with me. He's a big part of my band.

"Matt Rhody- I used to go on Sundays to see his band, Milonga Tango. They did a lot of traditional tangos and also Piazzolla and modern tangos. I saw Matt Rhody do this unbelievable solo and at the time I was getting ready to record. I approached him and said, 'Hey do you want to record with us?' He went to the studio with us and we put him on the whole record.

"After we finished the recording, the band came to me and did a little intervention - I wanted to have a six-piece band in the beginning, because of all the economics - they said, 'Look, Fredy, I know you don't want to have a bigger band and blah-blah-blah. If you want, you can cut our pay a little bit but please have Matt in the band.'"

DANCING FOR HOURS

Since the formation of Fredy's musical ensemble, the band has had a variety of bookings at private parties, festivals and conventions, as well as weekly performances at the same club - Cafe Brasil, the Red Room and now the Blue Nile, where, as at the Red Room, Fredy participates in an hour-long session of Latin dance lessons preceding each gig: "I think - especially if you're going to be a Latin singer, you'll have to sing and dance most of the time. You have to know

how to dance. In my case, sometimes I'll have to dance for three hours. You really have to be in good shape to be able to do that. What I do is I run, I play soccer, I go to the gym - I do a little weights, not too much."

The right threads are likewise important. Fredy believes in dressing up "out of respect for the audience. Even right now, for the interview, I'm well dressed [in suit and alligator shoes]. I guess it depends on what kind of music you play. In the daytime, I'm mostly wandering around in my baggy pants like everybody else. At night, I always try to look good. Sometimes, when I'm on stage, I feel like a host. It's good when someone is waiting for you and ready to accommodate you in some way. It's mutual respect instead of 'F-you.' That's one of the things that I've always had, even when I was in Honduras. From the beginning, from my first singing contest, I realized that. I didn't want to tell my mom that I was going to sing because she didn't know that I was interested in singing. I didn't want her to be embarrassed so I didn't tell her that I was going to sing in a competition. The first night I sang, I went normal with jeans and tennis shoes, and I didn't win but the reaction of the crowd was really good. So I felt that I had to try again and this time, I was going to dress like an artist. So the second time, I won. After that, I won many times. I recorded and released records and it was the beginning of a wonderful experience. It was because of all those elements.

"You always have to try to see what the next step is. There is always a lesson, every time you perform."