

RISING SON

Honduran singer's family cheers success from afar

By James Varney
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TEGUCIGALPA, HONDURAS - The hot, dark upstairs bakery in Tegucigalpa's Obrera neighborhood is a long way from the posh, retro chic of New Orleans' Red Room supper club on St. Charles Avenue. The bakery employee thumping on a vast pile of dough she is kneading into loaves might seem to have little in common with the thumping conga players behind Red Room crooner Fredy Omar, a rising star in New Orleans' burgeoning Latin music scene.

And yet the bakery plays a pivotal role in the life story of the Red Room's red hot crooner, a reminder of how authentically Third World the Latin spice in New Orleans' cultural gumbo is.

Around the corner and down a steep hill from the bakery, a phone rings every Friday at 11 a.m. in Omar's modest family home, and his parents, Marco Antonio and Maria Antonia Quiroz, look forward to the weekly ritual.

But on a particular Friday in late January - Jan. 28, to be precise - the phone didn't ring at 11, and it didn't ring at 11:15 or 11:30 a.m. Marco wasn't concerned by the delays, but Maria was trying hard to conceal her anxiety.

After all, this Friday was a big day for her 29 year-old firstborn. Omar's new CD, "Desde Nueva Orleans" was coming out and, in the early morning before his record release party, he was taping a show for WWL-TV.

To kill time, his parents resorted to their favorite pastime: watching a videotape of Omar on the cable access show Louisiana Jukebox, and passing around dog-earned snapshots of Fredy on a French Quarter balcony or a Jazzfest stage or - his mother's favorite - with his brother, Alex, on the patio of their Tegucigalpa home.

"Sometimes after he performs he'll call late at night," she said. "Oh, I would like to see his show so badly"

Son's success trickles down

That Omar's parents, both 48, even have a television and stereo equipment is testimony not only to their son's burgeoning success, but also to the foresight and financial acumen of Fredy's paternal grandfather.

In 1965, Jose Antonio Quiroz hit the lottery. His winnings - 5,000 lempiras, or a bit more than \$357 at the current exchange rate - weren't exactly in the Powerball league. Latinos love to play a variety of games street hawkers call "chances," similar to the low-stakes scratch-off tickets offered by U.S. lotteries. Indeed, it's not unusual to find people who have "won the lottery" several times here, most of whom proceed quickly to squander their haul.

Grandfather Quiroz, by contrast, invested his modest windfall. A second-generation baker at Panaderia Universal and a mid-sized player in the Tegucigalpa bread business, Quiroz bought his own oven. At first he ran it out of a second floor room around the corner from the Quiroz cluster of homes in the barrio, or neighborhood, called Los Profesores. Eventually he saved enough to add a second machine and soon Panaderia Quiroz was born.

With about eight employees, the Quiroz family has settled for a market limited to their barrio and realize earnings above the national average in Honduras, the fourth poorest country in Latin America with a per capita annual income of around \$750.

Lately though, the bakery earnings haven't been quite so lottery-like. Omar's childhood neighborhood was hard hit by Hurricane Mitch. The open lot that was the scene of his childhood soccer games - almost since his arrival in New Orleans he has volunteered as coach of a French Quarter soccer team for kids - is now

surrounded by the ruins of houses and piles of debris, rendering Avenida Los Inditos, the street in front of the family home, impassable for most cars. Ankle-deep slime from a sewerage leak coats the corner leading up to Panaderia Quiroz, where a wall on the second floor was cracked badly in the storm.

The Quirozes eluded most of Mitch's fury. Their hillside location put their homes out of reach of a river that raged through the barrio during the storm. Yet despite their relative comfort in Los Profesores, the family is under no illusions about their overall situation. From a patio outside his small house, Omar's father surveyed the lingering wreckage and acknowledged that his son's monthly remittances have become crucial to the family's finances.

Reaching for national fame

The local popularity of Fredy Omar con su Banda - Fredy Omar with his Band - hasn't translated into big bucks by U.S. show-business standards. But the new CD follows on the heels of a Los Angeles gig with Jimmy Buffet to welcome in the new millennium, and Omar's extended Honduran family is certain that better things are coming. "Since he was little, when there was a contest in the neighborhood and he won the prize, we've been supportive of his singing," his mother said. It wasn't always easy.

As with many Central American families who have seen members of the younger generation head to the States to make a grab for the golden ring, Omar's departure was wrenching. "It was the saddest thing ever," Maria Antonia said, shaking her head. "We couldn't sleep thinking about what might happen to him there."

By noon on Jan. 28, several members of that family had converged in the Quiroz living room. After a few false alarms, the phone rang

again, and Marco Quiroz nodded with relief and satisfaction: "My son," he said proudly.

The delay might have mystified the parents, but to their displaced son in the Big Easy it made perfect sense. Faced with the hectic day of the CD release, the party and the television show, Omar had braced himself in quintessential New Orleans fashion: by pulling an all-nighter.

"I had a show Thursday night and the fact is it's hard to sing on just a little sleep, so it made more sense for me to go straight to the studio, and then I was exhausted," he explained, apologizing for his tardiness.

His parents lapped up news of Omar's big day, and, when the conversation ended, put on one of his early recordings, made when he was a high-school student.

His gracious mother, who had offered lunch to all the guests and even cleaned the thick mud off the shoes of one who had stumbled in the Avenida Inditos slime pit, stood alone on the patio, listening to the voice of a son she has not seen since 1995, when he visited Tegucigalpa after his grandfather's death.

"I always want to be with him," she said, suddenly mindful of the distance between the world of a Honduran baker's wife and the tony nightspots that have become Fredy Omar's haunts. "It's even worse when I hear his music."