

# FREDY OMAR, New Orleans' Favorite Latin Act

published in "Where Y'At" by Eileen Yamo

It's been less than two years since Fredy Omar and his band burst onto the culturally diverse Frenchmen Street scene, where people of every race, age, social and economic group come together to dance to the music of local Latin, reggae, and world beat bands at clubs like Cafe Brasil, the Dream Palace, and the Dragon's Den. Their meteoric success is attributed to both the versatility of the band's seasoned players, who remain loyal to tradition while forging new ground with their jazzy, innovative interpretations, and the charm of its leader, Fredy Omar, whose exquisite voice adds a novel and romantic twist to the hot salsa and leaves the ladies swooning. For Fredy Omar's Latin Dance Band, the emphasis is on the word, DANCE. Unlike other local Latin bands who limit themselves to a particular style like merengue or 50's Cuban music, this band prides itself giving it's loyal fans the widest variety of Latin dance rhythms, adding Puerto Rican *plenas*, Colombian *cumbias*, and even Argentine tangos to the ever-popular Cuban and Dominican beats. Perhaps this is the reason that they have also enjoyed the biggest crossover crowd of any of New Orleans' Latin bands - they have something for everybody, Latinos *and* gringos.

Fredy Omar was born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, where he studied classical singing at the National School of Music. He became a grammar school music teacher and, on the weekends, a balladeer, performing, touring, and recording with a popular national act. In 1992, he accepted an invitation to come to New Orleans - a city with a burgeoning music industry and the largest Honduran population of any city outside of Honduras. Here he discovered the thriving Frenchman Street Latin music scene, dominated at that time by the late, great, New Orleans' Latin legend, Ruben "Mr. Salsa" Gonzalez (not to be confused with Cuban pianist Ruben Gonzalez). He furthered his new found interest in Cuban music by listening to Yolanda Estrada's weekly WWOZ radio show, "Tiene Sabor" and by taking lessons from master percussionist Hector Gallardo.

Ruben Gonzalez was famous as being one of the earliest and certainly the most enduring and influential proponent of Cuban/salsa music in New Orleans and a teacher to generations of young New Orleans' musicians.

Although well past his prime, "Mr. Salsa" still generated an infectious enthusiasm in both his audience and his band. Everyone danced. The improvisations were inspiring. Fredy dreamed of leading a band of such accomplished players.

During Jazz Fest, 1997, after two years of singing lead vocals with long-standing Latin band, *Ritmo Caribeno*, and a year with Latin jazz ensemble, *Arpa*, Fredy's dream became a reality when he was offered a showcase at the Dream Palace during LMNOP's first music conference. He quickly put together a band consisting of three of "Mr. Salsa's" band members: Ralph Gipson on keyboard and Cuban percussionists Hector Gallardo and Pupi Menes, who, after Mr. Gonzalez' death, had created a sensation with their award winning band, *Santiago*. A month later, Fredy and his brand new band debuted directly across the street at Cafe Brasil, where they immediately established themselves at the forefront of the local Latin dance scene.

Fueled by their sudden popularity, within months the band rushed to put out their first CD, *Fredy Omar con su Banda*, recorded live at uptown Tipitina's. The songs on the CD represent a variety of Latin dance rhythms, in keeping with the band's reputation for versatility. Also included are boleros like the classic *Besame Mucho* and the hit song from the Mambo Kings movie *Beautiful Maria*, giving Fredy a chance to demonstrate the technical virtuosity of his crystal clear tenor, "La Voz de Oro".

Before they had completed one year together, Fredy and his band had won both of the local music awards - Offbeat's "Best of the Beat" and Gambit's "Big Easy". They initiated a weekly "Noche Latina" on Wednesdays at New Orleans' swankiest live music supper club, The Red Room, on St. Charles Avenue and continued to draw an ever-increasing, eclectic crowd at their monthly shows at Cafe Brasil.

With the surge in popularity and subsequent opportunities to perform, Fredy began to attract other experienced Latin musicians. He added Colombian Cris Cruzado (percussion), Puerto Rican Harry Rios (bass and trombone) and Joe Canoura (flute/sax), who played for many years with international Latin stars Eddie Palmieri, Charlie Palmieri, and Ray Barreto. Recently, when the

band opened for Tito Puente at the House of Blues, Tito's piano player, Sonny Bravo (of *Tipica '73* fame) was delighted to run into his old bandmate, and Joe was invited to perform with Tito for the two night run. AJ Mantis, Joe Cuba's vibraphone player, came in from New York to perform with the band at their Jazz Fest debut last year and he will be returning again for this year's Fest (Sunday, April 25, Lagniappe Stage, 4pm) and a special show at Levon Helm's Classic American Cafe on Thursday, May 6th.

In spite of the heavy performance schedule, Fredy has found time to expand his musical horizons. He recently formed an offshoot smaller band, a quartet featuring Peruvian guitarist, Pepe Coloma, that performs every Friday at The Bombay Club, in the French Quarter, and he sits in with tango band, Milonga, every Sunday evening at Cafe Brasil. The release of Fredy's eagerly anticipated second CD that includes original material composed by himself and bandmates, Ralph Gipson and Harry Rios, was delayed when funds earmarked for the project were needed to help his family in Tegucigalpa after Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras, but it will come out later this year.

Upcoming gigs during Jazz Fest include a double bill with Walter "Wolfman" Washington at Jimmy's on Sunday, April 25th, the Red Room on Wednesday, April 28th, with the quartet at the Bombay Club on Friday, April 29th, and the Fiesta Cinco de Mayo de Fulton Street on Saturday, May 1st. For Latin music aficionados lucky enough to still be in town on Thursday, May 6th, the Levon Helm's show featuring AJ Mantis is a must-see. And for those who like to plan ahead, the band's Second Anniversary Fiesta at Cafe Brasil on Saturday, May 15th is sure to be a night to remember. Check the local music club listings or the website at [www.fredyomar.com](http://www.fredyomar.com) for updated schedules.

