

Hot salsa, and more

Toronto band Santerias plays flamenco, yes, but their brand is so much more vital and alive

If Santerias were just another flamenco group, I wouldn't be profiling them here today.

Suffice to say, they're not and the world is more fortunate for that. Everyone seems to be making flamenco records these days and, to these ears, they all sound the same. This may not be a popular opinion, but keep in mind that's just what it is — an opinion.

Santerias' singer Rubi agrees that "everyone's playing flamenco," but adds that "as much as we love it, we wanted to push the envelope and make original music that people could dance to without knowing salsa steps.

"We're not a salsa band, and you don't have to learn dance moves to enjoy our stuff," she says. "You just have to like good, catchy music with great melodies. It's complex but accessible and the lyrics are far from mundane. They're very profound, they're about soul searching and experiences that help us evolve. And I think there's a hunger for that sound in a world that's full of strife and confusion."

And a hunger for a band that puts a nice twist on pure flamenco.

Like Santerias — the Afro-Cuban religion that embraces Spanish, Christian and pagan influences — the four-member band mixes and matches a potpourri of styles to create their own sound. Salsa, Brazilian, Colombian



ALEXANDRA GELIS PHOTO

Singer Rubi, percussionist Jay Guerriere, bassist Oriana Barbato and guitarist Juan Dino Toledo comprise Santerias, who put a fresh twist on flamenco.

cumbia and various Middle Eastern rhythms all show up on the 11 songs on the group's second disc, *Demonios*.

Melding diverse sounds comes naturally to a group whose members hail from, or have lived in, Spain, Colombia, Chile, Cuba and Brazil.

"We were working on some typical salsa rhythms but, of course, us being Santerias we like to mix things up," Rubi says when I asked how a recent rehearsal went. "So, the foundation was a salsa

rhythm with some really jazzy chords and a Brazilian edge to it. It sounded really good, but I don't think we'll

have it ready for the weekend."

You'll have two opportunities this weekend to find out how Santerias' unique fusion sounds live. They play the Salsa on St. Clair festival tomorrow afternoon, and they're at the hugely popular Ritmo Y Color festival of Latin culture at Harbourfront on Sunday evening. And there's a good chance Santerias will be accompanied by one or two flamenco dancers.

Rubi says that she, guitarist Juan Dino Toledo, bassist Oriana Barbato and percussionist Jay Guerriere were all familiar with each other and naturally gravitated to each other to form the band four years back.

And just as Santerias came together organically, so does the music.

"We're really good friends and

everybody respects each other musically," she says. "When we work on music there's a real sense of collaboration. Everyone feels their ideas are being heard."

Given their collective voracious appetites for good music — regardless of genre — don't be surprised if you hear them introduce a new sound or two on the next album.

"We're starting to throw some blues in there," Toledo says. "When we formed, we threw all these different things into the mix. It's like second nature, we don't think much about what we do.

"For example, when we were rehearsing, we came up with this salsa rhythm, and I was playing guitar and Oriana came up with some funky lines and it became this hybrid.

That's how it is when we make music, it's very natural, very spontaneous."

RHYTHM IS GONNA GET YOU: SalsaAfrica, who I profiled here a few months back, is at Harbourfront's SIRIUS Satellite Radio Stage tonight at 8 p.m. — and acclaimed Cuban-born, Toronto-based jazz pianist Hilario Duran follows at 9:30.

Plan C, who do a brilliant job mixing rock, reggae, Colombian, Peruvian and Cuban rhythms, are at the same venue Sunday at 3 p.m., and Santerias play the Toronto Star stage at 5 p.m.

All the shows are free. For more information on Ritmo Y Color, call 416-973-4000 or go to harbourfrontcentre.com

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