



FIERY MIX: The band leans heavily toward traditional salsa (not the commercialized Miami Sound style) and a medium-tempo Cuban style called son.

'Making Love in Dance'

West End Mambo took a jazz road, but ended up a top-notch Latin band

■ **West End Mambo** will perform at 10 p.m. today at The Millennium Center, 101 W. Fifth St., as part of The Stratapult Studios Downtown Getdown, a new six-part musical series. Free dance lessons by The Fred Astaire Dance Studio will be offered from 9:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. Admission is \$5 at the door. Tickets may also be purchased, with surcharges, by calling 725-1083 or online at www.etix.com

By Ed Bumgardner
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The roots of West End Mambo, a septet formed in Winston-Salem two years ago, are not typical of most Latin-music bands.

The group was started by a jazz bassist, Andrew Valentine, seeking political asylum in the United States after fleeing his native Russia in the 1980s.

"Andrew had studied and played a little bit of Latin music in his travels, so he came up with the idea of forming a band that would play jazz with a Latin flavor," said Steve Blake, the band's saxophonist and, with bassist and pianist Cesar Oviedo, arranger.

"I think for Andrew, forming the band was initially just something interesting to do. But it quickly became much more serious than anyone had anticipated.

"It has evolved to another level. It is much more a traditional Latin band, rooted in Cuban music, than any sort of jazz band, or commercial Latin band, for that matter."

The musical evolution of West End Mambo has been concurrent with changes in the band's personnel. The original lineup consisted of Blake; Valentine;

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pianist Timothy Rodriguez, from New York City; conga player Rico Cepeda, who is Puerto Rican; Frank del Valle, a native of Cuba, on timbales; and Roberto Orihuela, who was also born in Cuba, on vibraphone.

The musical mixture of Hispanic horn-and-trained percussionists (del Valle, Cepeda) and educated jazz players (Blake, Valentine, Rodriguez and Orihuela) served well the band's original vision of mixing percolating Latin cross rhythms with the harmonic sophistication and improvisational spirit of jazz.

Members came and went before the band settled on a stable roster: Blake, Cepeda and Rodriguez have been joined by Oviedo, a native of Nicaragua; percussionist Frank Vila, who lived in Puerto Rico for 10 years; Frantz Laventure, from Haiti, on timbales; and Eudulio Solis, who studied in Nicaragua, on guitar and vocals.

The new roster has inspired West End Mambo to evolve into a top-notch Latin band. The harder jazz elements have largely disappeared. Instead, the band focuses on interpreting the more traditional forms and flavors of Latin music, particularly those native to Cuba.

Blake points to Oviedo as the source of and inspiration for the band's shift in musical

direction. "Caesar has as strong an understanding of Latin music as anyone I've run across," he said. "He has a wealth of knowledge and experience, and we all see his involvement as an opportunity to really learn this music."

Born in 1962, Oviedo has been immersed in Latin music since childhood. He graduated from the National Conservatory of Music in Nicaragua, then led a number of Nicaraguan bands that played throughout South America and in Cuba.

"That was a time of great learning for me," Oviedo said. "I was playing a fusion of Brazilian music, rock, jazz, Cuban music — plus I was hired to play and write original music by the Nicaraguan government.

"But the political climate of Nicaragua, the continual unrest and danger, affected me and my family. My mother took my brother and sister out of the country, then I left and moved to Miami, where I stayed for 12 years playing with various salsa bands.

"I came to Greensboro after working in Las Vegas for a few years. Las Vegas was too much, too fake. But here, everything is so green and peaceful. I fell in love."

Oviedo said that the name of the band is a bit misleading, in that West End Mambo is not a mambo band, per se. Rather, the band leans heavily toward traditional salsa (not to be confused with the commercialized Miami Sound style of salsa) and *son* — a medium-tempo Cuban style that, in its pure form, revolves around the *tres*, a six-string

acoustic guitar that is strung with the strings in pairs, much like a 12-string guitar.

"The terms mambo and salsa are confusing to most people," Oviedo said. "Mambo is actually a style, a way to play, a section of a salsa. What most people think of as mambo is a style of salsa from the 1920s, played by Puerto Ricans in New York, that was horns, percussion and bass.

"In Latin music, rhythm is what is important, how you accent certain beats. In true Latin music, the solos are not important. You can have seven percussionists, all playing different parts of the rhythm, and they will sound as one. It is a matter of feeling what is not there, then making the rhythm complete.

"The sound of everyone playing together, that is what makes this music great."

West End Mambo's song list reflects Oviedo's knowledge of Latin music. A fiery mix of salsa and traditional Latin songs represents a variety of styles — from bolero and rumbas to *guaracha* and *son montuna*. The band is one of the few Latin bands in North Carolina to play almost exclusively in the old style. Oviedo said that some people may come to see West End Mambo expecting songs by Gloria Estefan, but few, if any, leave disappointed.

"I think all people love Latin music once they hear it," he said. "They will love the energy, the joy, the spirit. It is about having fun. This music is also very sexual and sensual — it is making love in dance."