

SENSEMAYA

Riverfront Park, Troy

Sunday, August 7th, 2005

By J Hunter

Okay, let's get something straight: The band's name is pronounced "Sen-seh-MY-yah". NOT "Sen-seh-MEE-uhh". The former comes from a piece by Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen. The latter... Well, it's an herbal "remedy" some current & former residents of California feel very nostalgic about. BIG difference!

The thing is, though, the music of Sensemaya is just as intoxicating as that same herbal remedy. The poem cited above metaphorically describes "an aggressive way of living." To my mind, "aggressive" is the wrong word to describe either Sensemaya or its music; nowadays, the word suggests the product you get from metal monsters like Pantera or System Of A Down. In that light, Sensemaya's music is not "aggressive". It is exuberant, positive, sensual, and downright fun. But aggressive? Not by my definition.

The sun was just starting to set as keyboardist David Gleason counted the band into Ryan Lukas' composition "A Donde Se Fue el Fuego." The crowd, which grew to about 120 or more as the hour-plus set went on, was set to relax this evening, but they got with the program early and sat up straighter as Tim Williams rolled into a flute solo reminiscent of Dave Valentin. The stinging trumpet solo Ben Acrish tore into halfway through the tune contrasted the cool sound of Williams' flute.

Williams alternated between flute and reeds throughout the evening, either soloing or flying formation with Acrish, whose overall style has echoes of Arturo Sandoval. These guys were two-thirds of the flame-throwing horn section heard earlier this year on the Erftones' CD, *Dispatch*. Where the heat on that disc was white-hot, here the flame was more focused, its intensity flaring to the occasion. Sensemaya mixed original tunes - seasoned with salsa, reggae, and merengue - with covers ranging from Charlie Parker ("Cu-Bird") to the Buena Vista Social Club ("Cuarto De Tula"). The applause was wild on the hotter tunes, and couples danced in the crowd when the mood got sexy.

Up until now, my only frame of reference for Lukas was as part of the rhythm section of the Brian Patneaude Quartet. While Lukas' bass work (whether soloing or teaming with drummer Pete Sweeny and conga player Tony Garcia) was its usually stellar self this evening, I got to hear more of his compositional side, as he penned most of Sensemaya's originals himself or with Williams. His writing is on a par with his playing - which is to say, exceptional. I'd also use that word for Gleason, who kept the band focused within its framework of fun while serving up

splashes of color and contrast. If I had any complaint, it's that he didn't give himself enough solo space.

Alex Torres' various musical configurations get much love (and rightly so) for the spice they bring to the Capital Region scene. But variety is the spice of life. Check out Sensemaya when you get the chance, and you've got plenty. In addition to their weekly gigs at Justin's and Chameleons By The Lake, they're throwing a major dance party Friday, August 19th at Reel Meals Cabaret in Saratoga Springs.

Hey, a little *Vida Loca* never hurt anybody. Take it from a former Californian.

J HUNTER is a former announcer/producer for radio stations in the Capital Region and the Bay Area, including KSJS/San Jose (where he was Assistant Music Director/Jazz programming), Q104 WQBK/Albany, and WSSV/Saratoga. He has also written music and theatre reviews for the Glens Falls Chronicle. He currently resides in Clifton Park.