

Life in the Clubs: Taste for salsa music created career path for Dave Gleason

Local pianist also performs jazz, big band shows

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Photographer: Peter Barber

Pianist Dave Gleason, shown performing at the Muddy Cup in Proctors recently, will offer a solo show at The Stockade Inn in Schenectady at 7 tonight. Gleason, who teaches music at Schenectady High School, performs with a wide variety of local groups, including the Latin jazz band Sensemaya.

Pianist Dave Gleason got into his first salsa band by dancing. In 2001, he had just started studying ethnomusicology at Tufts University in Boston and was interested in focusing on Latin music. And as luck would have it, salsa band RumbaNaMa would perform a weekly Sunday night gig in Davis Square.

Gleason had played salsa music before, during his undergraduate studies

at the Crane School of Music in Potsdam, but still had to impress RumbaNaMa's music director first.

"I wanted to do a project on salsa music, and so they always say the best way to get inside the music is to learn to play it, so I wanted to play with the band," Gleason said.

"And I begged the band director of [RumbaNaMa] . . . to let me play with the band. I would go and I would hang out. 'You gotta let me play, you gotta let me play, just sit in, whatever.' I wanted to get the scoop, you know? And he said, 'No, I can't trust you to play the gig, since you're not Puerto Rican or Cuban or anything like that, but maybe if you can show me you can dance.' So I went every week for the dance lessons for like 10 weeks and I learned to dance, and one day he saw me twirling some girl on the dance floor, and he said, 'OK, you're ready.' "

Since then, Gleason has made salsa and Latin jazz his focus, studying the music firsthand in Cuba and Puerto Rico for his master's thesis. In 2003, after returning to his hometown of Schenectady, he formed Sensemaya, which was voted Best Latin Jazz Band in Metroland's 2005 Reader's Poll. That band has just finished recording its first album, "Shake It!," a collection of 12 original tracks featuring Latin grooves mixed with Western jazz improvisation.

Wide variety of styles

But Gleason considers himself a "utility player," and one look at his schedule confirms this. He's a regular player with Brian Patneade and Keith Pray's big band, has worked with the Joey Thomas Band and Soul Session, and plays with rock band the Brian Kaplan Band, among other projects. He's also active as a solo artist – he'll perform completely solo at The Stockade Inn tonight, drawing from jazz standards, originals and of course, Latin and salsa music.

"It's nice when I get to play solo, because I get to kind of zone back into my own thing," Gleason said.

It's a lot to keep up with, but Gleason, who also teaches music at Schenectady High School, is up to the challenge. The wide variety of styles – on any given week, he'll play five or six gigs, none of them with the same band – helps to keep his chops up.

“I like to think that people can call me and I can get it done for them,” Gleason said. “Maybe it's not the perfect thing that they want, but I can certainly get it done for them.”

Music didn't come easily for Gleason. In third grade, he got his start on violin, but ended up giving it up because, in his words, “I really just was not that good.”

“I just kind of thought, I tried a musical instrument; it's just not going to happen for me,” Gleason said. “I wasn't very good at sports, either, so I was just thinking, ‘Oh, I don't know what my thing is. And kids need a thing, know what I mean? I guess my grandmother or somebody got a piano, or a keyboard, for Christmas one year, and I really liked it, so I think then my parents bought me one.’”

Gravitating to jazz

Gleason taught himself to play along to songs on the radio, getting his first formal lessons when he was in middle school. He was turned on to blues in high school by his uncle, and eventually gravitated toward jazz, playing in the high school jazz ensemble and studying under Lee Shaw.

“That was huge because she kicked my ass,” Gleason said. “She really made me work hard, and she really taught me the way that jazz musicians learn things . . . to really play the real stuff.”

After getting his bachelor's in music, Gleason decided to focus on Latin music for his ethnomusicology master's due to the fact that it was something he could play. “It was either that or jazz, and I just felt like I wanted to get outside of what we do in North America.”

Sensemaya formed out of a couple of groups Gleason played with in Potsdam, including Abstract Interactions and Mojive. The original lineup featured bassist Ryan Lukas, who now plays with California group The Big Nasty, trumpeter Ben Acrish and saxophonist Tim Williams. Williams still plays with the group's current lineup, which also includes bassist Eric Johnson, percussionist Tony Garcia, trumpeter Steve Lambert and drummer Pete Sweeney.

The band began recording "Shake It!" about three or four years ago; because of this, everyone who has ever been in Sensemaya plays on the album.

"We've been working on this for like five years – I'm just a total perfectionist, so I was exerting serious quality control on every level," Gleason said.