

Get Ready to Rumba

Most of them don't have Latin heritage or a lot of experience playing Latin music, but when they take the stage as Sensemaya, the groove takes over



Photo by: Leif Zurmuhlen

By Erik Hage

On every other Wednesday night, you can catch Sensemaya doing their thing in the lounge-cool gloom of Justin's, conjuring up a rhythmically infectious blend of Latin rhythms and jazz. It's an act of alchemy, ushering the cultural heat of the Caribbean into a room of patrons dining on carefully crafted, visually pleasing portions of food, their faces aglow in the flickering candlelight. Women throughout the room, even those munching contentedly on salmon, sipping wine or immersing themselves in conversation, seem to get a little bit of the musical heat in their body, a shuck of the hips here, a little roll through the shoulders there—it's a style of music that just does something to people, whether they can understand (or identify) what they're listening to or not. (And it's surely no coincidence that the steamy *Sex and the City* adopted a Cuban-flavored, jazzy theme song.)

Sensemaya's sound, says leader David Gleason, unfurling one long stream of Latin genres and cross-pollinations, is rooted in jazz, swing, bebop, Cu-bop ("a combination of Cuban rhythm and bebop phrasing"), salsa, traditional Cuban Santeria rhythms, rumba rhythms ("fused with European jazz"), and even some Brazilian touches of samba and bossa nova. The group's set is a shifting, precise equation of piano, congas, bongos, drums, bass, trumpet, flute, sax, call-and-answer vocals, improvisation and head arrangements. Quite frankly, it's almost too much for a simple-minded music journalist raised on rock music to compute. So let's get down to the bottom line: The underlying current is sex, right?

Gleason chuckles. "I should point out that a lot of the Puerto Rican musicians I talk to think it's really funny that we perceive it that way. Because they often learn to dance salsa as children with their families—they dance it with their brother, their sister. In many ways, it's a way of getting the community and family together." But Gleason *will* go so far as to label it "sensual," allowing that lot of mainstream America finds Latin jazz appealing not only for the "positive nature of the music and the driving rhythm" but, yes, "a romanticized idea of a tropical climate *and* Latin sexuality."

While the average Lark Street denizen doesn't need all of this cultural context to enjoy Sensemaya, Gleason, the group's founder, is a veritable well of such knowledge, stemming from his graduate studies as an ethnomusicologist at Tufts University, where he immersed himself in the culture of the music he plays today

with Sensemaya. Ethnomusicology, Gleason explains, is “essentially the anthropology of music—it’s looking at music as culture.” And Gleason, sipping at a latte in the Borders café on a Saturday morning (with a heavy, straight rain casting more of an Eastern European than Caribbean atmosphere to the conversation), talks about his chosen form earnestly and intelligently, explaining, for example, that *guajira* “is the Cuban, 19th-century precursor to Salsa. . . . It’s a little bit slower, really florid. It’s music that comes from the Cuban mountainside,” or tracing the development of salsa from its nascent years in Cuba to its further development via Puerto Rican musicians in New York City.

The boyishly intellectual, 24-year-old Colonie native and middle-school music teacher (at Mont Pleasant) is a far cry from the pianist plunking out complex, heated improvisations with his fellow bandmates only a few nights before. But that’s the other side of the coin with Gleason: Sensemaya emerged when he decided to put all his fieldwork to practice back home. His studies at Tufts involved immersing himself in the work of veteran salsa musicians in Boston. He not only interviewed and observed, but frequently sat in with them as a player in an effort to “try to get inside [the music] and understand it—and understand its connection with culture.” With the completion of his thesis, Gleason thought to himself, “Wow, this is really cool, but how can I use this to make a group?” Such were the roots of Sensemaya, who have been around for only just over a year, and who have taken up a popular residency at Justin’s on Lark Street.

The group’s primary lineup consists of Gleason on piano, vocalist Walter Ramos (whom Gleason had interviewed for his graduate project) on congas and percussion, Pete Sweeny on drums, Benjamin Acrish on trumpet and flugelhorn, Tim Williams on sax and flute and Ryan Lukas on bass. Acrish, Williams and Lukas were old college buddies from Gleason’s undergrad days at the Crane School of Music in Potsdam (together they had, of all things, a jam band). Sweeny and Ramos were well-appointed veteran pros brought in to help see the project out. For most of the musicians, this was new territory, but in true jazz-musician spirit, they were excited to stretch themselves in new and interesting ways.

Seeing the group in action, moving through numerous styles and blending rhythms and forms, one might find it hard to believe that 1) the group came together fairly recently 2) that this is a relatively new area of music for most of the members and 3) that most of the members are of decidedly non-Latin American heritage (not that that should matter, obviously).

Gleason says the eclecticism of the set was part of the plan from day one. “I thought that one way to make it really interesting was to have each song be its own groove. A set [would be] a presentation of seven or eight grooves or styles that took the listener on a sort of journey.” Besides traditional songs from various Latin cultures and other arrangements, the group also perform compositions by both Gleason and Ramos, a wildly experienced NYC native whose law career brought him northward in ’99.

Gleason is also quick to point out the tremendously supportive atmosphere of the local jazz scene, a point perhaps underscored by the fact that local renowned player Adrian Cohen, who also books Justin’s, took interest in Sensemaya early on and helped them secure their Wednesday night residency, in which they alternate week-to-week with Ramos’ other group, Mundo Nuevo (a “way more traditional” group, Gleason notes). “The people are so friendly,” Gleason says, noting that, while there is obviously some competition among players, “they also want to encourage other musicians to reach their fullest potential,” knowing that it’s just healthy for the scene in general.

Down the road, they have a couple of local fests to play and a CD to put together (there’s already a batch of MP3s available at www.sensemaya.net). Or you can simply catch them in what has become their natural habitat, Justin’s. And when you hear the whole group singing a gang vocal back and forth with Ramos’ lead vocal line, here’s a little lesson I picked up from Gleason: The musicians are singing the *córo* (chorus), a response to Ramos’ *córo-pregón*, which like a vendor’s sales pitch—along the lines of “Hey, check it out . . . we want you to listen and enjoy.” (If you think of the call-and-response in “Oye Como Va,” you get the idea.) There are things to learn and Gleason is willing and ready to teach, whether it’s in conversation or through Sensemaya.

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