

From Rock to Mariachi

Artists who are in a class all their own

BY MARK HOLSTON

Eternally fresh in his artistic outlook and unflinchingly optimistic in the belief that his music can communicate with successive generations and disparate cultures, Carlos Santana is in a class all his own. Fans, who have waited patiently for almost two years for the famed guitarist and Latin rock pioneer to release the follow-up to the eclectic effort that produced the mega-hit *Smooth*, will likely be delirious with what they hear on *Shaman* (Arista 07822-14737-2). Every track, virtually all of which feature guest vocalists, seems to sport hit potential. At the core of the album's sound is a cha-cha rhythmic pulse powered by the leader's searing guitar licks, crackling percussion, and mambo-style horns.

Parlaying this successful formula to maximum effect are Musiq on "Nothing At All" and Macy Gray on "Amore." Special guest Seal and Santana opt for a slightly gentler, Spanish pop sound on "You Are My Kind," while "Foo Foo" is a foray into hot Dominican merengue dance rhythms. Tracks featuring troubadour Alejandro Lerner, opera star Plácido Domingo, and the group Ozomatli are sure to attract fans throughout the Hispanic world. Hats off to Santana for yet another exquisitely crafted pop masterpiece.

"Masterpiece" is also an apt description of the latest salsa-accented Latin jazz treat from violinist Susie Hansen on *The Salsa Never Ends* (Jazz Caliente JZC228). Hansen is a staple on the Latin music scene in Southern California, and her sweet, swinging violin brings an exciting new voice to a genre that often seems just to repeat overly familiar formulas. She's in splendid company with a group that includes percussionist Tiki Pasillas, vocalists Rubén Esteva and George Balmaseda, and saxophonist Justo



Almario. Often it's the spirit of Cuban *charanga* and vintage salsa that she taps, as on the title tune, while elsewhere she mixes it up with tracks like the merengue fueled "Blues con Fuego" and the romantic bolero "La pregunta," which allows her elegant classical technique to surface. *The Salsa Never Ends* is indeed masterful.

Also in a class all its own is *Mujeres y Mariachi* (Ulloa Productions) featuring vocalist Juanita with Mariachi Voz de América. Juanita penned many of the production's eloquent tracks, which are a celebration of this venerable tradition and a tribute to the women who have contributed to the music. A bilingual booklet and brief history of mariachi make the album an excellent introduction for those unfamiliar with this romantic, powerful genre. Juanita Ulloa's *Mujeres y Mariachi* show, based in San Jose, California, is available for bookings (505-867-6500). **H**

NEW RELEASES

★ *S. F. Bay*, John Santos and the Machete Ensemble (Machete Records M201). Tired of putting up with the whims of record company executives, percussion guru and master music conceptualizer Santos launches his own label with this release, and it's a beauty. From earthy rumbas and straight-ahead salsa grooves to silky smooth Latin jazz takes like the title tune, Santos and the cream of the Bay Area's Latin music colony create one of the season's most well rounded and enjoyable Afro-Cuban rooted programs.

★ *Venciendo Barreras*, Los Vencedores del Norte (Blue Cactus Records). This norteña sextet veers from the standard format that confines many such groups to sound-alike sessions. Los Vencedores seem to have had a lot of fun making this happy sounding recording. They achieve a high degree of stylistic variety, balancing polkas and *cum-bias*—"Ponte Tu Bikini" is a charmer—with a healthy dose of *corridos* and the bilingual "Mr. Moonlight." The presence of guest artists and attention to packaging—striking photos, original artwork, and pages of lyrics—convey an air of class missing on many releases in this regional genre.

★ *Hecho a Mano*, Chano Dominguez (Sunnyside Records SSC 1104). This enchanting release features Spanish pianist Dominguez in a variety of small group settings with guests that range from guitarist Tomatito to flamenco dancer Joaquín Grilo, whose hand claps and heels clicks are a distinctive percussive presence. Dominguez's keyboard work is at times brooding or festive but always inquisitive and delightfully inventive. He is a revelation, and the album is an off beat charmer.

★ *Del Alma*, Caravana Cubana (Warner Music Latina 49043-2). This collective of renowned Cuban musicians and Los Angeles-based Latin jazz artists hits a high note on this sparkling release, fortified by the presence of flutist Orlando "Maraca" Valle, pianist Chucho Valdés, and bassist Carlos Del Puerto, Jr. Among the local cast are pianist Joe Rotundi, saxophonist Michael Turre, and percussionist Michito Sánchez. The opening track, "Maraca de Cedro"—a nod to guest pianist Cedar Walton—is a swinging, salsafied son and one of the year's standout tropical tracks.

—M.H.