

NEIGHBORS



Educator Tere Palm and bassist Agustín Bernal founded MUJAM to organize musicians and educate new generations about jazz.

THE NEWS PHOTO: RODRIGO OROPEZA

Duo plucking new fans over to Mexican jazz

Couple Agustín Bernal and Tere Palm are making the music more accessible with classes, jam sessions in their home

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

Mexico has never had much of a jazz scene, at least not like that of Paris, New York or Tokyo. But over the last several years, Mexican jazz has been undergoing something of a renaissance. The change is evident in several new clubs (including Zinco and Papa Beto), events like the Thanksgiving Fest in San Miguel de Allende, and more airtime on local radio.

One group contributing to the increasing buzz about Mexican jazz is a group called Músicos de Jazz de Mexico, or MUJAM. It was formed last year by Agustín Bernal, a veteran bass player, and his wife, Tere Palm, in order to organize concerts and classes, record music, link musicians and create spaces for jazz playing.

Bernal and Palm are the driving forces of the organization, and their home, located on a quiet side street in Coyoacán, serves both as a performance space and a recording studio.

To date they have produced four CDs, all devoted to world class Mexican jazz musicians. Twice a month they offer jam sessions open to the public. For a \$200 peso contribution, you get a glass of wine, some hors d'oeuvres and two hours of music that transports you straight to Birdland.

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A recent recording session of duets by Bernal and Iraida Noriega, one of the country's most-acclaimed young jazz singers, is an outstanding example of MUJAM's work. The two artists carried on a musical conversation that took them to new realms of musical possibilities.

Continuing a tradition of vocal and bass duets – classic songbirds from Sarah Vaughan to Sheila Jordan have recorded exclusively with bass – they deconstructed songs like the

Cuban bolero "Quizás, quizás, quizás" and the jazz standard "Midnight Sun" without ever losing sight of the melodic chord structure. They blew the roof off the joint, as Louis Jordan used to say, and you will be able to hear the results on the CD, due for release soon.

AN EDUCATIONAL MISSION

Bernal, born and raised in Mexico City, first realized his passion for music during hours spent listening to his father's old Frank Sinatra records. "It was those fabulous arrangers, like Nelson Riddle, who really intrigued me ... made me want to hear more."

He started hanging out at the clubs with local greats such as Ramón Negrete and Roberto Aimes, and listening to more hardcore jazz records. The Bill Evans trio was his favorite, with the legendary Scott LaFaro on bass. "It was these records that made me want to take up the bass."

After a temporary foray into rock and funk, and a couple of years in New York hanging out at the Village Vanguard and other clubs, he returned to Mexico and his musical roots. Bernal has become one of the leading

mainstream bass players in Mexico and beyond, sought after for his performances and recordings alike.

Sensing a lack of interest and visibility for jazz in Mexico, the couple decided to form MUJAM. Their concerts offer both older and emerging jazz musicians a comfortable performance venue.

One of their biggest goals is education. Tere, a bilingual educator – she grew up near the Texas border and teaches both Spanish and English – explained, "We feel a need to educate the public, to make the music accessible to a wider range of people, those who don't know about it."

They present jazz demonstrations in schools, and have just received support from the D.F. Ministry of Culture to produce a series of concerts during March and April titled "Jazz en la Ciudad."

A repeat performance of the Iraida Noriega and Agustín Bernal duets will take place March 31 at 7 p.m. in the Centro Cultural Ollín Yoliztli, so you can judge for yourself.

See Mujam's Web site, www.mujam.org for more information.