

# THE ASPEN TIMES

## Culture and connection

Rock dreams lead deSoL's Albie Monterrosa back to his roots

**By Stewart Oksenhorn**

**August 12, 2005**

Albie Monterrosa is riding high these days. After years of chasing his rock 'n' roll dreams down dead ends, his latest band, deSoL, finds itself near the top of the charts. "Karma," the single from deSoL's eponymous debut, sits in the top 10 of the AAA radio format charts. Moreover, deSoL is the kind of tight-knit band - a "brotherhood" is the word the lead singer repeatedly uses - Monterrosa has always wanted.

Moreover, deSoL is playing a style of music that has found its way to Monterrosa's heart. Built on Latin rhythms and Santana-esque electric guitar, with lyrics in English, Spanish and Spanglish, deSoL's sound is a mix of the classic rock that Monterrosa has long favored, and the Latin styles that are in his blood.

In the Queens, N.Y., neighborhood where the 29-year-old Monterrosa was raised, the predominant culture was Latin American. Monterrosa's parents came from El Salvador. But the music of the immigrant generation was something to get away from, not to be embraced.

"My family listened to salsa, merengue, a lot of the old-school acts. That was the soundtrack in my house," said Monterrosa, speaking on a misbehaving cell phone from a tour stop in Telluride. "They also turned us on to rock, whatever was popular. But I always felt that their music was their music, and my music was Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, the Stones. And early hip-hop, like LL Cool J, who was from our neighborhood, and the Sugar Hill Gang."



DeSoL will perform Saturday at Belly Up in Aspen, and then again at the Jazz Aspen Snowmass Labor Day Festival, on a bill with Widespread Panic and Galactic, on Sept. 2.

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From his teens, Monterrosa sang in bands that played classic-rock flavors. His ideal was acts like early Santana and Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band, big groups that projected a sense of a shared culture. But band members would get married or tire of the poverty that comes with a startup band. And musically, there were no fresh ideas in his head. "I had exhausted all the possibilities," said Monterrosa.

Five years ago, Monterrosa went to St. John, the Virgin Islands, "to get refreshed," he said. On the beach, he heard a woman, of Puerto Rican heritage but who came from Asbury Park, N.J. - the heart of Springsteen country - playing Latin beats on the congas. The woman, who Monterrosa recalls with a slightly mystical air, refused to come back to the States. But Monterrosa returned north with new direction and determination.

"I put the word out that I wanted to put together a Latin band," he said. "I didn't know how Latin I wanted to get. But I was digging what was coming out of Cuba, Ry Cooder and the Buena Vista Social Club. I wanted a percussion player to tweak my songs."

At the open mics Monterrosa held at a Long Branch, N.J., nightclub, a percussion player was the first ingredient he found for his new concoction. Armando Cabrera was a Havana-born, Puerto Rican-raised resident of the Jersey shore who had the clave - the syncopated rhythm at the heart of Latin music - in his blood. And to Monterrosa, it was a plus that Cabrera knew almost nothing about rock.

"He was raised on salsa and merengue. He turned me on to so many CDs and cassettes that it was a heavy course in itself," said Monterrosa. "And I had to teach him who Keith Richards was."

Perhaps because of his heritage, or the influence of his parents' tastes, Monterrosa seemed naturally inclined toward the Latin

"I was neglecting my ancestry. But I couldn't neglect that any longer. The doors have blown open," says deSoL's Albie Monterrosa. The band performs Saturday night at Belly Up.



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rhythms. Working on a pre-deSoL recording project, a producer advised him to drop his offbeat strumming style.

"He said, you have to learn to play rock, two-and-four, straight-up," he recalled. "But I wasn't strumming like that. I had an accent to me. When I started up deSoL, I realized that was in me, that clave, not the two-and-four rock thing."

Asbury Park, which Monterrosa has called home for several years, is no hotbed of Latin sounds. So while Monterrosa had hopes of forming a full-on Latin band, he was willing to bend to accommodate the right personalities. Guitarist Soto is of Peruvian descent; percussionist James Guerrero has a Mexican heritage; and bassist/trumpeter Chris Guice's grandparents were Spanish. But keyboardist Andy Letke is from Indiana, with a classical and jazz background, and drummer George Saccal's ancestors are from the Middle East. So like New York band Yerba Buena, and Los Angeles' Ozomatli, deSoL became a melting pot of influences, with Latin as the principal culture.

"What came out was this mixture of people," said Monterrosa. It wasn't a forced thing. I'd be faking it if I sang as if I were in a real salsa band. But we in the band understand it. Because we live in a Spanglish world."

As important as the Latin element in deSoL's sound is the offstage groove of its members. He remembers that, as a kid, walking into the house of one of his Latino friends was different than visiting an Anglo buddy. The vibe was warmer, more family-oriented in the Latino households, with several generations typically to be found living together. Monterrosa got the same feeling from the E Street Band.

"Not because of the music, but how they were seven, eight, nine of them. And their personality was so large," he said. "They jam together, they think together, they project together."

DeSoL tries to convey a similar closeness; the photos of the band in the liner notes to "deSoL" - bandmates smiling and clapping, their arms around each other, could almost have been lifted from an early Springsteen album.

DeSoL is hitting the Aspen area with unusual force these days: The band opened for the Wailers in the spring at the Belly Up, and returns to Belly Up tomorrow, Aug. 13. They swing back to play on the main stage at the Jazz Aspen Snowmass Labor Day Festival, on a bill with Widespread Panic and Galactic, Sept. 2.

With a hit song, and his band of brothers, Monterrosa is living his rock fantasies. The final link in his happiness has been connecting with his cultural heritage.

"It was close to my soul, my root," he said of the Latin sounds he heard as a child. "But as a kid, you have to shy away and find your own music."

"I was neglecting my ancestry. But I couldn't neglect that any longer. The doors have blown open. Life is so good right now. I feel on the right path, connected to my roots."

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