

The Patriot Ledger

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MUSIC PREVIEW: A beat you can dance to: deSol ain't your average party band

*By CHAD BERNDTSON
For The Patriot Ledger*

Formed through a series of fruitful jam sessions in Asbury Park, N.J., the thrill of deSol is that it feels like a party band without actually having any of the stylistic trappings or cheesy excesses of one. You're up and dancing to such finessed nuggets as "Chica de Miami" and "Spin Around" (both from the group's superb eponymous debut on Curb Records), but there's also a serious worldbeat rock 'n' roll band at the core, an intimidating pressure cooker of hooks and rhythms that's hard to disagree with.

Their shows create a communal, everybody-up feel because the band is itself a commune: no less than seven "brothers" who fuse Latin soul and hard-driving rock 'n' roll together in a manner that's as danceably sweaty and unpretentious as it is forceful, an impetus for rock critics to exhaust the word "infectious." On the heels of a memorable gig at Ryles Jazz Club in Cambridge last fall, deSol returns to the area tomorrow for a throwdown at the Paradise Lounge.

One of the band's earliest professional converts was renowned songwriter Frankie Previte - best known for writing the Oscar-winning "Dirty Dancing" theme "(I've Had) the Time of My Life" - who was so taken with the group's demo and a subsequent live show that he became the band's manager. The group has since completed tours with such high-profile noisemakers as R.E.M. and the Wailers, and appeared at festivals like Riverstages and Bonnaroo, not to mention on a bill at Pro Player Stadium in Miami.

Lead singer and songwriter Albie Monterrosa grew up in Queens, N.Y., as the son of El Salvadoran immigrants, and spent many of his formative years doing the "rock 'n' roll thing," as he says, putting together straight-up rock bands and establishing himself as a top-shelf vocalist in a range of styles. He exhausted the possibilities of a few ensembles, gaining some recognition, but it was a subsequent visit to the Caribbean islands where a musical epiphany steered him back toward his Latino roots - and finding a way to fuse the south-of-the-border rhythms with the rocking, popping MTV culture to which he had grown accustomed.

"I met this girl playing congas on a beach, and we started jamming, and it was such an awakening," he explained. The islander, whom Monterrosa fondly talks about as if she were a mystical shaman, was playing Latin swing rhythms, and forcing his guitar style into her framework resulted in long days and nights of jamming on the beach, and a realization for the singer that his own culture and roots should - no, had - to be a part of his music.

"It was a weird spot," he remembers. "After that, I wanted a straight-up salsa and Latin rhythm band, but that wasn't really who I was either. It was weird because I grew up with my family, the food and customs and language - one culture - and then there was the whole rock and American culture."

Fortunately for Monterrosa, he found his first like-minded "brother" in percussionist Armando Cabrera, who was the most common mention among local music circles when Monterrosa returned to the New York area seeking Latino players. From there came the makings of the final lineup: guitarist Soto, percussionist James Guerrero, bassist Chris Guice, keyboardist Andy Letke, and drummer George Sacca, all of whom not only clicked with his idea of a mighty Latin rock ensemble, but also with the notion of a large, extroverted, bombastic roster that would turn concerts into loud, reveling atmospheres of blistering dance rock and exotic grooves.

"I definitely always wanted a huge band," Monterrosa said with a laugh. "Lots of horns, lots of percussion. Really, though, I just always wanted a brotherhood. It was always a party in my family, and among my friends back in Queens - a really big atmosphere of people. I always wanted that feeling."

While he does appreciate the comparisons to the original Santana lineup - the group to which deSol is most often compared - Monterrosa said he counts as even bigger influences such international artists as keyboardist/salsa legend Ruben Blades (perhaps most famous for his work with the Buena Vista Social Club scene), and also Paul Simon, whose work with percussion-heavy African groups like Ladysmith Black Mambazo is still a benchmark for the melding of worldbeat rhythms with American pop sensibilities.

Fueled by the excitement of knowing it's about to break wide, deSol is playing as many shows as possible, and its strenuous 2005 schedule shows no sign of breaking with the trend.

"We're starting to get encores," Monterrosa said. "We go out into the audiences. It's really starting to spread, and it's amazing that so many people are starting to believe in it."

deSol With Dedos. At the Paradise Lounge, 969 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, 9 p.m. tomorrow. Tickets \$8 at the door, or available online at www.thedise.com.

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