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DeSol Flies on Latin-Rock

Good songwriters, like good novelists, write about what they know. So it's not surprising that deSol's recent CD, "Spanish Radio," opens with a track written by lead singer and rhythm guitarist Albie Monterrosa. In fact, most of the songs, all of them quite good, were written or co-written by Monterrosa. In "Spanish Radio," Monterrosa sings about his experiences growing up in Hollis, Queens, and how he was raised in a household that spoke both Spanish and English.

On a recent Tuesday night the band played the newly reopened Conduit nightclub in Trenton. Accustomed to playing packed houses at home in Asbury Park, at Princeton's Triumph Brewing, in Philadelphia, and beyond, the band played to a sparse house. Yet their collective enthusiasm was not reduced one iota by the fact they were playing for just 15 to 20 patrons.

After a set of very danceable Latin-rock, with some tunes sung in Spanish, Monterrosa and deSol co-founder Armando Cabrera sat down in the club's spacious subterranean dressing rooms to talk about the band's rising star.

Monterrosa, based in Ocean Grove for the last 10 years, is a veteran of a several straight-ahead rock 'n' roll cover bands. His parents immigrated from El Salvador to Queens in the late 1960s. "I had this idea I wanted to do something with this music about seven years ago," he says, noting he moved to Ocean Grove when he was in his early 20s.

"I'd been in pop and rock bands, and nothing really panned out, so I went for a hiatus from the whole Jersey Shore thing to the Virgin Islands for a month," he says. There he met a girl from Asbury Park, who was playing congas constantly.

"I realized then -- this is all the stuff I grew up with, this was my parents' music. I grew up in a Spanish speaking household with Spanish food and Spanish culture."

While still in the Virgin Islands, Monterrosa took out his guitar and began trying to add Latin embellishments to the pop songs he had written. "I started working on the song 'Spin Around,' which is on the disc, adding Latin touches to the song. I went to bed that night and I was going over every song I had written, and I said to myself, 'I'm surprised I haven't thought of this before.' When I left, I thanked this girl, and told her, 'If you ever come back to New Jersey, come sit in with me.'"

Back in New Jersey, Monterrosa found himself helping the owner of Cheers in Long Branch on running his Sunday night open mike nights. He put the word out in early 2000 that he was looking to form a Latin-rock band and Armando Cabrera's name kept coming up.

"Finally I called him up at work," Monterrosa explains, "and he invited me over to his house in Oakhurst that night." The two sat down at the piano and began working on their vision for what would eventually become deSol.

"I remember his house was painted inside with all these Caribbean colors," Monterrosa says, laughing, and then, after working on a few tunes at the piano, with Monterrosa on guitar, "he says to me, 'If I decide to do this, I want to do it all the way.'"

Percussionist Cabrera explains they added a drummer and pursued gigs wherever they could find them -- finally scoring one at the Stone Pony. Later Cabrera and Monterrosa added bass, electric guitar, keyboards, and another percussionist.

Their first shows were at Nova Terra on Albany Street in New Brunswick.

Cabrera, who has his master's in mechanical engineering from M.I.T. and has four children, was living the good life in Oakhurst, working for a division of AT&T as a mechanical engineer. That division has since been sold to Tyco and there have been layoffs at the facility.

"I could have gone out and gotten another engineering job, but I didn't," says Cabrera. "I said, 'Well, this is a sign for me, because I believe in this, and I'll work harder on this.' So I sold my house in Oakhurst and we moved into a smaller house, down-sized a bit, but my wife is behind me all the way," he explains.

Guitarist and lead singer Monterrosa, only in his late 20s, also has a wife and two kids. The rest of the band includes James Guerrero on percussion, Rich Soto on lead guitar, Andy Letke on keyboards, Chris Guice on bass, and Tim Perry, drums.

Thanks in part to their manager, Frankie Previte of Middletown, deSol has been making inroads in recent months in far-away places like Miami, with its large Latin and Cuban population, and in New York City, where the band recently played at S.O.B.'s (Sounds of Brazil).

Previte, known for his work on "Dirty Dancing," has been pulling out all the stops for deSol in recent months. He has steered the band toward a record deal with Curb/Warner Bros. Records, with a debut album to be released next spring.

Previte got involved with the band after hearing them at the Downtown Cafe, in Red Bank. The band's photographer, Danny Sanchez of Red Bank, got their tape to Previte. Since last December, when Harry's Roadhouse, a large new venue, opened in downtown Asbury Park, the band has had a popular Thursday night slot there.

What is the appeal of a Latin-rock band for white kids from the suburbs?

Aside from the fact that the band is multi-ethnic -- Guerrero is Mexican and an old neighbor of Monterrosa's from Queens -- it's the instruments they use, and the skill with which they use them. Timbales, congas, bongos, guiro, cajon, timbau, and cowbells, as well as electric guitar and keyboard, are all part and parcel of deSol's vibrant, dynamic sound.

"It's not your everyday rock," Cabrera explains. "In reality, the composition of the whole band is that we're all from different ethnic backgrounds and everybody is bringing their own elements into it. I learn from all the guys in the band about pop music, from every aspect of music. We have people who have classical and jazz backgrounds and then we have great songwriting, all mixed together with these other elements."

Cabrera, the son of an architect father and dentist mother, was born in Cuba but he and his family fled the country for Puerto Rico prior to the Castro takeover. He was raised Cuban in a lower-middle class part of Puerto Rico.

During the 1970s and '80s, Cabrera was very much into the music of Ruben Blades and the Fania All-Stars. [Fania was a New York-based record company that specialized in issuing sides by the top names in Latin, Caribbean, Cuban, and Afro-Cuban music.]

Asked about his influences, growing up in Queens, Monterrosa says, "My mother played Spanish radio stations constantly, and I think that just seeped into me. I have a stack of Armando's CDs that I may not ever give back to him, but growing up, I loved the songwriters -- Paul Simon, John Lennon, Elton John -- I was basically raised on rock 'n' roll. I like to say I was a pop-head with a Spanish soul, because at the end of the day, it's all about the lyric and the melody, the songs that people are going to gravitate to."

Monterrosa recalls that Previte "shopped the band around" to different record labels for the better part of a year before they found their deal with Curb/Warner Bros. Records.

"It was hard for us to get a deal, everybody was like 'You're not English enough, you're not Spanish enough, you're not American enough, and you're not traditional enough.' And to his credit, our manager Frankie just said, 'You guys just keep doing what you've been doing.' Everybody was passing on us, Columbia, and other big record companies," Monterrosa

recalls.

Monterrosa and Cabrera are encouraged by the fact they have sold out of nearly all 5,000 copies of their "Spanish Radio" CD on their own, through hard work and touring in the Garden State and nearby lower Manhattan, and the fact that the CD is getting attention at Latin clubs in Miami.

On stage, it's clear they are a well-rehearsed machine. The music is rhythm heavy, for sure, with timbales, congas, and other drums on stage, but also very melodic. The group's songs are message songs that, like three-minute pop songs from the glory days of 1970s AM radio, are easy to sing along with.

What does Curb/Warner Bros. have in mind by way of a marketing plan for the band? Are they going to be marketed as Latin or pop?

"My dream was always to start off in the American market and crossover to the Spanish market," Monterrosa explains. "I wanted to do it the other way around instead of the way Ricky Martin did it. I was just talking to Bob Catania, the head of promotion at Curb Records, which is a big country label and they want to get in to pop. They're testing the record out in Miami and at different radio stations in Florida," he explains.

"That, to me, is better than getting a million dollar deal and having them throw it out there and see if it sticks," he says, not unlike the experience of the Spin Doctors and literally dozens of other bands who once had big label recording contracts.

Given that they've had just one personnel change in the band since they formed in 2000 -- drummer Ron Alessio left amicably for work and personal reasons -- it appears a wider following and good things in general are in the offing for deSol. This band could be opening for Santana as early as next summer, they are so tight, so skilled and so melodic. Most important, they have something original to say.

"I understand the record business can be crazy," Monterrosa concludes, "but I'm optimistic. I see how we've moved along and how people have been opening doors for us. We're all really kind people and that's going to help bring us to where we want to be," he says.

"We've been seeing the numbers grow in Asbury Park and we're on a mission," he adds, "it's grass roots rock, it's all about positive energy and people enjoying themselves."

-- *Richard J. Skelly*

**DeSol, Triumph Brewing Company, 138 Nassau Street, 609-924-7855. Latin pop rock. www.desolmusic.com
Saturday, November 29, 10:30 p.m. Also Friday, December 26.**

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