

ARTS SA Brings Latin Flavor to the Aztec

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Dressed in bright mangos and limes, ripe and ready for the pickin', the ladies need little reminder of what they came out to do, but the invitation is still out there: No seats at the very front. Please come down and dance if you feel so inclined. Lights dim and turn magically into the color of a Mesoamerican sunset in the heyday of the great empire at Tenochtitlan, and a burst of blue and green and vermillion dances sinuously from the brass now on the stage, given its pulse by the passionate percussion. Once the groove is set in full motion, it doesn't stop. At all. The whole night.

Houston Street was alive with a palpable energy. A savory *sabor latino* was felt on the lips and in the hips as San Antonio welcomed the [Spanish Harlem Orchestra](#) to the newly renovated [Aztec Theatre](#), under the auspices of [Arts San Antonio](#).

"I've always been a fan of Afro-Caribbean music," said [Executive Director and President of Arts SA John Toohey](#). "This is one of the best salsa bands in the world."

The practice at Arts SA is to identify the absolute best performers in the world – in fields of expression such as world music, jazz, dance, ballet, and even theater – and to bring them to San Antonio for the community to experience. "The performance needs to be excellent in every

sense,” Toohey said. “If we bring a jazz group, it’s not just any jazz group. Good is not good enough – it needs to be wonderful.”



Executive Director of Arts San Antonio John Toohey welcomes the crowd to the Aztec. Photo by Melanie Robinson.

While many arts and concert businesses may stop short at simply making the concert available, Toohey claims the difference at Arts SA is their aggressive marketing technique to truly bring the people to the performance. “We feel we have to work very hard to really bring an audience to the performance,” he said. “We present groups whose names don’t always reveal what they do, and often times what they do challenges the audience.”

This was not necessarily the case with the Spanish Harlem Orchestra, as Toohey helped bring these guys to San Antonio once before. “The musicians were just wonderful to work with,” he said. “We had a capacity audience, and it was our first time presenting at the Aztec.”

According to Toohey, the Aztec staff was eager to get the group in and let Arts SA produce. “We had dozens of people who came up to us after the show who had not been to the Aztec since they were children, and they really enjoyed the experience,” Toohey said, adding that the Aztec was truly the perfect fit for the Spanish Harlem Orchestra.



From the balcony, the heart of the Aztec shines brightly above the stage, letting down its rays upon the tres hombres guapos, dancing in beautiful harmony to the spaces surrendered by the horns. In black and white with shirts unbuttoned, no tie, their voices reach and press softly, roundly, against the pointed corners of the Aztec ceilings, golden molding highlighting ruby red jewels that order themselves with purpose. Similarly, the voices sparkle each with their own charm. One high and suave with a business air, the other diaphanous and playful with a wink of an eye. But the third, the leader, the “Don” amongst señores, flies straight and steady down the middle, tucking his hand gently in towards the tail of his coat every time he steps back in salsa sway. It’s the kind of smoothness that, like jazz, you just can’t teach. You’re born with it.

Professional pandering is made all the easier when a city’s only professional sports team has just won the national title, and understand those three words in a totally different way.

“I love San Antonio, home of the Spurs,” said [Oscar Hernandez, leader and pianoman of the Spanish Harlem Orchestra](#), inspiring a chant of “Go Spurs Go” throughout the concert hall. “You know, I kind of feel like your Spurs are like my band. We play as a team.”

Hernandez, donning a light gray sports coat to the black of his team, stands out in the Latin jazz and salsa world as a premier bandleader and composer. Influenced by [New York in the 50s](#) and *gatos* like Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Mongo Santamaría and Dizzy Gillespie, Hernandez is known for recording the theme song for "[Sex and the City](#)" and collaborating with Paul Simon.

He spoke to the crowd of his discography with the orchestra like you'd imagine a proud father would speak of his prodigal son. "We have two CDs that won a Grammy, a Grammy-nominated CD out now and one on the way," Hernandez told the impressionable crowd. "We have these CDs out for sale after the show, where we'd like to sign autographs for you."



The line for these Juan Hancocks is already stretching around the anteroom of the theatre, like the space before the stage converted into a dance floor for the evening. A bubbly-eyed señora stood at the front still shakin' and groovin' from the unstoppable Latin beat in her vivified soul. "I got just what I expected," she said, anxiously looking at her Spanish Harlem Orchestra poster, anticipating the presence of Hernandez and Co. "I don't even understand Spanish, but it was fabulous!"

Jazz for the Alamo City, [91.7 KRTU](#), was in attendance and even brought out some faithful supporters. "I've been a member of the station since 2005," said Gino Orlandi, an active listener

of jazz who loves to experience all forms of the music. “Thankful to KRTU for inviting me to the show.”

While many of the musicians hail from Central America, their home base is New York City, which got some of the crowd – including Orlandi – sentimental. “I grew up in New York, did my undergrad at New York University, so this definitely brought me back,” he said. “Truly outstanding showmanship by these musicians.”

Relaxing with a drink in their hands, trumpeter [Maneco Ruiz](#), saxman [Jorge Castro](#), and timbales player [Daniel Antonetti](#) gathered together to shed some light on the experience of playing with this dignified ensemble.

“We were raised on this music, I was listening to it, Jorge and Daniel were listening to it,” Ruiz said. “The music is in you. All we do is modernize it.”



Ruiz made sure to give credit to bandleader Hernandez and his leadership style. “Everybody gets to shine, it’s not just Oscar’s band,” Ruiz said. “Go see Marc Antony, you’re not gonna get that.”

Antonetti, born and raised in New York, picked up what Ruiz was putting down. “There’s respect in the band. What Oscar says, we listen to. He’s been successful,” Antonetti said. “He knows what he wants, and he still gives you the liberty to express yourself.”

While we saw the ensemble as a collective, each one of the 13 musicians is quite accomplished in his own right. “I’ve got the guys on stage right now recording with me personally,” Antonetti said. “On the album, we’ve got salsa music and I’m rapping over it.”

Smiling with tender congeniality, Antonetti admitted he was fond of the Alamo City. “I love the heat. Its like 50 degrees in the city right now,” he said. “The sunshine is good, and the people are really nice. We’re feeling the vibe.”

The Spanish Harlem Orchestra isn't the only group of jazz musicians who want to bask in the San Antonio sun. "The agent for the Spanish Harlem Orchestra is also the agent for the [Bad Plus](#)," Toohey said. "He doesn't believe they've ever come to Texas before, but they'll be here Sept. 30 at the Aztec!"

Toohey admitted that the Bad Plus represents some of the more esoteric forms of jazz that Arts SA has ever hosted. "Their technique is wonderfully good, and they are creative and open to different forms of music – almost like no other musician I know of," Toohey confessed.

The jazz trio of Reid Anderson, Ethan Iverson, and David King are known for what the New York Times dubbed "avant-garde populism" in their music, covering iconoclasts such as Nirvana, and most recently taking on the Western motif in their tenth studio recording.



The troubadours of the musical spectrum will bring the whole gamut to Texas for just one night, right after they leave Berkeley and before they head out to the bayou. "They got on my radar

with their [performance of Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring'](#),” Toohey said. “They captured the music in a way no one thought could be done.”

At Arts SA, Toohey desires to create an experience that is a step up. “We don’t have a club or a lounge. We don’t want you to sit next to your date and talk,” Toohey said. “We want you to sit and listen to what is being done, shut out the external stimuli and focus in on the event.”

Ultimately, in Toohey’s book, music is not about good or bad or if you like this form or that form. “Can the music take you somewhere? Do you get something from it?” he inquired. “I think if you’re open to hearing what people can do – if you like music – the genre is absolutely irrelevant.”

**Featured/top image: The “tres hombres guapos” showing the audience how to move. Photo by Melanie Robinson.*