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INSIDE CHARLOTTE ARTS



DANIEL COSTON

UltimaNota with the Charlotte Symphony at its inaugural Traveling Roadshow performance in late April 2024.

Latin band UltimaNota shares its sound across Charlotte

BY LIZ ROTHBAUS BERTRAND
Arts Correspondent

When Tony Arreaza speaks about his band UltimaNota's recent successes around Charlotte, one phrase keeps popping up. "It was magical," the Venezuelan-born guitarist and composer said as he shares each new part of the group's story.

But there's clearly something more than magic at work for UltimaNota, now in its 15th year.

The group, which bills itself as a "blend of tropical rhythms with a modern twist" features an international roster of seven musicians, originally from Venezuela, Mexico, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic.

What began in 2009 as a cover band to play at weddings and restaurants has greatly evolved.

The group now writes, performs and records its own music. That transformation, which began during the pandemic, opened the door to new performance opportunities, including a recent live performance with the Charlotte Symphony, as well as national recognition for the band.

Arreaza recently spoke with The Charlotte Observer about UltimaNota's journey to reach these milestones.



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UltimaNota keyboardist Franklin Pire, right, and saxophonist Oscar Huerta at a recent rehearsal. UltimaNota formed in 2009, with members from Venezuela, Mexico, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic.

RECORDING MUSIC DURING THE PANDEMIC

When the pandemic closed down all live events, it was a

double blow for Arreaza. He's not only a musician but founder of Carlotan Talents, which organizes events, books talent,

and manages more than a dozen Latin bands from across the region.

"I felt like I was the first one

to shut down," Arreaza said. He worried he'd be last to get back to work.

After a few weeks of "forced vacation," Arreaza found new inspiration in composing his own music. He finally had time to delve into production, using the music studio behind his house. The result was a 12-song album of original songs, called "Soñando."

"If it wasn't because of the pandemic I don't think we'd have ever done it," he said. "In order to do this you have to have time and you have to learn how to (use the) technology."

As the album came together, Arreaza wanted a song with weight to turn into a single. His wife, Ailen, suggested creating a piece with personal significance about their friends and things happening to people they knew in the community.

Arreaza asked her to help write the lyrics and that song became "Mi Sueño" (My Dream). The song recounts stories of challenges immigrants face here and around the world, Arreaza said.

'A TRIBUTE TO IMMIGRANTS'

The song's video was produced with minimal resources, Arreaza said. That included grant money from the Arts & Science Council, which was also used to create the album and a short documentary film on its making.

The music video begins with these words: " 'Mi Sueño' (My Dream) is a tribute to immigrants who have made incredible sacrifices to come to this country and build up our city, but often have to live in the shadows due to our broken immigration system."

Arreaza said they hired friends as actors and recruited several prominent local immigrants and advocates. They hold up placards during the video reinforcing the song's messages on topics like "Access to Education" and "Immigration Reform."

They include former Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools board member Jennifer De La Jara, Manolo's Latin Bakery owner Manolo Betancur and Stefania Arteaga, co-executive director of the Carolina Migrant Network.

"Trust me, it was tricky but at the end I'm so honored to have that video out," Arreaza said.

A year later, the video was nominated for a national award, Best Music Video, at the Official Latino Film & Arts Festival (now Nvision Film and Music Festival) in Palm Springs, California. UltimaNota didn't win, but Arreaza said the group subsequently received many calls and emails from non-profit organizations requesting permission to use their video.

"This is what we do music (for)," he said. "The music business is so hard, so at this point I love when people listen to music that we write, that we compose."

SEE ULTIMANOTA, 2C



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UltimaNota guitarist Tony Arreaza said he still gets goosebumps recalling how it felt rehearsing with the Charlotte Symphony for the first time.

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ULTIMANOTA

PERFORMING WITH THE CHARLOTTE SYMPHONY

The band got a special opportunity to share their music this spring, performing with the Charlotte Symphony at Musica Con Amigos.

The event, co-sponsored by the symphony and the Latin American Coalition, was the orchestra's inaugural CSO Roadshow. That's a new symphony initiative to bring music to more of Charlotte's neighborhoods, using a custom-made mobile stage for pop-up performances.

Arreaza said he was surprised and honored when the orchestra reached out around January regarding UltimaNota's participation. He has long ties with the Latin American Coalition, too, and worked there as cultural events director for 11 years before going full time with Carlotan Talents.

"I was kind of embarrassed to share our humble songs with the Charlotte Symphony," Arreaza said. But symphony president and CEO David Fisk, and the others Arreaza met with, assured him they wanted UltimaNota's

music as part of the program.

"One of the defining features of CSO Roadshow is the collaborative approach we want to take toward programming with our community partners at each location," Fisk said in a statement to The Observer. "During our planning conversations with the Latin American Coalition, they enthusiastically recommended inviting UltimaNota to perform with us."

The first thing the symphony asked was whether Arreaza had written scores available.

He didn't, but then realized who could create them. By coincidence, the band had just hired a newly arrived Venezuelan pianist, Franklin Pire, to replace their former keyboardist.

Pire is a professor of symphonic music and composition who trained at the National Music Academy of Ukraine and taught at a Venezuelan university for years. He created new arrangements for UltimaNota and the symphony to play together.

"Our team gladly worked with UltimaNota



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UltimaNota band members, from left, guitarist Tony Arreaza, vocals Fred Figueroa, drums Juan Carlos Genoa, percussion Lueichy Martinez, keyboards Franklin Pire, saxophone Oscar Huerta and bass guitarist Isaac Melendez.



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UltimaNota percussionist Lueichy Martinez practices with the band on May 14, 2024.

to orchestrate their pieces, so that the CSO's musicians could play with them side by side," Fisk said. "Being able to reach a completely new audience and embrace the Latino communities of Charlotte was a highlight of the experience for us."

Likewise, Arreaza enjoyed working with the symphony. "They're extremely talented... and we feel like we're lucky to be able to play at that level."

He said he still gets

goosebumps recalling how it felt rehearsing with the symphony the first time. "I was playing this song and I couldn't really concentrate," Arreaza said.

It was "Mi Sueño," one of three songs the group performed with the symphony. He remembered the moment he composed the song's three chords and came up with the idea of creating a song about immigrants and the challenges of succeeding in the U.S.

"All of those ideas and now we have all of these musicians playing this beautiful arrangement. I remember I got emotional... It was just very special."

PERFORMING AT MIDDLE C JAZZ CLUB

If you want to watch them live, the group will play at Middle C Jazz Club this Sunday, May 26, their second time at the upscale uptown venue. Arreaza said the band loves the space, the acoustics and the opportunity to play for a crowd that typically doesn't hear its music.

Before their show last spring, Arreaza wondered if the group would need to change its repertoire to cater to the club's clientele.

"And they're like, 'No, we want you to come do your music. We're gonna move some tables, we're going to make room for people to dance,'" Arreaza said. "They want us to be ourselves and it was fantastic. So we're happy to be back."

This time the band will perform a mix of their originals with a selection of "old school" Latin music.

'THIS IS WHO WE ARE'

Also on the horizon is a new single and video to be released July 6.

The song is called, "I'm From Everywhere" and features lyrics written by Ailen Arreaza. It focuses on the circumstances of immigrant families, especially those in which the children are born in the U.S. and the parents come from elsewhere but now live in America.

Tony Arreaza relates easily to that. When people ask him where he's from, he said it's a hard question to answer after living in the U.S. for 31 years.

"Charlotte is my city," he said. "Charlotte is where my kids were born, this is where I got married, this is my house. But I was born in Venezuela... We wrote this song and it's basically saying, 'I'm from here, I'm from there, I'm from everywhere.'"

And the group is collaborating with Latina artist Liza Ortiz on the project. "This song is in 'Spanish'... because this is who we are, you know. We came from Latin America but now we're here, and this is our country now."

WANT TO GO?

UltimaNota plays at Middle C Jazz Club June 26 at 7 p.m.

Tickets: \$28-\$35

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