

Palabra sound goes on

Always

re-inventing, changing and creating his own path, La Palabra (producer/pianist/songwriter/arranger/composer/singer and bandleader) has established himself as one of Latin music industry's leaders since the late '80s while many have stood still.

La Palabra is ready to shake up the music world once again by bringing Latin arrangements and orchestrations to the Hollywood film industry. Palabra has spent the last few years restructuring and reorganizing his company, Palabra Productions, which he established in 1986. The firm secured private investors and currently has expanded into five divisions—production, booking, record label, music publishing and promotions.

La Palabra began his recording career in the '70s with Lalo y La New Yorkina and Héctor Casanova. During this time, he also experimented with an early form of salsa romantica by writing Spanish ballad-style covers of English songs, including Morris Albert's *Feelings* and The Beatles *Eleanor Rigby*.

He continued performing in the late '70s, alongside such acts as The Jackson Five, B.B. King, Anita Baker and Kool and the Gang. He was brought to Los Angeles by Stevie Wonder in 1979 as a member of Wonder's Phoenix Rising project.

Then, in 1980 he created the Salsa Romantica® movement, releasing the first salsa arrangement of *Todo Se Derrumbó* (later redone and released by Louie Ramirez & Ray de la Paz). Ramirez praised Palabra for the creation of the revolution of Salsa Romantica® when they met years later in 1991 at the Copacabana in New York City. Palabra released several CDs during the '80s and '90s, including *Versalles*, *Sensation 85*, and Morrowland Records' *Orquesta La Palabra On Fire* (2000).

After releasing a dynamite full-length record in February 2004 titled *Breakthrough* (on his label, Tornillo Records), he went on an Asian tour that included Shenzhen, China. Palabra is now planning a more extensive tour of China for 2005 and has also teamed up with top manager Jon Mercedes III, named by Hispanic Magazine as one of the 25 Most Powerful Hispanics in Hollywood.

Mercedes has already secured several projects for La Palabra, including composing musical scores for two films currently in production at Fiesta Studios and produced by Monty Fisher, president of Four Fish Films. Mercedes has also signed La Palabra to work on several salsa film musicals, one of which is based on La Palabra's autobiography, "Journey Beneath My Skin," which will also be developed for the Broadway stage, and another titled "The History of Salsa: Part I." Palabra's books will focus on the history and development of salsa over the last two decades, which he modified. "I changed the whole approach to salsa with Salsa Romantica®," he says.

Although La Palabra is responsible for changing the face and sound of salsa, thanks to his hit version of Lionel Ritchie's *Lady*, the salsa community has overlooked him.

La Palabra intends to continue to push the boundaries of salsa music, just as he did with Salsa Romantica®, with the release of his next CD currently in production.

"It's time for new ideas, a new sound, a new wave," explains La Palabra. "There are some Colombian groups that recycle the same old Cuban beat, the same New York beat, but they don't play anything new. It's always recycled Salsa Romantica®."

"My thing in salsa and music has always been to be an innovator," he adds. "So my next CD now is going to expand my horizons and create more of an American sound which I call American Salsa®. I don't want to say too much now because then I'll give away what I'm doing but I'm going to fuse [styles]."

"The man is an innovator," explains Mercedes, Palabra's manager. Mercedes, with over three and a half decades of experience in the entertainment industry under his belt, plans to use his expertise, advice and contacts to crown La Palabra as the new King of Salsa.

"Palabra is also working on Rap-A-Salsa®, a fusion of salsa and hip-hop," adds Mercedes. "This new wave is going to break through in 2006 and last a decade as it evolves and improves with other innovators adding their style to the new beat and sound."

While the Palabra and Mercedes duo elevate salsa to the mainstream American audience, they realize they have many obstacles and critics to face.

"Some people say that salsa is too commercial," explains La Palabra. "But since when was salsa not commercial? Salsa was made for the people and not to be dissected in a musical laboratory. I believe in making my music magical, sensual and exciting."

Yet, as commercial as some critics label salsa music, the genre has never been a strong seller in the United States. In fact, you'd be hard-pressed to find any salsa album gone platinum. With his new approach, La Palabra plans to shatter the limitations that have kept salsa out of the mainstream for years.

Kelly Stacy, president of Tornillo Records and co-producer of *Breakthrough*, states: "Doing musical films with salsa as the catalyst of Latino romantic comedies is going to create millions of new fans to the genre. Urban music is going to be greatly influenced for years to come."

"Salsa has a following," explains La Palabra, "but if you compare it to what's going on along the world of music, there's not much happening. With my new sounds, I don't have to worry about that because if people like it, they will dance to it and if they dance to it, it will sell."

However, according to La Palabra, the largest problem facing salsa today is its lack of soul. The record companies, faced with the task of pushing sales figures, have focused on the image of salsa music rather than its sound. "What salsa needs today is what hip-hop did to black music. It needs to put 'el barrio' back into salsa and forget about 'los bonitillos' (the pretty boys)."

While La Palabra plans to update salsa with a modern sound, he's going to keep the strength of the music's roots within his music. He expects much of the same resistance he endured when he first struck a chord with audiences with his hit *Lady*, but he's "ready for the criticism and rejection that comes with being different." ■

By Ivan Fernandez