

West End Mambo  
serves up  
authentic salsa

# old school



By Michael Huie  
ARTVIEW EDITOR

When Ricky Martin was shaking his bon-bon and Jennifer Lopez officially became JLo, West End Mambo didn't just ride the newfound popularity of Latin music. They went back to its roots.

The local band, headed by musicians Steve Blake and Cesar Oviedo, has grown into a 10-piece band with roots in the Cuban-style of salsa.

The band was first formed in 1999 by Andrew Valentine, a Russian, whose next-door neighbor was a Cuban musician, says Blake. Although Valentine has since left the band, West End Mambo continues to specialize in classic salsa, but also play a variety of Latin music styles, including Latin Jazz.

Since its inception, the band's lineup has gone through some changes, but Blake says the impetus for the band and their commitment to a specific type of salsa music has remained constant.

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music. The title of the documentary, directed by Wim Wenders, and the album, comes from a Havana nightclub popular in the late 1940s and '50s.

"[Cooder] went down there and dug up a bunch of players that were involved in the evolution of salsa in Cuba," says Blake. "Cuba is generally agreed to be the source, but Puerto Rico has something to say about that, too."

Blake says West End Mambo's sound lies somewhere between the Cuban popular music featured in the Buena Vista Social Club and the sound of New York's Fania All-Stars. The All-Stars, a New York-based salsa group who came to prominence in the 1970s, had a lineup that reads like the Latin music hall of fame, with artists such as Johnny Pacheco and the late Celia Cruz.

"A lot of people have a not very specific idea about Latin music," says Oviedo. "Some people expect new salsa, or the New York-style of salsa, which is more popular with young people. We don't happen to play that style. We enjoy the old style, which is the strongest."

"I look at what we're doing as a genre thing like the blues bands do around here," says Blake. "They sort of specialize in a particular style."

Even the band's name refers to the style they play. The term mambo, Blake says, is a way to play salsa and also a section of the salsa arrangement.

"It's a section of the salsa where it repeats," says Blake. "The mambo section usually alternates with the vocal."

Both Blake and Oviedo have played a wide variety of

music throughout their careers. Blake is a graduate of the Berklee School of Music and has played jazz with the Matt Kendrick Unit and toured with Motown legends The Four Tops and The Temptations.

Oviedo was born in Nicaragua and started as a bass player there with a jazz fusion band called Praxis. He has also played such diverse styles as Brazilian, rock, flamenco and Latin-American folk. He was also music adviser for the Nicaraguan National Television Systems Network for three years during the 1980s. Part of his job was arranging music for a live weekly show on national television.

"It was a great experience because you had to play all the newest music, whatever was on the radio at the time," says Oviedo.

However, both men say there is a palpable energy and sense of freedom they feel when they play the West End Mambo-style of salsa.

"For me, one thing I enjoy about salsa is the independence from a single drummer," says Blake. "In salsa, you have three percussionists that take the place of a single drummer. When everybody's hitting the groove, the feel of the percussion is more intense than with a single drummer."

Oviedo adds, "When it grooves, it moves people who don't know the style, it's so exciting."

"If it's not happening, it's not happening," adds Blake. "But when it is, it is really intense."

For more information about West End Mambo, see their Web site [www.westendmambo.com](http://www.westendmambo.com).