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JAZZING IT UP

Cuban style

Iliana Rose celebrates her heritage through her music

By Erin Richards Staff Writer

There is something about a cowbell that sparks an almost chemical reaction in singer, and songwriter Iliana Rose.

"Whenever I hear a cowbell, I go nuts. It's in my DNA," said Rose. "It's music that joins with your heartbeat and makes you want to move."

Rose, a Miami native, was born and raised in a Cuban neighborhood and her Cuban influences are clear from her accent to her musical styles.

Her genre of choice: Cuban jazz, a marriage of music, melding jazz beats and Cuban influences with her heritage of Spanish lyrics, Cuban drums and danceable rhythms.

At the 322 Cafe in Sierra Madre, Rose sets up with her band, a rotation of musicians, who on one Saturday night, included a drummer, guitarist and violinist.

For Rose, her Cuban heritage is now one of her most celebrated forms of expression, and an integral part of her career. Her parents, both from Cuba, escaped with her grandparents from Fidel Castro's regime and settled in a Cuban neighborhood in Miami.

"It wasn't until I got a little older until that I would ask my parents questions and interview them about Cuba and listen to my grandparents' stories of being thrown in jail and working in the sugarcane plantations," said Rose.

Just after a set break, couples stream onto the dimly lit dance floor, twisting and twirling, swaying in time with the beat. Standing above them, Rose coos into the microphone, arms outstretched, as if she were conducting her own human orchestra. Her vocals and body rhythms tempt more dancers out onto the floor. "People dancing to my music is better than a standing ovation," said Rose, laughing.

Rose said her own personal experience with Cuba transformed her into a different artist. "It wasn't until I really let myself explore the music and culture that I really felt that connection. Now I am really proud to call myself Cuban-American."

Currently a Burbank resident, Rose plays three to four times a week all over the Southland. Some of her regular spots include the Odyssey restaurant in Granada Hills every Wednesday night and Cafe 322 in Sierra Madre the last Saturday of every month. She also performs at many salsa, Latin and other music festivals, throughout the Southland including the Culver City Music Festival and the Oxnard Salsa festival.

Rose has developed a local following, bringing in "the usual" crowd as well as newcomers with each set.

Husband and wife Herb and Karin Meiselman come out to Cafe 322 from Altadena each month to see Rose perform. They have been coming out to see her since January with no plans to stop.

"She is so lively, rhythmic and expressive," said Karin Meiselman. "She usually brings in a lot of people and everyone gets out and dances."

Herb Meiselman taps his hand on the table, following the beat while he sips a glass of red wine as his wife Karin Meiselman bobs her head, watching Rose as she belts out a jazzy Spanish ballad.

"She really is great," adds Herb Meiselman. "We love her act and feeling the rhythm of her music."



Iliana Rose sings and plays keyboard, backed by Sean Rosano on the bass, at the Odyssey restaurant in Granada Hills. John McCoy Staff Photographer

To Rose, music was always her calling. She demanded piano lessons by age 10 and enjoyed playing classical music. She earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Miami, where she majored in jazz, and headed west after graduation.

Although she feels the best when able to play her own special genre of Cuban jazz, she can play anything from rock to rap, with the ability to sing in six languages including Italian, Portuguese and Hebrew, as well as English and Spanish.

"I'll play in your bathroom," said Rose, laughing. "If there's someone to hear it I'm happy, and if there's someone dancing to it, I'm ecstatic."

Ashley Wells, 24, a new hostess at Cafe 322, is impressed. "She's great, I was blown away," said Wells. "I love her type of salsa and Latin music."

She continues to play standards during her performances, but she also "sneaks in" her own original work. She hopes to get back into the studio and record another album. Her album, "Light of the Sun," is available at her Web site ilianarose.com, and on iTunes.