

Shake Shake Shake

Cuban jazz pianist Iliana Rose encourages audience participation at Left Coast Wine Bar

By Bliss 09/10/2009

Sometimes you have to look back to better find your way going forward.



Musician Iliana Rose discovered the full truth of that two years ago when she and her husband traveled to Cuba. A first-generation Cuban-American raised in Miami, which she jokingly calls “the other capital of Cuba — it’s just like Havana, but with a McDonald’s on every corner,” Rose grew up hearing stories of Cuba from her grandparents and parents, who migrated to the United States after Fidel Castro rose to power. But she says she didn’t fully appreciate the sacrifices they made or the deeper effects of Cuban culture on her music until she was hired as an interpreter on Kevin Leffler’s documentary “Shooting Michael Moore.”

“I got to see the real Cuba,” she says. “We went to the Havana projects, I interviewed AIDS patients, visited doctors. Cubans are really beautiful people who have been oppressed for half a century. So much so that they’re almost mute. They’ve

become mute. They haven’t experienced freedom of speech in a long time. When I got back to the United States it was such a relief to be able to say whatever was on my mind.”

“It was like an homage,” she adds. “I was able to go to Cuba and meet myself, who I’m from. And the music is just amazing.” A University of Miami grad who majored in jazz voice and clarinet performance (she also plays saxophone and marimba), Rose says she “didn’t know anybody” when she moved to Los Angeles. She gradually connected with “a circle of really interesting, eclectic musicians and artists and poets” that included the man who is now her husband. She works as an arranger and film composer, and last year started performing at Left Coast Wine Bar. She’s been hustling hard to attract audiences.

Once they’re there, she’s apt to hand someone a microphone so they can belt

out “Guantanamera” with her five-piece band, and turn down lights to enhance the party atmosphere as people dance.

Proud of her heritage, she takes care to specify that her music is Cuban jazz.

“It’s different from salsa music, it’s different from Latin jazz,” she explains. “I play with a lot of improvisation, a lot of freedom — freedom with the form, with the lyrics, with the chords, and a lot of percussion. I love percussion.”

She places shakers on tables all around the room so audience members can join in. “Some of those shakers are in the shape of fruit,” she says with a laugh. “Sometimes they’re not sure whether to eat it or shake it.”

Iliana Rose plays Fridays at Left Coast Wine Bar, 117 E. Harvard Ave., Glendale; call (818) 507-7011 for details. She also plays the last Saturday of each month at Café 322, 322 W. Sierra Madre Blvd., Sierra Madre. ilianarose.com