

LEAD LADY

Violinist Susie Hansen, one of the few females leading a Latin jazz and Afro-Cuban band, will headline the Hot Blues and Cool Jazz concert to be held Aug. 23 at the Herb Hafif Estate in La Verne.

By **IMANI TATE**
STAFF WRITER

It only took one year of playing rock 'n' roll music for violinist Susie Hansen to get bored.

"I discovered jazz and realized I'd never get bored playing it," said Hansen. "It's not just the improvisation I love. It's the



PHOTOS BY
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complexity and sophistication of the music, the chord structures, the rhythms. "It's all compelling to me. Jazz is the music that really holds my

attention."

The Susie Hansen Latin Jazz Band will headline the Hot Blues and Cool Jazz concert at 5 p.m. Aug. 23 at the Hafif Family Estate in La Verne. The show, which also features harmonica player Chris "Hammer" Smith and his blues band and dinner by Outback Steakhouse, will benefit Mt. San Antonio College Foundation's scholarship and student services programs.

Hansen is one of the few female leaders of a Latin and Afro-Cuban jazz ensemble. Impeccable improvisations, professional experience and respect for both the music and her colleagues have allowed her to find success in a male-dominated jazz genre.

Hansen has been frequently featured at the Playboy, Newport Beach and Santa Barbara jazz festivals, in clubs and concerts throughout the United States and as a guest artist in Havana with Los Van Van, Cuba's premier dance band.

She has also played with Tito Puente, Paquito d'Rivera, Sonora Poncena, Orquesta Aragon, Orquesta Broadway and Giovanni Hidalgo.

Although a "late bloomer" who started playing jazz in her 20s, unlike contemporary and veteran artists who started playing jazz as children or teen-agers, Hansen is no stranger to music. It was in her family home before she and her sisters, studio violinist Jenny Hansen and entertainment attorney Joan Hansen, were born.

James Hansen, their father and first music teacher, was a violinist with the Chicago Symphony for 30 years. Their mother, Rita Hansen, was a high school English teacher. Both stressed education, music and discipline for their daughters.

Susie started taking violin lessons at age 5, but soon quit because she was too young to grasp the structure and discipline vital to playing. She began again at age 6.

"I didn't have a lot of choice because it was my dad's choice that I learn music," she conceded, "but I loved it. I really enjoyed music from the first day I played it. I studied all classical with my dad."

Her formative years were filled with academics and music. To "get a life," she gave up music again at age 14,

fully participated in social and school activities as a teen-ager and returned to music as a senior at the University of Illinois.

She played violin in the university's symphony orchestra and string quartet and a rock garage band with friends. She balanced music and academia, earning honor status for her Bachelor of Science degree in math and computer science at the University of Illinois and master's degree in electrical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Her education was completed on academic scholarships and she was eligible to continue the free ride through a Ph.D. She stopped serious thoughts momentarily to sing, to the "Mickey Mouse Club" tune, "M-I-T, P-H-D, M-O-N-E-Y."

But, despite the lucrative economics of a high-tech career, the lure of music called to her heart.

"I bailed to play music," she said, saying she's never regretted the decision to play music professionally.

"My mother thought I was nuts," she said, laughing. "My father sent me money every month. But both my mother and father supported my decision. They came to every one of my shows when I was working in Chicago."

She went professional in Boston after finishing her master's at MIT, toured the East Coast and Appalachians with a band called Trapezoid and, two years later, returned to her native Chicago.

"When I returned to Chicago, I had to decide what I was going to play for a lifetime," she said. "This kind-of-jazz stuff wasn't

working for me. I had to play real jazz."

So she did.

When she started her professional career as a musician, Hansen was listening to and influenced by Jerry Goodman, the violinist in guitarist John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra, and Chick Corea's Return To Forever ensemble. When she became more intense about mainstream jazz, her horizons expanded to incorporate trumpeter Clifford Brown and saxophonist Dexter Gordon, both legends, and master pianist Cedar Walton among her musical influences.

"These are the guys I really listen to and absorb how they play," she said. "I love their harmonic sense. All three are loaded with melody and have a sense of time that's really compelling. They're the complete package for me."

She played as a sideman for a short while before "unintentionally" becoming a leader. Her first band, as a leader, was Strings Attached, a string and swing quartet. Brimming over with ideas and excited about the work, she felt it best she be a leader to both execute those ideas and get credit for the work.

"I'm somewhat of a natural leader because I can see the big

picture, know what to do and am not afraid of big decisions. Or, you can just say I'm bossy," she admitted with a sardonic smile.

Moving to Los Angeles in 1988, she established the Susie Hansen Latin Jazz Band after playing in percussionist Victor Parra's Latin jazz band for six months.

"Latin and Afro-Cuban jazz had everything I love about jazz plus the greatest rhythms in the world," she said. "Being introduced to Latin jazz was a real gift, yet another blessing that came down the pike for me."

She has also played with "congero," or renowned master, Cuban percussionist and drummer Francisco Aquabella, percussionists Bobby Matos and Papo Conga and Afro-Cuban singer Candi Sosa.

Although it is more common for men to lead Latin and Afro-Cuban ensembles, Hansen said she hasn't faced much prejudice as one of the few females fronting a group in this genre.

"As a leader, whether you're a man or a woman, you get the best out of people by treating them with the utmost respect," she asserted. "You back it up with good musicianship on your part, get good gigs and take care of business. Then only the stupidest guys

won't work for you.

"You can't just boss people or make demands," she continued. "You have to respect musicians. My band is full of excellent musicians and I respect them."

Hansen's sidemen for the Mt. SAC Foundation benefit include Cuban percussionist and singer George Balmaseda, pianist Joe Rotondi, electric upright bassist Rene Camacho, drummer Jimmy Branly, conga player Victor Baez, bongo drummer Arnie Silva, trombonist David Stout and tenor saxophonist Tim Misica.

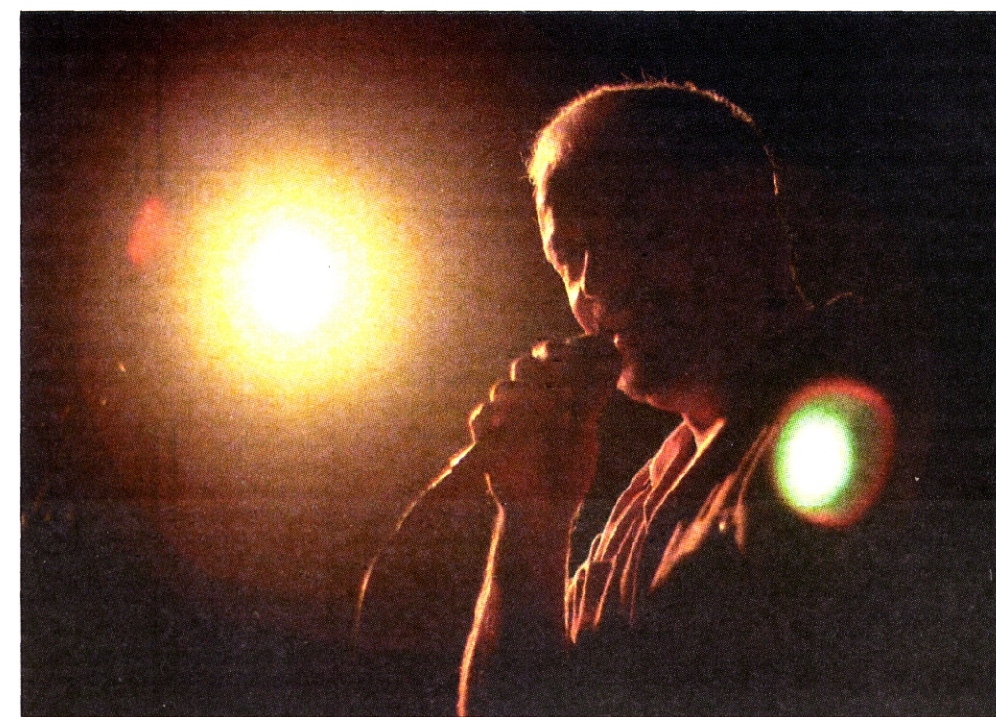
Critics, fans and peers have called Hansen's music "infectious," "rhythmically dynamic" and "compelling harmonies." Music critic Dan Heckman describes her work as "high-voltage excitement. She creates a brand of music that is as physically moving as it is intellectually stimulating."

Latin Beat magazine writer Max Salazar said she "harnesses the sensual prowess of a Jean-Luc Ponty and displays it with an overwhelming tipico Cuban feel."

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Susie Hansen sizzles on the violin as she sets the mood with Latin and Afro-Cuban jazz rhythms



Highlighting the evening will be noted Cuban percussionist George Balmaseda, the lead singer in the Susie Hansen Latin Jazz Band.