

CALENDAR

Saturday, May 3, 2003

ALL THAT JAZZ

A brand of salsa with Scandinavian roots

An out-of-the-blue invitation to join a mambo band changed Susie Hansen's life.

By **DON HECKMAN**
Special to *The Times*

There she is, blond hair flipping as she swings her violin around, vigorously accenting her phrases, moving in time with the rhythm. It's Susie Hansen in action, leading her eight-piece band, playing Latin jazz and salsa.

Latin jazz and salsa?
Wait a minute.

A blond, female violinist of Scandinavian descent leading her own jazz and salsa band.

Is something out of sync there?

Not at all.

It is, in fact, exactly what Hansen has been doing for more than a decade, fronting one of the Southland's busiest ensembles, playing more than 200 dates a year. Her newest recording, "May the Salsa Never End," has been selling well for a jazz release on a small independent label, and the Susie Hansen Band has just successfully concluded its first appearances in the New York City area.

Asked about the seeming contradictions in genre and appearance, Hansen just laughs.

"People don't seem to think you can play Cuban music if you're not born to it," she says. "At the very least you're supposed to be Hispanic. But there's plenty of indication, and plenty of players, proving that neither of those things are true. So I just let our music speak for itself."

Which is exactly what will be happening this weekend, when her band makes a string of appearances around town as part of the lead-in to Cinco de Mayo. The music will display the band's appealing blend of salsa and Latin jazz, a mix appropriate for both listening and dancing.

"The title song of our new album is really a Latin jazz song disguised as a salsa — a dance tune with three jazz solos," she says. "We're kind of unique in a way, covering both bases. A lot more Latin jazz than some salsa bands, but with more salsa and more dance orientation than some Latin jazz bands."

Latin jazz and salsa were the last things on Hansen's mind when she was growing up in Chicago, the daughter of a violinist with the Chicago Symphony. In fact, she didn't discover anything beyond classical music until she was a senior in college and began playing in a rock group. Her affection for Latin jazz was triggered a few years later.

"I had been leading my own band in Chicago, playing straight-ahead jazz — bebop,



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swing, some Brazilian," she says. "Then we played a big concert, and the band before us was a mambo band. They stuck around and listened to us, after which the leader said he wanted me to join his band. And that's how it all began."

Moving to Los Angeles in the late '80s, Hansen was soon gigging with local units led by Francisco Aguabella, Bobby Matos and others.

"But I quickly figured I had to have my own band," she recalls, "because everybody drove me crazy with the way they ran their bands. But I think that my path was really determined when I was first asked to join that Latin

band in Chicago. My first response was to say, 'Me? What do I know about mambo?'

"And the bandleader said, 'Oh, you'll get it and you'll love it.' And he was right."

The Susie Hansen Band performs this afternoon at the San Clemente Cinco de Mayo Festival, and tonight at Lunaria in Century City. It also performs Sunday afternoon in a Playboy Jazz Festival event at the Beverly Hills Civic Center and Sunday night at the La Puente Cinco de Mayo Festival. For information, see www.susiehansen.com.