

She's winning battles in a game of Latin

BY KIRK SILSBEE

We've all heard it: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. The adage applies to music as much as anything. A case in point is violinist and band-leader Susie Hansen.

"In the last five years," she says from her Los Angeles home, "I've had to cut down the personnel in my band from nine or 10 pieces to six." But even without the horns, extra voices and percussion, the Susie Hansen Band still plays most of the parts in the arrangements of the group's book.

Resourcefulness and mental toughness are part of the Hansen's toolbox. As a Chicagoan with a degree in chemistry and an extensive grounding in jazz, classical music and Appalachian music, she was smitten with Latin music. She moved to L.A. and established herself as a formidable player and leader. In SoCal's Latin music scene, only conguero Poncho Sanchez's band works as often.

The Susie Hansen Band alights at Joe's Great American Bar & Grill this Thursday, an occurrence

Susie Hansen toughs it out, playing for dancers' feet and catching their energy.

she's likely to repeat. "It's a sweet room," she enthuses. "We'd like to make it a once-a-month residence."

She's proud of her band. It's one that requires versatility. "Everyone does double-duty," she stresses. "When we don't have the horns, the piano plays their lines and I play double stops and chordal figures. Our pianist, Joe Rotondi, is the heart of the rhythm because of his great time and harmonic choices. He's so inside what everybody's doing that he plays the montunos [rhythmic vamps] differently all the time. He's unquestionably a genius." Her drummer, Tony Shogren, adds: "Joe's intricacies are little sonatas."

The name of the recently departed jazz pianist, Cedar Walton, unexpectedly surfaces. "He was a kind of mentor to me," Hansen reveals. "He was very generous and gave his entire library of originals to me. We've done a lot of his tunes, with our own arrangements, over the years."

For a time in the 1980s, the Dallas-to-New York jazz giant lived in Santa Monica, though he mainly worked on the East Coast, and in Europe and Japan. Hansen relates, "He said, 'I don't know how you manage to work so much in the town you live in. I can't seem to do that.'"

Though she's not one to speak about discrimination or gender inequality, one can only imagine the hurdles Hansen has cleared in making a place for herself in male-dominated Latin music as a non-Hispanic instrumentalist and bandleader. Her battles are not lost on her band.

"She never wants to talk about the elephant in the room," Shogren says, adding, "you have no idea. This music is a man's game, but she's very tough. She's made all of those obstacles unimportant, and it's part of her greatness. She perseveres and surpasses all that."

Hansen and company feed off of the dancers they attract. "Some of the guys in the band see everything that happens in the room," she says. "I don't. I'm in my own zone. But I catch the dancers' energy. Salsa dancers have a glow, and they smile."

Shogren concurs: "Playing for dancers is the real payoff for us."

"We aim for the feet," says Hansen. "We always say: The more you dance, the better we play; the more you drink, the better we sound."

About the writer

KIRK SILSBEE writes about jazz and culture for Marquee.

Infobox

Who: The Susie Hansen Band
Where: Joe's Great American Bar and Grill, 4311 W. Magnolia Blvd., Burbank
When: Thursday, October 17
More info: (818) 729-0805, www.joesgreatbar.com