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First Lady of salsa

Immersing herself in Cuban sounds has led to a kind of musical liberation for Yeti Ajasin

By ERROL NAZARETH

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Mention Ruben Blades' name to Yeti Ajasin -- a.k.a. Lady Son -- and watch her face light up. Mention 1992's *The Best of Ruben Blades* CD, and you'll likely have a spirited conversation on your hands about the popular Panamanian political singer.

Not only did that album blow Ajasin's mind, but it inspired her to embark on an amazing journey that's culminated in her solid debut album, something she never predicted.

While Blades' album turned her into a Cuban music fiend, it was a cultural exchange program that she participated in when she was in Grade 11 in Toronto that sowed the seeds for her love of the music.

"I returned from my first trip to Cuba with a passion for the culture, the people, the music, and the language," Ajasin says. "I was determined at that point to master Spanish and I did that via cassettes and formal academics."

Ajasin, who double majored in French and Spanish at York University's language program, says she's always had a gift for picking up languages. She says she has "an acute ear which has aided me in my ability to sound authentic while singing in a language that is not my first."

Ajasin's momentous trip to Cuba and growing love affair for the music was cemented when her best friend at the time, Joshua Ariz -- who ended up co-founding Ajasin's band, *Lady Son y Articulo Veinte* -- gave her Blades' best-of album.

"I was hooked! There was no turning back," she recalls. "I began collecting and intensely studying every renowned Latin artist, no matter what genre they represented. Another trip to Cuba allowed me the opportunity to enhance my knowledge of hand percussion since I only had experience playing the drum kit in my high school band and jazz program."

Ajasin studied Latin percussion at Cuba's University of Holguin and the Jose Maria Ochoa School of Music & Performing Arts and with master Cuban percussionist Hector Mon, who lives here.

Ajasin's story is as interesting as her background, and for me, it makes her the quintessential Toronto music story.

Where else would you find an Italian-Jewish-Nigerian-Canadian who didn't speak Spanish singing and playing congas in a multicultural salsa band and also leading a Latin rap group? Oh, and she's also a member of the groundbreaking group *SalsAfrica*.

And she's accomplished this in a male-dominated Latin music scene.

"Being a woman and being non-Cuban has definitely been a challenge," admits Ajasin, whose salsa band *Lady Son y Articulo Veinte* perform at *Lula Lounge* tomorrow.

"It's been difficult to gain the respect and acknowledgement from much of the Cuban community.

"This continues to boggle my mind since I'm accomplished, creative and a direct descendent of the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria -- whose music is the heart and the pulse of Cuban music," she adds.

"The Cuban community has not discovered that inclusion rather than exclusion could enhance their lives and musical journeys.

"It's also sad that within the local Latin music scene there's limited support of each other. The challenge for women, as it is in many professions, is for us to be taken seriously."

Semillas, the just-released album from *Lady Son y Articulo Veinte*, should shut the haters up.

Produced by local Latin music mainstay Luisito Orbegoso, the disc features killer arrangements and Ajasin's powerful, warm voice driving the proceedings. Add to that her ace percussion playing and the fact she wrote all the music and lyrics.

"Playing music has always been my passion, my abilities as a songwriter simply came to me, and I didn't discover my singing voice until I was 23," she says.

"I have combined all these things to become the artist who I am."

Lady Son y Articulo Veinte is at *Lula Lounge* tomorrow.

The show starts at 10 p.m.

\$15 gets you in.

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