



Here comes de Sol: Latin rockers shake up Shore music scene

By KELLY-JANE COTTER
STAFF WRITER

*Maria cocinando habichuelas en la cocina,
My mother's in the kitchen cookin' up a pot of rice and beans
And there was always music going down, everywhere around, my old neighborhood
It was given to me
Now, I'm bringing it to you"*

-- "*Spanish Radio*" by deSol

The Saint is a bar on Main Street in Asbury Park, well known for cultivating local talent and for booking touring bands just before they get really big.

It's your standard-issue indie rock club, with walls covered by bumper stickers and posters for alternative legends like Thin Lizard Dawn and hipster faves like Cake and the Ben Folds Five. There are ads for Guinness and Mike's Hard Lemonade. Regulars wear midriff tops and baggy jeans, T-shirts and knee-length cut-offs, and once in a while somebody walks in with true pizazz, like the girl with Popsicle-red hair, vinyl pants and black lipstick.

Tonight, the vibe is a little different. As the band sets up, music by Los Lobos is playing over the sound system, early stuff from 1978, when the band was known as Los Lobos del Este Los Angeles and played Mexican standards. People are sucking down Coronas at the bar, swaying to "Cielito Lindo."

Headlining tonight is Kinky, a five-piece electro-Mexicali band from the growing *rock en espanol* scene in the border region of Monterrey, Mexico. These guys have Euro-club style and conjure the sounds of DJ Shadow, Daft Punk and De La Soul, adding *cumbia* and North Mexican folk accents. They stand in the corner with their short, mod hair, smoking ciggies and not knowing quite what to make of the opening act.

That would be deSol.



JAMES J. CONNOLLY photo


Albie Monterrosa, leader of the band deSol, performs at The Saint in Asbury Park.

The seven musicians in deSol are earnest. They're not concerned with hipster credibility, but they would like to make everyone sing in Spanglish and they'd appreciate it if you'd shake it like you mean it. It's not often that a Jersey Shore rock club features Spanish-speaking musicians on its stage and rarer still for those musicians to become local favorites. But the guys in deSol have cultivated a steady following from New Brunswick to Point Pleasant Beach.

The band is led by Albie Monterrosa, a 28-year-old singer/songwriter/acoustic guitarist who was born in El Salvador and raised in the multi-culti epicenter of Hollis, Queens. Eight years ago, his parents moved to Jackson and he moved to Long Branch where, to his astonishment, he learned that some people considered Latin music kind of corny.

"People were cracking on me," Monterrosa said. "It was like, 'Why are you listening to that?' It was the first time I was ever made to feel different."

Listen to the songs!



Here are 60-second excerpts, in mp3 format, from de Sol's "Spanish Radio" album.

- [Spanish Radio](#) (972K, .MP3)
- [Urgency](#) (941K, .MP3)

[Learn more about using MP3 files.](#)

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So, when he joined local bands like Babe's Tea Room and The Homegrowns, he wrote songs in the American pop/rock tradition. And he dropped his surname, preferring instead to go by his first and middle name: Jerry Albert.

That worked for a while. But, you know, sooner or later, your roots show.

"I was exhausted of the whole pop scene," Monterrosa said.

A trip to the Virgin Islands reintroduced him to tropical rhythms, and about four years ago Monterrosa began writing bouncy melodies peppered with Spanish lyrics. Someone told him about this percussionist in Oakhurst, Armando Cabrera.

"There aren't that many Latin players in the area willing to do original music," Monterrosa said. "It's a small scene, so I kept hearing, 'Why don't you call Armando?'"

Cabrera, 43, was born in Cuba and raised in Puerto Rico. He has a romantic, *basso profundo* speaking voice and, as he puts it, "no knowledge of American pop."

"I always liked Santana in high school," he said. "That's about it. Other than that, I was all about Ruben Blades, Celia Cruz, the Fania All-Stars."

They worked as a duo, writing and playing acoustically. Then they added musicians to become deSol: James Guerrero, who grew up in Mexico and Queens, on bongoes, congas, percussion and vocals; Rich Soto, whose parents emigrated from Peru, on electric guitar and vocals; Christopher Guice, whose grandparents were from Spain, on bass and vocals; and two "basic white guys," Andy Letke, piano and organ, and Ron Alessio, drums.

Together, they recorded "Spanish Radio," a 10-track CD. The sound of deSol is informed as much by American rock and pop as by the musical traditions of Latin America. At times, the band could be Simon & Garfunkel jamming at a *taqueria* or Santana hanging out with The Wallflowers.

Monterrosa's lyrics make the most of his bilingualism. He uses Spanish like cilantro, to brighten a dish, to add an astringent accent to the pop and the folk. He's careful to make each word count. His decision on whether to use English or Spanish depends on which language better fits the melody in a given line.

The chorus of "Urgency," an intense, percussive, love song is a prime example:

*"Fire,
Bombero, bombero
No apagas el fuego"*

How much less effective it would've been all in English:

"Fire,
Firefighter, firefighter
Can't put out the fire."

And, using "Fire" instead of "Fuego" in the first line makes for a better crescendo, using a singer's healthy "ahhh" vowel in "Fire" instead of the clunkier "ehhhh" vowel of "Fuego."

Are audiences sensitive to such nuances? Perhaps not consciously, but they can dance easier to a smoothly constructed chorus.

Monterrosa greets his audience at The Saint. "How's everyone doin'?" *Como estan mis amigos de Mexico?*"

Members of Kinky lift their beer bottles to acknowledge the greeting.

From the first note, deSol has the crowd moving.

Granted, this is American dancing. That is, it's just a lot of wriggling and twisting. An all-Latino crowd is much more choreographed. People dance as couples and there are actual steps to the dance.



JAMES J. CONNOLLY photo

Band member James Guerrero (above) lends his voice to deSol during a gig (below) at The Saint.

Shakira and Santana notwithstanding, Latin music remains an underground phenomenon, with local DJs and bands playing for private parties rather than clubs.

Touring Mexican bands are often booked at the Berkeley-



Carteret Hotel in Asbury Park, and word spreads via colorful posters hung in *taquerias* -- neighborhood taco shops -- and Latino travel agencies in Freehold and Red Bank.

The rapid ascent of deSol, along with the recent switch at Long Branch's Y-107 FM from new country to syndicated Latin pop, demonstrates the growing demand for all sounds Latin. The underground is seeping up.

Primera Clase, a Long Branch-based Latin band, performed for a dance in May in Neptune sponsored by Our Lady of Providence Roman Catholic Church.

The musicians would call out, "*Donde estan la gente de Colombia?*" and if enough *colombianos* hit the dance floor, the band played *cumbia*, popular in that country.

If, instead, they found many Dominicans itching to hit the floor, they'd switch to *merengue*. Either way, couples would drift out to the floor and step, step, step, turn.

Wilson Bonilla, a Colombian DJ from Long Branch, has 3,500 CDs in his collection. He needs that many, because he spins at parties with multi-Latino crowds.

"I can play *merengue* and the dance floor fills, then salsa and, not so much," he said. "It's nothing to do with what I like. I have to keep an eye on who's out there and, believe me, it's hard when you have too many people from too many countries.

"They stick to the traditional music; they don't want to hear new stuff. It's a way to feel connected to the old music of their country. They feel it in their blood."

Scott Stamper, owner of The Saint, said he rarely sees Latino immigrants at his club, even on nights when someone like Kinky or deSol is playing.

"I don't think they're into it," he said. "They want cover bands, bands playing folk songs they know, not something like this."

There are exceptions, however.

In front of the stage at The Saint, six non-Hispanic women are gyrating to deSol. Then, Monterrosa catches the eye of a petite, plump woman with a long ponytail. He nods at her, smiles and asks her name. She's Yolanda.

"*De donde es?*" Monterrosa says, asking where she's from. "*De Mexico?*"

"*Si, de Mexico.*"

"OK, Yolanda, *esta cancion es para ti. Es para Yolanda* everybody, give it up and say hi to Yolanda, everybody!"

The crowd replies in sing-song unison.

"Hi, Yolanda."

Yolanda blushes and looks at her feet, but as the band plays "Object of My Affection" for her, she resumes dancing with the other fans.

As a child, Monterrosa relied on his mom for his musical education. Maribel Imery Monterrosa listened to Spanish radio, as deSol's song recounts, but she also embraced the Top 40 of her adopted country.

"Salsa competed with disco in my house," her son said, "and they were very related."

Monterrosa therefore thinks that music fans are music fans and radio stations eventually will realize that.

"We might be hearing 'You're not Spanish enough' or 'You're too Spanish,' " Monterrosa said. "You look at somebody like Marc Anthony, who does some of the best straight-up salsa you've ever heard. But what he has to do to get played on English-language radio is play English-language pop. I think you've got to give listeners some credit and let them hear different things, new things."

So far, deSol has received encouragement from both Latino and Anglo sources.

It's hard to imagine an English-language morning news show sharing airtime with an unsigned band, but the Spanish-language Univision Channel 41 plugged deSol before the band's trip to Miami earlier this year.

"They gave us five minutes to do a song on the early morning news," Albie said.

The mainstream music industry might soon be introduced to deSol with the help of Middletown's Franke Previte, a songwriter who won an Oscar for "(I've Had) The Time Of My Life," from the 1987 film "Dirty Dancing."

Danny Sanchez, a Red Bank-based photographer who works with many local bands, shot portraits of deSol for the band's CD and he passed it along to Previte, who, in turn, played it for David Bryan and Tico Torres, of Bon Jovi, and for Tony Pallagrosi, a concert promoter who books most shows in Monmouth County.

"I played it for all these people I respect," Previte said. "They were like, 'Yeah, you're right. These guys are good.' Is it American pop or is it Latin whatever? To me, it falls into a category that's never been."

Previte is helping deSol shop the CD at record labels, and he hopes to work with deSol on a Latin sequel to "Dirty Dancing."

Now, making his own music, informed by the truth of his youth, Monterrosa finds himself delving deeper and deeper into his roots. He remembers the *tamale*-making parties of his

childhood, when all his relatives would come over and prepare *tamales* in a grand, festive assembly line. He misses those days.

"I said, 'Mom, what happened? Why don't we do that anymore?' And she's like, 'Oh, everyone's busy, everyone's moved away.' "

Sometime soon, Monterrosa would like to visit El Salvador, to take some time to see relatives and find out if they like his music.

"I'd like to go for a month or two," he said. "I'm full-blooded, man, I want to see where I came from. We're bringing out these sacred rhythms that have been in us for so long."

He'd go as Albie Monterrosa, of course. It's safe to say Jerry Albert's not around anymore.

"I've never felt so full of who I really am," he said. "Because I'm a Latin American dude, you know? I can't hide that. I speak to my mom in Spanish, I speak to my dad in Spanish."

"El mundo da vueltas, el mundo da vueltas, el mundo, Ay, mi mundo!"

Monterrosa and his bandmates are singing "Spin Around," with its Spanish chorus of "The world spins around, the world spins around, the world, oh, my world!"

Cabrera leaps into the audience with his conga, and several fans dance with him. Guerrero, smiling and singing, pounds harder on the bongoes.

The band switches from its original songs to a well-known folk song, "Guantanamera," and Monterrosa invites his mostly Anglo audience to join in.

"We're going to unite our voices in this little corner of the universe, OK?"



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