



"La Maestra" Susie Hansen

Susie Hansen - Maestra of Latin Music by Les Rivera

Female salsa band leaders are hard to come by. Susie Hansen is a world class modern day pioneer. She carries a popular punch wherever she and her band perform.

Her virtuoso skills and groovy salsa (charanga) sounds make her electric violin sound as if it was a natural extension of a deep rooted Latin upbringing somewhere in Cuba.

Her background, however, was not from being raised in a Latin family, nor was it in Cuba, the Bronx, East Los Angeles, Miami, or from any other Latin cultural upbringing. As we're about to hear in her interview, Susie's professionalism comes from her exceptional ability to excel within new artistic challenges!

In her case, her artistic gift and talent has manifested her into world fame within the Latin musical genres of salsa, mambo, charanga, Latin jazz, and everything else Latin.

The Los Angeles based Susie Hansen Latin Band is one of the most popular salsa bands on the West Coast. Her band is also a name to be reckoned with around the world, with a few CD's in her belt. In spite of great success in the salsa world, Susie is about as down to earth as anyone can be, taking the whole thing in stride.

Her always upbeat, very pleasant and happy personality is apparent as she arrives at our dinner table on this beautiful Pasadena, California evening, in the famous old town district. After a nice meal and conversation at a Japanese establishment, we begin the interview.

Les Rivera: When was the Susie Hansen Latin Band first established?

Susie Hansen: It was established at the end of 1989. I had been playing with Papo Conga. He and I had a falling out at the time, but we had some gigs coming up at El Floridita in Hollywood. I went to the club to speak to owner Armando Castro and I explained that Papo Conga and I weren't going to play together any more. If Armando wanted to continue using Papo's band it was fine, but I was not going to be there. So Armando gave me my own gig, my first one under my own name in Los Angeles.

I put together a band and we had gigs right from the gate. Eddie Ortiz from Son Mayor was my lead singer for the first year of my band. It was great!

I first came to Los Angeles in 1988. Within the first year and half living here I played with Francisco Aguabella, which was the first break I got. Then I played with Bobby Matos. Next I played in the bands of Long John Silver, Candy Sosa, and Papa Congo.

Salsarican is a rapid growing website committed to promoting the popular growth of salsa music and dancing to a huge U.S., Puerto Rico and a world wide web frequent visitor base. The website's main content is focused on the NuYorican & Puerto Rican salsa culture, as well as the cultures of Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

John Orta, Candy Susa, and Papo Conya.

I played with a lot of local guys whom I learned a lot from, especially Joe Rotundi, the piano player. He and I would practice together. I learned so much from him. When I played with him in Candy's band, I taped all our gigs and learned a tremendous amount that way too. So, I was ready to do my own band. I had also had my own band in Chicago doing bebop and straight ahead jazz for six years, so I already knew how to lead a band.

LR: Susie, how did you get started in salsa?

SH: I got started in salsa in Chicago. In 1987, I was playing with my own jazz band at an event in Grant Park, called "Taste of Chicago." The band right before us was Victor Parra and the Mambo Express Allstars. Victor had a regular show on public radio for salsa, charanga, mambo and so forth.

He played before us, and I confess I didn't pay much attention. I was more concerned about such things as getting our own sound correct. But he stayed and listened to us! After our show he approached me and he said that he had fired his violin player within the last week and he needed a new one. Then he asked me to come down and play with them on Monday at the Moosehead Bar and Grill. I said, "What do I know about mambo?" He goes, "Oh don't worry, you'll get it." And I did! I went down there and I just got it. I could play the music right away, no problems with the rhythm, and no questions about the harmonies or the chord changes.

The saxophone player would go (Susie imitating the sound of the horn). He would play me a line and I would play the same. So when I first got into it I just loved it (happy smile)!

LR: Where did you learn to play the violin, and why did you choose that instrument?

SH: Oh, I didn't choose it, my father did! I was five when I started. My father was a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, playing in that orchestra for 38 years. He was my teacher and I loved to practice and play. I was a very happy violin player as a kid. By the time I was ten I was practicing three hours a day.

LR: You play the Zeta violin. What's the difference between that and a regular violin?

SH: The Zeta has a solid body like the guitar. It has no acoustic chamber, so there is no resonating air in the body. It doesn't really propagate the sound within the physical properties of the instrument.

The only way the sound is amplified or projected at all is through the five pickups under the five strings. It's a totally amplified instrument with no acoustic sound. I like it, because you have no problem with feedback, it has a nice even tone, and I really like the quality of the sound of the Zeta. I have been playing it for almost twenty years.

LR: You came from Chicago. How did you end up in Los Angeles?

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SH: I have two sisters. One was in New York and one was in LA. I was living in Chicago in 1987 and I had a steady gig at the Green Mill. The Green Mill was an old established club there. I played every Tuesday for a year and a half. When we lost that gig I was kind of disappointed and unhappy. On the other hand I realized I could take some time off, which I hadn't done because of the busy work schedule.

I called my sister Joan and I said well, finally I can take a vacation. First I am going to Boston, where I went to school, and I am going to see some of my friends. She said are you nuts? You never visit me! So I said ok, I am coming to LA. Once I got to LA I wanted to move here. Within three months I moved and I lived in LA. Great (laughter)! After a few years, my other sister moved to LA too. She plays viola in the studios, so were all here now.

LR: Are your CD releases still popular and selling well?

SH: Yes, I still sell a lot of the current one all over the world, "The Salsa Never Ends." It's been out two and a half years now. We still get airplay all over the world. It's never been a real big seller, but it has been a very consistent seller, ever since it was released. We also get e-mails and fan letters from all over the world.

My first CD "Solo Flight" didn't get as much attention. But now it's rallying again, and we're selling a lot of this CD. Just two years ago we had a minor hit in Italy from one of the songs from the first CD, "Beautiful Maria of My Soul." And last week, a DJ from Italy showed up at one of our dance gigs, and he said that we are now very popular in Italy with the song, "La Salsa Nunca Se Acaba."

LR: Is there a new CD in the works?

SH: Yes, we're getting the music together for that now.

LR: Do you dance salsa yourself?

SH: Oh yeah, I love to dance, "on-1" or "on-2"! Salsa is the most joyous dance and music in the world. When you go out to a dance place and you look at people dancing, they all have a smile on their faces, no matter how well or bad they dance. This is different from a rock club or a disco, where people often have this look of attitude on their face.

LR: Describe salsa music.

SH: Salsa is the world's most heartfelt music. It appeals to people at so many levels. It's rhythmic and it makes many people want to dance. Even people who do not know how to dance are usually moving in their chairs. It's jazzy, and it's got a sophisticated harmony. It appeals to people at a level that's intellectual in the same degree that jazz always did. The music is evocative, making people feel the music in their hearts. People respond to its harmony, the wonderful rhythm and the heartfelt music.

LR: Have you performed live outside of the West Coast, and where?

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SH: I started my career in Boston, so I played there. Then I moved to Chicago and I played there, with my own band. Since I started my own band in LA we have played throughout California, in Las Vegas, in Montana, in Mexico, in New York City a couple of times, in New Jersey. We toured in Toronto, Canada, playing at festivals there last summer. We don't tour all that much, but we do like to travel and perform.

LR: Hector "La Voz" Resendez, his beloved staff, and his popular salsa radio show play your music and your jingle every Saturday. Salsa and Latin jazz enthusiasts love Susie Hansen. How did you become so popular?

SH: (Laughter) He calls me the "Jazz Girl" (more laughter)! See, that's what my car license plate says. (Author verifies this is true).

Hector is the greatest supporter of local musicians. There are lots of radio stations in this town which support Latin jazz and salsa.

They are full of great DJ's. But, Hector is someone really special. You can always call him up and get on his show. If you have something important to say he will announce it for you. He is behind all the musicians in such an important and valuable way.

I, in turn, have tried to give that back too. I support his radio station, I contribute money to them when they have fund drives, and I sometimes go down there to be on the show for the fund drives. I wrote and produced that jingle for them during the making of my first CD. Hector loved it. He said it was a good station ID. People come up to me from nowhere and they start singing "Sal-sa for South-ern California, Canto Tropical", and they just sing it to me (laughter).

Everybody on Canto Tropical has a good heart; Kathy "La Rumbera" Diaz, all the guys on the show, from Pedrito "Swing" Maldonado, Armando Nila "El Caballero Salsero", and Carlos "El Marinero" Montani, they all take care of the musicians. We can't survive without that. They all do this for the love of salsa.

LR: Is it hard to be a female bandleader in a typically male oriented salsa artist world?

SH: That's an interesting question. It would be hard for me to know, since I never had the experience of being a male bandleader (smile). The truth from my personal experiences is there are some Latino guys who cannot deal with a woman in charge. But they don't last long in my band. They quit because they can't take it, or else they cause too much grief for everyone and I fire them.

So the guys who are in my band are normal, intelligent, responsible guys who simply want to have good leader and play good music.

They respect me as a bandleader; they always get paid what they've been promised. The musicians get to the gigs on time and I take care of the details. They know that they will always have other good musicians to play with in my band. It took me a while to get an entire band with no jerks, but I think any bandleader goes through this, whether you are male or female.

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The fact that I am not a Latina may help me more than hinder me. As a non-Latina I don't have to deal with some of the embedded prejudices that Latinas are faced with. The negative aspect of not being a Latina is that some people may think what does a "white girl" know about our music? Yet I have this music we love for so long I've gotten past that attitude. People have discovered that I can really play and I always treat the music with respect, that I love the music. The whole thing ends up not being a problem.

LR: What advice do you have for up and coming, aspiring female bandleaders?

SH: My best advice for musicians when you're young is to learn the music and the songs. Play with people as much as you can. Get out there, sit in, be willing to go to rehearsals, take the lessons, transcribe, dig in, and get it! Learn how things work, that's the most important thing. Then you'll have something to offer to a band leader.

To bandleaders the most important advice would be not to get into it if you're not willing to do the business. It's too hard to have a band if you're not willing to work to get it booked.

LR: How do you become a recognized name as an artist?

I remember reading in college that persistence is nine-tenths of the artist. Of course, the punch line is, "but who wants to be nine-tenths of an artist?" So first you have to know you have that musical gift. People have to relate to the music that flows through you. But then persistence is crucial. You have to practice, study and play, get the gigs, and be persistent. Learn to write and arrange music. You cannot sit back and wait for the phone to ring or for people to come to you. Persistence is the key factor.

Susie Hansen's website can be found at www.SusieHansen.com