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The charismatic Venezuelan sonero

Profile: Oscar Emilio Leon Somoza: The Lion Of Salsa

by George De Stefano

Tito Puente's "Oye Como Va" ranks right up there with "Stairway to Heaven" and "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" in the category of once-cool-tunes-ruined-by-overexposure: who wants ever to hear them again?

But two years ago, on a Lincoln Center stage, [Oscar D'Leon](#) performed a near-miracle with the Puente warhorse. D'Leon, who opened for El Rey del Timbal at Avery Fisher Hall, joined the headliner and his band for the predictable encore, and the instant he grabbed the mike he jump-started the tune like an EMS technician electroshocking a heart attack victim's failing organ. He double-timed it, scatted the lyrics, improvised new words — basically, he brought it back from the dead and made it dance.

D'Leon's resuscitation of "Oye Como Va" was a particularly vivid illustration of what he's been doing since he began performing and recording twenty-odd years ago. (A late bloomer, he became a professional musician at age 30 after stints as a cabbie and bus driver.) The Venezuelan sonero draws his inspiration from two main sources — the classic Cuban music of such masters as Beny Moré, La Sonora Matancera, and Orquesta Aragón — and the New York salsa of the late '60s - early '70s. But he transcends and transforms his influences through the force of his own sonerismo and irrepressible personality.



Take, for instance, his re-working of Orquesta Aragón's "Calculadora." The original now seems too stately, the arrangement dated, even corny. D'Leons cover preserves the distinctive Cuban sabor, but it's vibrant and it swings. His hearty, agile tenor on the verses is answered by the nasal antiphons of the voz de vieja coro as the band plays a faster tempo than on the original, the horns punchier and the percussion more prominent. It's charanga that sounds totally idiomatic yet contemporary.

D'Leon's revivifying alchemy is in full force on one of his biggest recent successes, his 10-minute-plus medley of three Beny Moré classics: "Bonito y Sabroso," "Francisco Guayabal," and "Que Bueno Baila Usted" on his 1991 album, [Autentico](#). D'Leon tears into the tunes with his typical gusto, as the band, again employing faster tempos and a more driving rhythmic approach than on the originals, surges along with inexorable momentum that erupts in a joyous climax.

And yes, the sexual simile is intentional — D'Leon will turn 51 in July, but thus tall, rugged Venezolano with the lush mustache and shiny pate exudes more frank eroticism than any of today's crop of pretty-boy salseros. At the Lincoln Center show, an especially ardent woman seated in front of me lost more of her composure with each grind of the singer's mobile hips.

A generous performer who sometimes gives too much of himself — occasionally I've left his shows feeling satiated — Oscar D'Leon also can be an inconsistent recording artist. For every brilliant coup, like the Beny Moré medley, there's a clinker like his Quincentennial tribute to "Cristobal C" or "Padre e Hijo," a cloying duet with his teenage son Yorman.

But D'Leon's new release, [Toitico Tuyo](#) (Sonero Records/RMM) is an all-around delight. Ironically, the consistency seems to have been achieved through what could have been an excess of diversity. D'Leon's latest was recorded in four different locations — Venezuela, Colombia, Puerto Rico, and New York — with a virtual

committee of arrangers and producers, including D'Leon, and with different musicians at each session. (D'Leon's own orquesta appears on the three Venezuelan tracks.) The music is steeped in Afro-Cubanismo while also embracing merengue, salsa romantica, and bossa nova. What holds it all together is D'Leon's charisma, energy, and authority.

The set opens strong, with the straight-ahead salsa of "Mentiras," recorded in New York with **Sergio George**, the producer/arranger/pianist who, in his talent and ubiquity, is well on his way to becoming the Larry Harlow of the '90s. George gives Mimi Ibarra's tune an arrangement similar to the sound he crafted with the Senegalese vocalists who, as the trio called Africano, released last year's superb **Trovador** (see Descarga Newsletter, Vol 1, No. 9, 1993).

The Puerto Rican songwriter Omar Alfanno contributes "Que Raro" and "Si Fuera Mia." These, the set's longest tracks, afford D'Leon the opportunity to deliver two of his most engaging performances. (I love his confident cry of "¡Seras!" in the latter, with the horns echoing his ebullience.) And along with "Matemática Sexual," they also were arranged by and produced by salsa veteran Luis "Perico" Ortiz.

D'Leon upholds the banner of Afro-Cuban tradition on "Como Olvidarte" and "De Ti," both of which he (co-)wrote, produced, and arranged. Both tunes have delicious montunos that he'll no doubt develop into tours-de-force of improvisatory sonerismo when he performs them in his shows.

"Casas de Carton," a lament for the plight of Venezuela's urban underclass whose members live in cardboard "casas," is a stylistic departure for D'Leon, the delicate bossa nova guitar accompaniment offering an ironic contrast to the bleak lyrics.

The title track is three-and-a-half minutes of hip-grinding merenguismo. What's unusual is the substitution of standard Afro-Cuban percussion for the characteristic tambora. D'Leon's arrangement is more

textured that that of most Dominican productions, ensuring that this non-merengue fan won't hit the "skip" button on the CD player.

Toitico Tuyo — the album — fails to satisfy in only one respect. Like D'Leon's two previous releases, **El Rey de Los Soneros** and **Autentico**, it's too short — only 35 minutes. This fan wishes that the generosity of D'Leon's shows would carry over to his recordings.

That cavil aside, it's time to give props to Oscar Emilio Leon Somoza, the self-described poor negrito from Caracas who, by dint of extraordinary talent and determination, made himself an international standard bearer for classic salsa and his nation's best-known artist. And if proclaiming himself "El Rey de los Soneros" seems immodest, then who among his contemporaries has a stronger claim to the crown?



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