



Nick Walker

Bathed in the glow of the rotating light displays and the merciful breeze of several wall fans, hundreds of salseros and salseras filed into The Salsa Room on a hot fall night to hear Bio Ritmo, the Virginia band that likes to put their own twist on Nuyorican salsa.

At first, the effect was subtle.

Bio Ritmo's show sounded classic 60s and 70s salsa, but then there were elements of other genres gently emerging from deep within the music. Sometimes, it was almost subliminal, and the original rhythm would return later on. Other times, the music would change suddenly, with new melodies jumping out and forcing the dancers to adapt.

"It all comes down to the core passion in our music," says Rei Alvarez, wearing his signature fedora atop his shaved head and sporting a full beard and mustache. Alvarez is Bio Ritmo's lead vocalist and percussionist who also writes all of the lyrics. "The melodic progression, the set of chords that establish the melody... that's what matters to me. A good melodic progression can evoke emotions," he says.

Based in Richmond, VA, Bio Ritmo is known for its creativity, originality and experimentation. But, they say, they never lose track of their traditional salsa roots. "We're always looking for the roots of the music, because you need to know the rules before you break them," says Alvarez. "The inspiration to be creative comes from that confidence. Our music has evolved, but we're still a salsa band."

Alvarez takes pride in Bio Ritmo's unique blend of salsa with musical styles from around the world, including punk rock, pop, jazz, swing, disco, classical and samba music. This variety gives Bio Ritmo an edge Alvarez feels is lacking in many contemporary salsa bands. "Modern salsa has become very formulaic. We're not into Top 40 salsa at all. We're into music that has character," he says.

"As a music critic, I really love the band's last production, all the way," says Yannis Ruel of Paris, who describes Bio Ritmo as one of the most original contemporary salsa bands. "It is retro and futuristic, funky but always *'en clave,'* nice lyrics and unorthodox *sonero,'* says Ruel, and adds, "plus they have their own compositions."

Formed in 1991, Bio Ritmo is essentially in its third iteration.

The band started as a percussion and brass ensemble, first providing music for an IMAX documentary and playing at local parties and clubs in Richmond. They later incorporated salsa into their repertoire under the leadership of Puerto Rican vocalist and percussionist Jorge Negrón, and in 1993, released their first single. Bio Ritmo's debut album, "Que Siga la Musica," followed in early 1995.

In 1996, Negrón returned to Puerto Rico and the band went in a different direction, led by Cuban trombonist and vocalist René Herrera, who favored a more contemporary Cuban sound heard on the group's next two albums. When Herrera left in 2000, the band broke up, only to get back together a couple of years later under the leadership of Alvarez.

Bio Ritmo returned to their Nuyorican roots, releasing a self-titled album on their own label, "Locutor," in 2003. That same year, the band won the Northeast Showcase Finals of the Independent Music World competition in New York City, earning the title "Best Independent Band in the Northeast."

It was Bio Ritmo's innovation and reinvention of classical salsa that attracted pianist Marlysse Simmons, who once played with D.C.'s Orquesta La Romana.

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"I definitely learned the salsa 'ropes' with Romana," says Simmons. "I especially owe a lot to the bass player, Tony, who guided and showed me a lot of tricks." But Simmons was also interested in composing and playing her own music when she joined Bio Ritmo in 2002.

"I actually had a song that I had started to write while I was still with Romana, and when I joined Bio Ritmo and met Rei, I passed it along. A week later, he had lyrics and revamped it into what became the song *Atrévete,'* she says.

Besides recording, performing, and touring with Bio Ritmo, each band member has several other musical projects on the side, in addition to their full-time day jobs. Alvarez, Simmons and percussionist Giustino Riccio each play in a classic-style bolero band, while bassist Eddie Prendergast leads an electronica/drum & bass "Miami" funk project, which features Bio Ritmo members Bob Miller



and Toby Whitaker on trombone and trumpet.

Simmons also has her own project influenced by Brazilian samba, rock and jazz styles. Riccio himself is part of a duo project called "Fuzzy Baby," which he describes as a "two-member, one-man band" with each partner singing and playing multiple instruments simultaneously.

"One of the things that make this band stand out are how integrated this diverse group of individuals are. They seem hip to other genres as well, and these influences make for a lot of creative musical endeavors, particularly in their arrangements, says John Sullivan, a fan from Cincinnati, OH. "Bio Ritmo has everything you would want in a great Latin Band: chops, creativity, musical savvy, danceability," he adds.

Bio Ritmo's most recent album, *Bionico*, was one of the top ten Latin albums on iTunes in 2008. The cover of "*Bionico*" features a *vejigante* mask drawn by Alvarez, an illustration that also appears on Bio Ritmo's t-shirts and records.

"It's a folkloric tradition from the French *Carnaval* part of our [Puerto Rican] heritage," Alvarez explains. "It's an illustrative element of my art, and a good way to convey a feeling of mystery and poetic romance. It's also one of my hometown's (Ponce) great traditions, both in carnavales and in the art of making the actual masks."

Bio Ritmo recently finished recording their latest album, this time with the help of Aaron Levinson, best known for putting together the Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

Simmons says this album will sound similar to their previous efforts, but notes that "as we're evolving all the time, it'll always be a little different." Listeners can expect to hear around 8-10 tracks of salsa dura, chachacha, descarga, and other styles that can't be easily categorized.

The album itself won't be available until fall 2010, though eager fans may be able to get a few songs digitally from their label's website. Bio Ritmo is also planning their next tour, with stops around Puerto Rico, Europe and the U.S.

