

# SIN MIEDO

By Nick Walker



Photo: Ruth Mathangi

**L**isten closely over the rush of the crowd and cars in Adams Morgan neighborhood on a Saturday night and you will hear the sounds of one of D.C.'s best-known Latin bands streaming from the open windows of 18th Street's Bossa Lounge.

Known for their vibrant blend of Afro-Cuban percussion and jazz, Sin Miedo (Spanish for "fearless") draws a crowd of college students, senior citizens and everyone in-between. As they play a salsa song, Bossa's cozy dance floor swells with people of varying dance skills, moving to Sin Miedo's infectious grooves.

"You can come here and hear music all week long, but no other band sounds like this one," said Daniel Cima, a long-time supporter of Sin Miedo seated on Bossa's outside patio, which borders the stage from the back. "To me, there's no band better than this, certainly not in this neighborhood."

The man behind Sin Miedo is French pianist and vocalist Didier Prossaird. He discovered Latin music as a

teenager, and then in the early 90s left France for a Caribbean vacation in Saint Barthélemy in the West Indies.

Prossaird enjoyed Saint Barth so much that his "vacation" ended up lasting three and a half years as he began performing with local bands on the island. Upon meeting members of Baltimore-based Mambo Combo, who were there on tour, Prossaird moved to the United States in the mid 90s to perform with them. In 1998, he left Mambo Combo to start Sin Miedo.

"Salsa is the same all over the world," Prossaird said.

"It used to be that people in France couldn't dance salsa, until about six or seven years ago. Now they have lessons and bands. It's really caught on over there."

Sin Miedo began playing Thursdays at the nearby Rumba Café, only a couple of blocks away from Bossa.

One member who has been in the band since the beginning is percussionist René Ibanez, who alternates between playing the congas, bongos, and timbales.

Ten years ago the band was just a quintet. More instruments were added over time, and now the full band includes ten members, many of whom were originally jazz musicians.

Prossaird draws inspiration from other pianists, including Rubén González of Buena Vista Social Club fame. He considers legendary Cuban pianist Chucho Valdés as his biggest influence.

"He's way out there, doing all this shit," Prossaird said. "It's crazy; the piano suffers."

Sin Miedo released their third album, "Estoy Enamorado," in March of this year. Most of the lyrics are written by songwriter Alexis Fleites and combined with musical arrangements by Prossaird and others in the band.

"The last album was more jazz, this is more salsa, which I'm happy about; it's more danceable," said bass player Steve Sachse, who joined the band in 2000.

In addition to composing music, Sin Miedo is known for improvisation. Wednesday nights at Bossa feature more jazz than salsa, and members will spontaneously break off into separate rhythms only to seamlessly come together moments later, drawing out songs to fifteen minutes or more.

"We've been playing so long, we all know each other," said Ibanez about the band. "We know what's going on, we use telepathy, we feel each other."

During a recent Saturday night show, a clarinetist from an Adams Morgan bar dropped in to play with Sin Miedo for awhile. A couple of hours later, a percussionist did the same.

"You know a band is good when people from other bands come in to jam with them," said Susanna Travies, who helped manage the Rumba Café with Daniel Cima when Sin Miedo was just getting started.

"The amazing thing about this band is that it's so multi-cultural," Travies added. You have this French guy playing not only salsa but rumba and all types of Cuban music and he really gets it. Then you have Steve who is American, René who is Cuban, a Venezuelan bongo player, and so on. Sin Miedo is very diverse."

"With Latin music, that's just how it is," added Alfredo Mojica, timbalero and vocalist. "It doesn't matter where you're from. If you feel it, you've got it."

Sin Miedo was voted Best Salsa Band two years in a row at the local Salsa Metro Awards. They also are known for their versatility, punctuating sets with mambo, cha cha cha, merengue, cumbia and much more.

"We play all kinds of music—Latin, Brazilian, reggae, Indian, African—just whatever, you know," said Prossaird.

"I am 100 percent Cuban, and my parents taught me to keep the tradition alive," said Ibanez. "So we do Afro-Cuban—son montuno and guaracha. We also do danzón, charanga, and we are one of the only bands that play ballads. No other band in the area does that. We keep it very real."

When asked for his favorite venue to play, Prossaird smiled and replied, "Carnegie Hall..."

"Just kidding. I'm always happy, wherever I'm playing."

