

A college of musical knowledge

A sizzling hit-hat cymbal usually marks the start of another La Chazz salsa session that mixes a triumphant brass attack with a percussion onslaught no less urgent. Though the group is not new, its residency at Cafe Melange in the Wisconsin Hotel, 720 Old World 3rd St., has helped distinguish La Chazz as Milwaukee's most exciting dance-provoking group, bar none.

Every Thursday night, the group embarks on two sets of guitarist Toty Ramos' original compositions for an audience that always includes members of Milwaukee's musical elite — Paul Cebar, Wild Kingdom and others — as well as some of the city's most discerning listeners and lounge lizards.

As an added bonus, the group regularly attracts some accomplished guests to the bandstand. At any given session one might find Melvin Rhyne — a member of Wes Montgomery's legendary trio — at the piano or former Jazz Messenger Brian Lynch on trumpet. Members of the Philip Glass Ensemble also have stopped in to participate.

"We get more musicians down to hear our group than I've seen in a long time," trumpeter Neal Chandek said proudly.

The group consists of Ramos, drummer Earnest Adams, percussionists Hector Rodriguez and Luis Diaz, bassist Robert Siegel, trombonist Mike Franceschi and trumpeters Chandek, Allen Johnson and Jeff Pietrangelo.

Though La Chazz performs tunes written by Duke Ellington and other jazz greats, Ramos' compositions really define La Chazz style, according to Chandek.

"One observation I have is I've been playing Toty's compositions for a long time," Chandek

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Many talents feed Latin heart of La Chazz

Music

By Robert Tanzilo

said. "I think the original music is something that is important in determining the character of the band."

Bandleader Ramos, an accomplished artist and furniture maker, founded La Chazz and arranges the material. His arrangements make the most of the vast talent at his disposal, including Adams, who has toured with Stanley Turrentine, Dizzy Gillespie and George Benson after cutting his teeth with a number of local acts.

Adams, a solid rhythmist who always downplays his role with the group, holds the large group together and keeps a strong fire burning underneath. And his incendiary solos draw a rabid response.

"For one thing it's a musical challenge," Chandek said of playing Ramos' music. "No. 2, it's how well-conceived (the music is) and that (with) the

tunes we do — while they're well-constructed — there is room for improvisation and solo.

"So you have a model for a creative format."

Though the group consists of musicians from jazz backgrounds, Ramos' intent was to keep the focus on Latin music. In the group's early days he told a reporter:

"We do have musicians who are oriented to a fusion style. But we want to make it true Latin music. We want the Latin feel to be the heart of the music instead of using it as an exotic touch."

Chandek feels that one of the group's major achievements is its ability to reach a number of different communities.

"Toty has been able to bridge a lot of the gaps in the community. With La Chazz we've played black clubs, Puerto Rican clubs, Mexican clubs and all the jazz festivals. Paul Cebar liked us so much that he took us down to Chicago to warm up for his group, which is basically a rock group. I think that's an important part of the character of the group."

La Chazz also serves as a musical college for a number of local musicians, according to Chandek. Besides the regular members, the group has three "alternates" and many musicians who participate in La Chazz rehearsals.

"It's like Milwaukee's version of Duke Ellington's band because it's like a music school," Chandek said.

"At our rehearsals we have extra musicians coming down just to learn," he said. "Some of the Ko-Thi percussionists come down to play with us. It's really something to be a part of it."

It's really something to witness it, too.