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La Terraza 7 Cafe Fostering Latin Music's New Sound

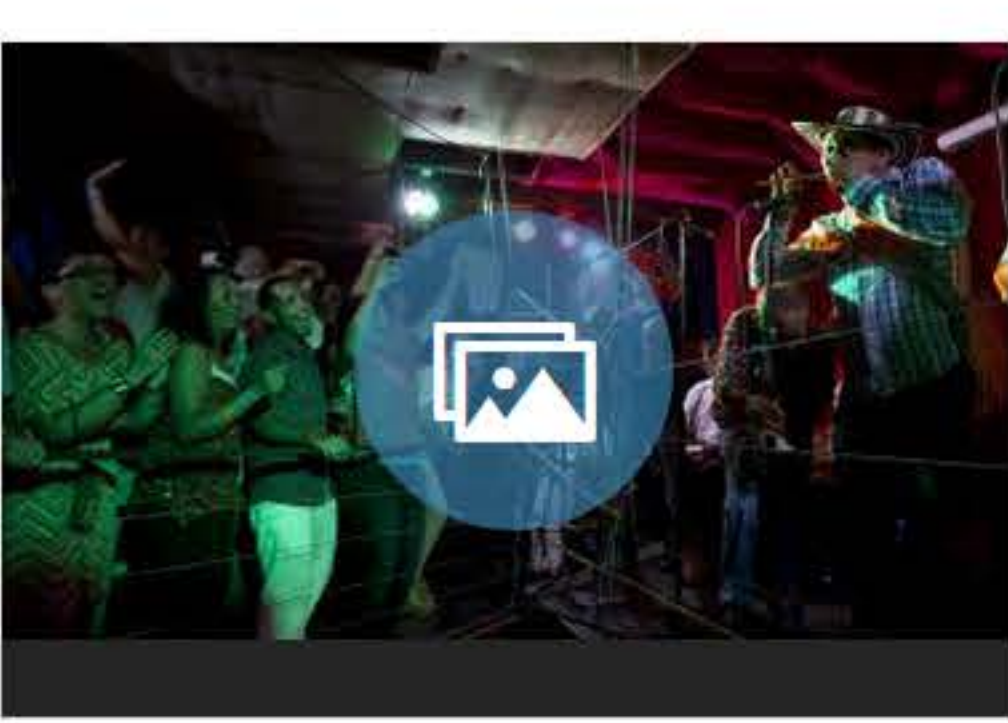
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By William Farrington

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JACKSON HEIGHTS — The rumble of the subway train overhead is inseparable from the bustle of Roosevelt Avenue below.

The grinding wheels of the 7 train at the 82nd Street station can be heard every few minutes, followed by a fresh influx of commuters, a steady rhythm that keeps the grocery stores, restaurants and street vendors busy on that stretch of Jackson Heights.

Just around the corner, there's another familiar sound coming from La Terraza 7 cafe — the beat of Latin music.

For 10 years the cafe, named after the train that passes nearby, has been the hub of the neighborhood's expanding scene. From a space not much larger than a studio apartment, a new music is emerging that the owner, Freddy Castiblanco, a Colombian immigrant, describes as "Latin traditions merge[d] with jazz, rock and American genres, that is expressive of our particular experiences as New Yorkers."

"Before Terraza there was not an artistic outlet where musicians could jam and listen to new music. Freddy created that," said Kaisha Johnson, the director of touring artists for the Center for Traditional Music and Dance.

This week, both the old and new guard of Colombian music will be performing around the city. M.A.K.U. Soundsystem, which got its start at La Terraza, will take the stage at Le Poisson Rouge in Greenwich Village Wednesday.

On Thursday, the legendary Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto will play at La Terraza.

M.A.K.U. Soundsystem's music fuses the raw energy of punk's slashing guitar chords and psychedelic keyboards with call-and-response vocals punctuated by trombone, sax and clarinet hovering over traditional Colombian percussion and Cumbia rhythms.

The band's name evokes the street parties of Cartagena, where the ports once fused global influences with Colombian sensibilities. Elements of Afrobeat, soukous and reggae can be heard in their compositions.

The original members of Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto, a beloved folkloric group formed in the 1950's, are now in their 70s and 80s, backed by a younger generation of musicians.

"They are legendary and iconic in their music but very humble," said Johnson. "They come from a very small village, travel the world, then go back home to their lives as farmers or teachers."

Based on Kogui Native American music typified by the gaita, a small flute, their music integrates African percussion and Andalusian song.

The core members of M.A.K.U., all Colombian immigrants, met at a traditional instrument workshop at La Terraza and formed the band two years ago.

Following a successful globalFEST showcase at Webster Hall in January, M.A.K.U. has been touring the country playing festivals. They have a newly recorded EP that will be released soon, recorded live to capture the spontaneity of their performances.

Lead vocalist Lana Baja, who plays the tambora, delivers fiery or ethereal lyrics in Spanish that are often metaphorical musings on life as an immigrant.

"We want to dance and have a good time," said Juan Ospina, who plays bass and sings. "The other side of the coin is we know the struggles of the immigrant, what it is like when you can't cross that border. That element enriches the music and what we sing about."

The scene in the city drew other members of the band to the area.

Drummer Andres Jimenez was studying jazz at the time in Boston before relocating to Jackson Heights.

Similarly, guitarist Camilo Rodriguez's interest in punk music brought him to New York, but he soon realized he missed the sounds of his native Bogotá.

Castiblanco added that theirs is not an uncommon story: many musicians come to the city to play jazz and find their music is better when they discover their roots.

His philosophy is to pair local musicians with traditional masters. The collaborations can be heard six nights a week from a stage suspended by wires above Terraza's bar.

"The music is a way to empower our community," he said. "We are New Yorkers generating a new culture based on our memories."



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