

Amanda Martínez: A New Voice for Latin-Canadian Music

Por Catherine Davis

‘Remember someone saying, ‘You can make a small step. Don’t underestimate what one small step can do.’ At the time, Martínez was sceptical. Five years later, she is a firm believer, ‘You can really change your whole trajectory.’ Regarded as one of the most promising new Latin artists to emerge on the contemporary Canadian music scene, singer Amanda Martínez has achieved in a few years what she once regarded as ‘fantasy’. Noted for her soothing voice and unique interpretations of Latin and jazz styles, it wasn’t until Martínez took the chance and followed her heart that she discovered her true calling as a performer. Now she is able to affirm from experience, ‘You can’t do anything until you yourself believe it.’



*Amanda Martínez at The Registry Theatre
Photograph by José Romelo Lagman*

nés. It was also through her family that she developed a love for the guitar, which her father and his brothers would play at family celebrations. Martínez, however, would not learn to play and compose on guitar until just a few years ago. As a child she instead learned piano, although she now admits, ‘I never had that same love [for piano] as I did for the guitar.’ In fact, a career in music was not always an obvious choice, ‘I always had a real love of music but I never considered making it a career... I always liked to sing, but I never would sing in front of people.’

Self-described as a ‘shy’ child, it wasn’t until she was nearing the end of high school that Martínez would sing in front

Born and raised in Toronto by a Mexican father and South African mother, Martínez grew up listening to a lot of her father’s music, which she now identifies as an early influence. She remembers being particularly taken with the songs of such artists as Chavela Vargas and Mercedes Sosa, as well as the boleros performed by Eydie Gormé with Mexican trio *Los Panchos*. Folkloric music always appealed to Martínez, in particular the ‘heartfelt lyrics’ of Cuban trovadores Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Mila-

of an audience, after being cast in one of the lead roles in the school musical, ‘Once I did that, I loved it so much I ended up getting an agent!’ Upon graduation, however, she chose to pursue what she considered a more ‘practical’ path, completing a degree in biology at the University of Western Ontario and then an MBA at York University, specializing in Latin America. The program included a year abroad, during which Martínez worked at the Canadian consulate in Guadalajara, México, followed by an exchange in Venezuela. The full influence of her experiences abroad did not become apparent until

after her return to Canada, when she had been working in trade and finance for less than a year, 'I experienced a kind of crisis and realized that I was *not* doing what... I wasn't following my heart.' After taking some time to regroup, she decided to make the leap into music, 'I think it was always there, that passion for performing, but I had this idea that you couldn't make a living at it and I just never gave it a chance. And then I realized, 'Wait a second, why am I not taking myself seriously? Why can't I?''

Recounting the first stages of a transition which began in 2001, Martínez now marvels, 'I didn't really have a plan. I kind of jumped right in and just decided I was going to go for it.' She organized a concert at Alley Cats, a well-known jazz venue in Toronto, which proved to be a success and led to her being hired to perform on a weekly basis. Without a recording, she found other singing jobs through word of mouth, piecing together a band when necessary. The following year, Martínez recorded her first demo, which she brought to Toronto's famous Yorkville café Sassafras. With a little persistence, Martínez secured a schedule as a jazz singer at the venue for three nights weekly over two summers. After hesitating initially, it didn't take long for her to begin incorporating elements of the Latin music which had always inspired her. Martínez's career continued to gain momentum as audiences responded, and she began performing at festivals and working with musicians who specialized in Latin music. Last year marked another tur-

ning point when she was invited to be part of the Global Divas Concert with Jane Bunnett and released her debut album *Sola* to great acclaim, raising her profile as an artist and earning the title of *Best World Music Artist of the Year* at the Toronto Independent Music Awards.

Produced independently, *Sola* features an eclectic collection of songs, incorporating elements of jazz and Latin styles and including interpretations of traditional songs in addition to original compositions. The idea of showcasing some of the music that had inspired her appealed to Martínez, and as a result *Sola* includes songs such as *La Lloron'* from

México, 'Look to the Rainbow' which she first discovered on an Astrud Gilberto record, and *Gracias a la vida*, all of which have special meaning for her. The original pieces reveal influences ranging from Cuban to flamenco, woven seamlessly together with the soulful melodies of Martínez's voice.



Amanda Martínez with band—from left: Alexander Brown (trumpet), Julio Cesar Jimenez (piano), Osvaldo Rodríguez (violin), Amanda Martínez, Kevin Laliberté (guitar), Rosendo 'Chendy' León (percussion), Ruddy Bolaños (bass). Photograph by Naomi Jaye

Having already been nominated for *Latin Jazz Artist of the Year* at the National Jazz Awards which will be held this spring, Martínez has even greater plans for 2007 including performances at numerous festivals, more artistic collaborations, and the premiere of her first music video, for *Guajira sola*. When reflecting on her success so date, Martínez credits the music and the collaborative spirit of those with whom she works, 'I feel that now I have more of a grounded sound and a group that I work really well with, and I'm really happy and grateful for that.' She describes the formation of the band as 'organic', originating from a working friendship with guitarist Kevin La-

liberté which began about four years ago when they began playing together as a duo. The rest of the players seemed to come together so naturally that even Martínez was amazed, 'I used to always say that I wanted to work with a group that really got along well. It's so important that there's that chemistry and energy, and I want people to feel good about what they're doing.' Working with musicians from three different countries, Martínez encounters a diversity of influences, methods and viewpoints which create a unique dynamic and make her work with the band all the more fulfilling.

As both an artist and the host of radio show *Café Latino* for Jazz.FM91, Martínez also has a unique viewpoint on the greater Latin-Canadian music scene. She acknowledges that there has been a significant increase in interest for Latin-influenced music and growth of the scene in recent years, 'There's been a real immigration of Cuban artists here in Toronto, and we've been very lucky to have that influence. I think it's a combination of factors: of clubs that have opened here to support the artists and then interest for a [radio] show like mine. I think that there is a thirst for that type of music... I know that when my father moved here in the '50s he said you could count on your fingers the number of Latin musicians, and now it feels like it's exploded.' Martínez also recognises the influence of Latin festivals such as *Salsa on St. Clair* and Harbourfront's *Ritmo y Color Festival* in Toronto, and others which have incorporated Latin-influenced music into their programs, such as Montréal's popular *Festival Nuits d'Afrique*.

Martínez as well as many others are impressed by the diversity and innovation of many new artists, 'I tend to be attracted to the groups that have a fusion of influences. People have also called it the 'Toronto sound' because we have such a wide range of musicians and backgrounds here that when they form a group there are all different influences [at play].' Among the artists currently gaining profile in Toronto and Canada is Latin jazz pianist David Virelles, who began playing at the Cabana club in Toronto with Jane Bunnett's Grammy-nominated and multiple Juno Award-winning group The Spirits of Havana, and released his first album after touring Canada last year. Others include Juno and National Jazz Award-winning pianist Hilario Duran, who also played with Jane Bunnett's band and recently laun-

ched a solo career, and Toronto-based singer Eliana Cuevas who is originally from Venezuela. Caché, a group whose members come from different parts of Latin America, is considered a mainstay in the city and recently released a second album. One need only take a glance at the website for Lula Lounge, Toronto's premiere venue for live Latin music, to discover such groups as Café Cubano and others who have become local and international favourites on the scene – and while Toronto is undeniably a hot spot for new Latin-inspired artists, others have emerged from across the country. In particular, Martínez mentions the Puentes Brothers, a Juno-nominated duo based in Victoria, who have more recently embarked on successful solo careers.

On a personal level, Martínez is also looking forward to realizing her own potential, 'I hope that I'll develop my confidence in composing, and I'd love to feel more comfortable playing [guitar] on stage. In terms of long term goals, I feel that there's a lot of potential to play for Canadian audiences and then I'd love to tour internationally.' Ultimately, it is her love of the music and her desire to connect with audiences through her songs that drive Martínez forward, 'I like to think that when I perform I take people somewhere else... Music makes you feel things that you wouldn't necessarily feel [otherwise], a certain sadness or something that's hidden within you and it brings it out, like a release, and sometimes I find that people respond that way with our music.' Whether performing in more intimate settings or in larger venues, Martínez is always aware of the power of music to cross barriers, 'In any kind of setting, I think what I'm really grateful for is that people, they're from all different walks of life but we're all connecting in that moment through the music. And it's not just through me; it's through the combination of myself and the musicians and all of us together. And that's so magical; *that* I really love. I live for [the moment] when the lights go down and we get to take you somewhere different...'

Catherine Davis Desneiges is a Montréal based performer, film production designer and writer with a degree in fine arts and philosophy. She has collaborated with artists from Europe, Asia and the Americas on diverse projects in the visual arts, theatre and cinema. Also an accomplished painter, her work displays a strong aesthetic often revealing an underlying socio-political edge.