

Jesse "Chuy" Varela



Guillermo Belallaba on maracas, Cafe Cocomo, 2000 (Photo: Peter Maiden)



Gibby Ross y los Rumberos at the Glass Kat, San Francisco, January 13, 2004. L to R: Ramon Garcia, Patrick Morehead, Orlando Torriente, Chip Boas, Gibby Ross, Richie Veles (Photo: Peter Maiden)

THE FLYER AND MARACAS GENTLEMAN: For years in the Bay Area, Guillermo Belallaba has passed out flyers. With a smile on his face, he hands out a stack of glossy 4x6" cards announcing upcoming gigs. Once the music starts, Belallaba transforms into Mr. Maracas and stands on the side of the stage playing along to the band with his shakers. He never steps on stage unless asked but the cat can swing and sets a mean pulse.

To celebrate his birthday (Jan. 3, 1928), a party was organized in his honor by Diana, who hosts salsa dances at Café Cocomo and The Glas Kat. The celebration included the music of Gibby Ross y sus Rumberos.

"I'm glad to be alive," Belallaba declared. "I can hardly believe I'm 76 years old. Sometimes I have to look in the mirror and ask, is that really you?"

A former merchant marine, Belallaba was born and raised in New York City. He arrived in the Bay Area in the late 1940s. He experienced the phenomenon of The Palladium Ballroom as a kid in NYC so when he noticed the emerging mambo dance scene happening in Oakland and San Francisco, he saw an opportunity.

"I opened a couple of clubs back then and leased many simultaneously because so many people were interested in this music. It went well for about five to six years, then rock'n'roll came in. There wasn't much happening until salsa arrived. It took off here in the Bay Area, I could barely keep up with the demands for passing out flyers."

A longtime Oakland resident, Guillermo started distributing flyers in 1950 and has done it consistently in the Bay Area for the last 34 years. He has been at the openings (and closings) of most salsa clubs and for many years carried a ladder to nail flyers on to trees.

"I would like to see this music continue, to be able to have younger people come after us and embrace it as part of their heritage. I always wanted to be a professional musician but the opportunity never presented itself. So I took a different avenue by passing out flyers and letting people know what was happening. I still have a great zest for doing it."

Now living in Fairfield, CA, he owns 50 pairs of maracas and is not shy about it. "To me, playing maracas is even better than having a nice

scotch and soda. Sometimes I wonder if they possess me because I get such a nice feeling playing maracas. It's a thing I love to do."

GIBBY ROSS Y SUS RUMBEROS: It was a treat to hear Gibby Ross y sus Rumberos at the Glas Kat. Ross grew up on the bandstand playing with his father Joe and their band Alma del Barrio. Joe was a NYC native of Puerto Rican heritage who settled in Oakland where Gibby was born on Sept. 5, 1965.

He began playing percussion as a boy and his first major showcase was in New York where he was on the same bill as Celia Cruz. "El Niño Prodigio de Puerto Rico" is how he was introduced. Celia liked him and gave him a set of congas. Tito Puente heard him play at age six and began to mentor him with timbal-playing tips.

Ross is a strong but silent bandleader with a firm timbal hand. Setting up in the back of the band, with Richie Veles out front on congas and Eric Rangel at his side on bongó, he directs the band via percussion cues he throws in at particular times in the arrangements.

The other lead vocalist for the night was Orlando Torriente who sings with John Santos & Machete. On *Mirándote*, he delivered a solid performance with his booming, resonating tenor voice. As a vocalist, he has all the pieces in place: intonation, phrasing but most importantly, a wit that links together spontaneous stories in his improvisations.

A highlight of the night was Eddie Palmieri's *Un Puesto Vacante*. Ramón García handled the lead vocals, but allowed the instrumentalists to shine. It was Ross who exploded out the gate after the theme and chorus. Unlike Nicky Marrero's original solo on the Palmieri recording, Ross created a five-minute percussion mosaic that was an ode to drumming excellence.

Throughout, the two-trumpet and trombone horn section was impressive with its strong ensemble cohesion and top-notch solos. Patrick Morehead (piano) held down the montuno more than ably and Chip Boas (bass) displayed a solid tumbao.

Currently, Ross tours with Journey and works with Malo when his schedule permits.

¡Hasta la próxima! Paz. chuyvarela@aol.com ■