



Photos courtesy of Los Gatos

Written by Billy Wallace **Los Gatos, INSPIRE Program & More Indicate that Change is in the Air**

Things are changing in the Roanoke area music scene. You can see it everywhere: from the bands to the venues to the patrons, the Valley has become a virtual showcase of variety. Honestly, five years ago who would have thought that there would be a weekly hip-hop night at the East Main Street Café in Salem? Would anyone have predicted the diversity and talent of the budding underground metal scene? Were there any clubs allowing rappers, punk rockers, and whiskey-soaked country balladeers to share the same bill? In days not long past, music lovers had to travel to cities like Charlottesville and Asheville to get this kind of delicious diversity.

But the Roanoke area is stepping up and out, and even the Jefferson Center is getting in on the act. In addition to bringing in a ton of great national acts (Rodney Crowell on February 2 and David Sedaris on April 11 are two that I'm excited about), plans are in the works for a new series which will feature local, more underground acts. The **Roanoke Live series**, as it's tentatively called, will take place on the first Wednesday of every month, and will feature three or four similarly themed regional bands—one night might be a hip-hop showcase, for example; the next might feature local rock groups. They're planning to have a beer garden setup with beer and wine selections for the over 21 crowd, but the youngsters will be able to get in as well—another rarity in this town.

In another innovative move, the Jefferson Center has set up co-sponsorship of the series with Flat Five Recording Studios, and will pay the bands in part with free studio time.

Besides linking local musicians with a prominent venue and one of the area's best studios, the Jefferson Center is supporting the local scene in other important ways. A prime example is the **INSPIRE program** (Imaginatively eNgaging Students with Performance and Innovation in Roanoke-area Education). OK, so the acronym is a bit of a stretch, but there's nothing kitschy about the program itself. The goal is to promote multiculturalism through music and dance, and the Jefferson Center is bringing some of the region's most talented musicians into local schools to host classes and workshops.

An exciting addition to the INSPIRE program is the local Latin jazz group, **Los Gatos**. In many ways, Los Gatos epitomizes the changes I've mentioned—I mean, seriously, a *local* Latin jazz group? Members are Francisco Aranda (percussion, from Chile), Vladimir Espinosa (percussion/vocals, from Cuba), Jeff Hoffman (upright and electric bass, from Roanoke), Chris Magee (trumpet, from Harrisonburg), Lenny Marcus (piano/flute, from Louisiana), and David Sandoval (percussion/vocals, from Puerto Rico).

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Each human ingredient of this musical melting pot brings his own unique experiences and influences to the Los Gatos sound. Aranda explains the project as “a fusion of Latin music with jazz...[We're happy to] help the local music scene develop and show Roanokers what our roots are about and how all music is connected... We're all learning a lot from each other since we're all coming from different backgrounds.”

Los Gatos' music is an intriguing blend of traditional American jazz styles and Afro-Cuban rhythms that's both infectious and original. Mixing salsa, timba, cha cha cha, and mambos with the brass and jazz sounds of New Orleans, it's a blend that makes any music-lover—with or without previous exposure to Latin jazz—*need* to move.

The excitement of the band's attitude shines through in their music. It's obvious that the musicians enjoy what they've created and are eager to share it with the world. “It's a real treat to perform with Los Gatos,” says Magee. “[We're] like-minded musicians who love the music and play with musicality and fire. I hope everyone enjoys our CD as much as we enjoyed creating it.”

Jeff Hoffman adds, “I have been so fortunate to be able to perform and record with musicians of this caliber... I am astonished that these people coming together have met in the Appalachians to bring their culturally diverse backgrounds together to form such a band.”

This multiculturalism makes Los Gatos the perfect band to be featured in INSPIRE. Hoffman says of their involvement in the program, “Los Gatos is striving to promote this approach of showing how people of different backgrounds can be a wonderful cultural influence on one another.”

You don't have to be a student to experience Los Gatos. On Friday, January 19, join the band for their CD release party at the Jefferson Center, part of the center's **4th Annual Latin Dance Party**. The festivities take place after the 8 pm performance of **Plena Libre**, the Grammy-nominated musicians from Puerto Rico (check out Metropolis on page 9 for more on that performance). The annual party has been building in buzz and popularity since its inception, so get tickets while you can.

It's exciting to observe the musical landscape as it becomes more and more layered—mirroring the region's amazing geography, spectrum of people, and rich cultural history. And as fans, we should all be helping the scene's evolution. Get out to cheer on your hard-working, local bands. Keep an open and supportive mind about the different sounds that make up the melting pot we call home. Let's give nearby music cities like Asheville and Charlottesville a run for their money.

*For more information on the January 19 events—both the Plena Libre concert and the Latin Dance Party/Los Gatos CD release party that follows it—visit [www.jeffcenter.org](http://www.jeffcenter.org) or call 540.345.2550 or 866.345.2550 for tickets. Prices for Plena Libre vary depending on seat location; tickets for the Latin Dance Party/Los Gatos CD release party are \$15 or \$10 for those that attended the Plena Libre show. To learn more about Los Gatos and hear samples of their music, visit [www.losgatos.cc](http://www.losgatos.cc). To learn more about Plena Libre, visit [www.plenalibre.com](http://www.plenalibre.com).*