

The Record

Los Hombres Calientes

by John Radanovich

When percussionist Bill Summers moved from California to New Orleans in 1992, he did more than simply hire a moving van: he changed his life significantly. Sick of L.A. excess, he craved the Crescent City's real riches: a thriving indigenous musical culture: "I took a ridiculously huge pay cut, but I couldn't take L.A. anymore." Summers never foresaw creating a band called Los Hombres Calientes, and he certainly never dreamed of its current success.

Summers grew up in Detroit but both his parents came from Ascension Parish, just up the Mississippi from New Orleans. They were descendants of slaves from the Belle Helene plantation, and Summers has had a lifelong dream of establishing his Multi-Ethnic Institute of Arts on land that belonged to his family—land that formerly was part of the plantation. He envisions his institute as a place for the study of music and other arts.

In New Orleans Summers sought a jazz comeback. But for many fans, Summers had already earned a place in the music pantheon by his percussion work on Herbie Hancock's "Headhunters," the greatest selling jazz record in history. He worked with Quincy Jones, Miles Davis, Michael Jackson, The Wailers, Sting, Sarah Vaughan and many others, but nothing gave him as much pleasure as does his current spot leading Los Hombres Calientes. "Of my 25 years in the business, nothing comes close to the feeling of this band."

Summers' long relationship to the intricacies of Afro-Cuban sacred drumming is a deep one: "Few people understand the science of this music. It's on the same level as all the classical composers." His drums and hands have been baptized for ritual playing of the hundreds of rhythms and songs used in Santeria rites. "I play bata. I suppose that's voodoo drumming but that's what makes me tick."

The group plays acoustic Afro-Cuban jazz with surprising forays into reggae, samba, brass marching band material, and straight-ahead jazz. They don't dabble in these side forms, they dominate them. It's best to think of them as jazz experts playing Afro-Caribbean music.

The band was conceived by Summers, along with drummer Jason Marsalis and trumpeter Irvin Mayfield. The name was a joke, hurriedly thought up by Mayfield for their first appearance at Snug Harbor in New Orleans. "We didn't know if we'd ever play another gig. But the buzz from that was so incredible that it was stupid," Summers says.

The nine-plus member group has since become the darling of jazz critics and are wildly popular in their live shows. Their eponymous debut on the New Orleans Basin Street label was the best-selling record at the 1999 New Orleans Jazz Festival. It and successive records have won countless critic polls, a Billboard top latin jazz album award. Their most recent third CD, "Vol. 3: New Congo Square," was nominated for a Grammy in 2002 and is a whopping 79 minutes long. It has famous guests from Cuban, Jamaican, and jazz genres. The record is named after the spot where New Orleans

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slaves gathered on Sundays for drumming sessions, a spot regarded as the specific birthplace of jazz rhythms.

Summers sees some part of his success as vindication. "You cannot know how good it felt to be back there in L.A. the other day, at the Grammys. When I was with Herbie I would hear, 'man, that was the best show I ever saw in my **life**.' But with Los Hombres, consistently in different cities, people come up and say, 'you changed my life.' Now that's a compliment."