

Melena to debut new material on Brownsville stage

BY SARAH WILLIAMS
THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

Cuban percussionist Melena has traveled the world touring with pop luminaries like Macy Gray, Julio Iglesias and Chayanne. This Saturday, she'll get to perform on the same stage as one of her favorite musicians, Giovanni Hidalgo, at the ninth annual Brownsville Latin Jazz Festival's Night at the Copa.

"Giovanni Hidalgo is a big inspiration for all percussionists. It's a dream come true and a blessing to be able to open for him. That is something I feel very fortunate about," Melena said from her home in Los Angeles.

Like Hidalgo, Melena's percussion style is predominantly Afro Cuban, but she infuses that classic sound with elements of pop, R&B, hip-hop and other genres

"I want it to not just be Latin jazz, but also have more of a world wide influence," she said about her all inclusive style.

On Saturday, Melena and her Afro Cuban band will debut new material for an album she plans to record after the festival.

"I'll be able to see the reaction of the people for the first time. This is the first time I'll be performing with my band outside of Los Angeles, so it's a great opportunity for me," she said.

Melena said she hopes her music will inspire her Brownsville audience.

"Music is very healing. As a performer, music is something we can give to people; it's something they may need that they don't get in their life. I hope it makes them happy," she said.

She plans to open her set with 'Ellegua,' a song about the guardian angel of Cuba.

"We dedicated the first song in his honor. It starts out very lively, very syncopated, very percussive and exciting," she said. "I hope that the audience will get excited about the music and get a good feeling from it," she said.

Melena counts an on stage performance with Stevie Wonder as one of the most exciting times in her life.



"The fact that I was able to share the stage with him was an incredible experience that can't really explain in words. I stood very close to him on the stage and I was looking at him thinking, 'I can't believe I have the chance to be here,'" she said.

Melena has also toured Europe and Australia with Macy Gray. She recorded a PBS Special with John Tesh on his "One World" tour and traveled all over South America and Spain with Latin Pop artist Chayanne.

She has made many trips to her home country Cuba to study with legendary percussionists Mario Jauregui, Regino Jimenez and Lozaro Ros.

I also did a clinic in Puerto Rico dedicated to women in percussion. It felt like going home to Cuba; it was a very memorable experience"

Melena said she would tour with her band once she finishes her next album. On Saturday she hopes to invite Hidalgo to record with her but her first priority is enjoying the crowd's response to her new songs.