

Some like it *picante*

Juanita Newland Ulloa sings tunes with Latin flavor

By Philip Elwood
EXAMINER MUSIC CRITIC

JUANITA Newland Ulloa calls her attractive cabaret show, on stage this week at the Plush Room, "Mexican Romantic Music and Contemporary Mariachi," which really doesn't explain very much of what she and the Picante Ensemble (her accompanying quintet) are up to.

The program's 15 selections are all written by women, mostly (like "What A Difference A Day Makes") by Maria Grever, some such as "Besame Mucho" by Consuelo Velasquez; a couple by Ulloa herself (including a beauty, "Mariposa") and one, "Dos Gardenias," which became a 1998 hit when recorded by Ibrahim Ferrer and Omara Portuondo of Buena Vista Social Club fame, by Cuban pianist of the 1930s, Isolina Carrillo.

"Dos Gardenias" is but one example of crossover music included in Ulloa's wonderfully diverse collection of material. Most of the songs are love ballads, sweet and bittersweet, and require highly-charged, emotional rendering as well as a sharp soprano voice with plenty of staying power. Ulloa has both.

"Promise Me" ("Jurame"), Grever's first hit, in 1928, says, "Look at me, Kiss me, Love Me until it drives you crazy; "Besame Mucho" ("Kiss me lots") is sung in duet by Ulloa and violist Ginny Morgan, with the magnificent trumpeter Frank Davis triple-tonguing all over the upper-register in accompaniment.

Muted, then open-horn, Davis plays particularly well on "Mala-guena Salerosa" — a most impressive rendition — and on "Lamento Gitano," a Gypsy lament.



Juanita Newland Ulloa features works of female songwriters.

STYLE

Mediterranean trumpet stylings, as heard on 80- to 90-year-old recordings of Spanish, Italian, Mexican and Cuban bands, always take the high road and feature astonishing embouchure placement and control. Davis is a fine trumpeter and occasional trombonist.

On Wednesday night, Ulloa's trumpeter will be Marvin McFadden of the Santana band.

The sorts of romantic ballads heard here were particularly popular in pre-World War II years in most western nations; they were composed urban dance music, not street (folk, or vernacular) music.

When Ulloa sings Grever's "What A Difference a Day Makes," for instance, she begins in Spanish with only bassist Saul Sierra and Picante Ensemble leader, guitarist Jorge Liceaga, backing her with a cha-cha rhythm; following those choruses, with the full ensemble eventually playing, the rhythm shifts to a 4/4 fox trot dance beat, she sings in English and the backup has a swing-combo sound.

Interesting, when one realizes that Dinah Washington's version of the song, titled "What A Difference a Day *Made*" was close to being a rhythm-and-blues number, and places the song in the past tense.

Another of Ulloa's compositions, the 1998 International Latin American Song Festival winner, "Solo Nos Queda Hoy" ("We have only today") was placed in the ranchera/mariachi category, whereas Grever's "Volvere" ("I'll Return") is a pure, 32-bar, Hit Parade composition.

Ulloa plays her own piano accompaniment on "Mariposa," and on the rousing "Tu, tu y tu," Kit Eakle gets in some hot fiddle choruses.

The Picante Ensemble plays a couple of polkas during the show - one, "The Wet Vulture," has a bit of early New Orleans brass band sounds in it.

Juanita Newland Ulloa and the Picante Ensemble play through Saturday at 8 p.m., with a Sunday performance at 3 p.m. (415) 885-2800.

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