

CALIFORNIAN: Murrieta's Mondragon comes to Jazz at The Merc

By Cam Miller - For The Californian | Wednesday, March 25, 2009 8:21 PM PDT

Diego Mondragon darn near missed his calling, and if he had, the jazz scene would have been poorer for it.

Mondragon is a Murrieta jazz violinist, one who's skilled enough to have six gigs in local venues in the month of March alone. An enviable record indeed, in good times or bad, and particularly remarkable in view of today's flimsy economy.

Concert No. 6 in that run of local jazz dates comes up tonight when the classically trained violinist appears with his band at The Merc, that intimate bandbox of a nightspot in Old Town Temecula. But that he's playing there, or anywhere, for that matter is a minor miracle. He gave up playing the violin altogether when he was a teen as the result of an ongoing dispute with his father over his son's dedication to becoming a proficient violinist.

"I began playing a violin when I was 3 and had given my first concert when I was 10. They called me a child prodigy and I guess I was," said Mondragon, a jazz artist by night but a school psychologist by day at Chaparral High School where his daughter is a senior.

However, things began to unravel for Mondragon when his father began to push him, and at age 15, Diego left home after rejecting a scholarship to the Royal British Conservancy.

"You bet I regret I didn't take that scholarship offer; it might have changed my whole life," he said. "I feel as though I kicked away a chance to stay in Europe and perform in a symphony orchestra. But you make decisions and then live with them."

That he ever played a violin again was sort of a fluke. He hadn't yet patched up his differences with his father, with whom he was on the outs for 14 years before reconciling and performing with him in the Orchestra de Baja, California. Mondragon had enlisted in the Marine Corps with the idea of being a lifer. But after eight years in the corps and being elevated to the rank of a helicopter crew chief, Mondragon began toying with the idea of resuming his interest in a violin.

"I never thought I would, so it was hardly part of any master plan," he said. "And I'd been away from the instrument so long, it was almost starting all over when I finally did start playing again."

Moreover, he'd never played a note of jazz until he moved to San Diego to obtain a degree in string pedagogy and then a master's at San Diego State University. He had already earned a BA in aviation management while in the Marine Corps.

At the same time, he was lured to jazz by the sounds of electric violinist Jean-Luc Ponty.

"In no time I had formed my own band (Jazz Vazz)," said Mondragon. "Even though I'd never played a lick of jazz until I heard Luc Ponty. Sort of a learn as you earn situation. And the more I listened to other jazz violinists like Stephane Grappelli, Stuff Smith and Joe Venuti, the more I appreciated what playing string jazz is all about."

Today, Mondragon plays electric violin and acoustic electric violin, though the latter more often.

"It has a sweeter sound, rounder, more like the instrument I grew up with," he said.

The soft-spoken Mondragon is relatively satisfied with the way his career in music has progressed, but he also feels it needs to be given a shot in the arm. And he's hopeful a new CD may be the answer. The disc, "Corazon de Mondragon" ---- "Heart of Mondragon" ---- will be issued April 29 at a CD release party at the South Coast Winery.

"This will be my second CD, but I feel closer to my new one because I also wrote all the songs," Mondragon said. "My first CD was a collection of Christmas songs, which made it marketable for a month and that's about it. I did sell every last one of them, but I think the new album be more appealing because there's no seasonal tie-in."

Mondragon produced the album himself. Asked to describe the process, Diego had one word, "Wow!" And then came the explanation.

"Choosing the material, arrangements, rehearsals, making sure all the band members are available at the same time, on and on and on. It seemed like the details were never-ending, but now that's it's ready to go, all the work was worth it," he said.

Mondragon said he'll be featuring some of the music from his new at The Merc.

"It'll be a pretty eclectic tune list ---- straight-ahead jazz, Latin, Gypsy, flamenco ---- a good chance to hear a variety of genres," he said.

As a rule top-of-the-bill artists performing at The Merc are accompanied by no more than two or three musicians, but Mondragon is an exception. He'll be using four sidemen, including well-known bassist Rob Thorsen, drummer Enrique Platas and percussionists Gerardo Nuno and Danny Javier. However, Mondragon will break up the mini-army of musicians into smaller groups and will be accompanied by the entire cast "maybe once, maybe twice."

Although Merc producer Sherry Williams may or may not sing briefly with Mondragon tonight, the violinist and vocalist are ticketed to perform together May 7 with ensembles from Great Oak and Chaparral high schools at the Old Town Temecula Community Theater in a fundraiser for both schools.

"Any time you get a chance to work with Sherry, you go for it," Mondragon said. "She's a wonderful singer and a wonderful person."

Jazz at The Merc

When: 7:30 p.m. March 26

Where: Old Town Temecula Community Theater, 42051 Main St., Temecula