



LATIN ROCKERS Momotombo SF, a Bay Area band with members from Santana and Malo, bring the sounds of the era to life at Hood Mountain's Friday show on July 28. They'll play the Raven Theater audience on Aug. 5. (Photo by Christian Kallen)

A&E

Momotombo Erupts on the Music Scene

By: **CHRISTIAN KALLEN** 📅 August 4, 2023

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Taking the stage this weekend at the Raven Theater, between concerts by a Minnesota guitarist (Leo Kottke) and a big-ticket tribute band (for Chicago), comes Momotombo SF, an oddly named combo with little name recognition but a growing following. The 10-piece band, which proudly advertises its lineage in two Chicano rock bands of the 1970s, Santana and Malo, will play in Healdsburg on Saturday, Aug. 5.

The band has only had a handful of appearances in the North Bay, but then again they only formed in 2018, and stopped playing altogether during two years of the pandemic. Now they're slowly building up their schedule, and their fan base is expanding with every concert.

Momotombo played last week for the summer's final "Fridays at the Hood" show (formerly known as Funky Fridays), and if the open-air venue off Pythian Road near Oakmont had a roof, they would have blown it off.

Perhaps that's appropriate. The band is named for a volcano in Nicaragua, which in an explosive eruption in 1606 buried the city of Leon. The mountain is still smoldering on the shores of Lago de Managua, along with a half dozen other active volcanoes in the Central American country.

It's also the title of the lead song on the group Malo's second album – titled appropriately "Malo Dos" – co-written by one of the band members, Pablo Tellaz, who came from Nicaragua.

"It's a pretty powerful name," said Leo Rosales, the timbales player and vocalist who provides the focal point for the band in concert. "So we're trying to live up to the name."

Other band members have similar roots in the wider Spanish-speaking world: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and of course Mexico. Notably, that includes the Santana family, which came to the Bay Area from Jalisco, Mexico.

The band Santana had their introduction to the public in the film *Woodstock*, which brought their signature blend of psychedelic Latin blues to the world's attention, making a star of Carlos Santana. It also showed the wide range of music coming out of San Francisco – not just the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, but a more multicultural scene as well.

With the band Santana's success, Carlos' younger brother, Jorge Santana, was motivated to form his own band, with a big difference: horns.



MALO MAN Leo Rosales at the timbales was an early member of Malo in the 1970s, now he's coordinating the revival of the era's 'Chicano rock' sounds with Momotombo. SF. They play the Raven on Aug. 5. (Photo by Christian Kallen)

Rosales, who guides the band Mototombo from the stage and in their bookings, recalled the origin of Mala. "When Carlos' brother, Jorge, started the group Malo, he started a different aspect of Latin Rock music. Instead of just having percussion and keyboard and guitar and bass and a drummer, he brought in the horn section."

Horns were getting big back then – with Michael Bloomfield's American Flag, Blood Sweat and Tears and eventually Chicago. The horns in Chicano rock got there organically, from popular Afro-Cuban bands like Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Mongo Santamaria and the like. The trumpet is basic, perhaps two; the trombone is common, the saxophone occasional.

When combined with the polyrhythmic patterns laid down by multiple percussion instruments – timbales, congas, maracas, claves, güiros and even cowbells – the music is made to dance to. Other bands emulated the sound, and what became called Chicano rock was soon a viable genre, populated by Azteca (which included Coke Escovedo and his brother, Pete Escovedo) and War (led by Lonnie Jordan), as well as Malo.

Their first album came out in 1971, and contained a hit: "Suavecito," an infectious number written by members of the band.

"Suavecito" percolated its way up the charts into the Top 20, its mid tempo rhythm decorated by bells, silver guitar, golden horns and the languid lyric, "Never – I never met a girl like you in my life..." The song was sung on the album by co-writer Richard Bean.

But when the band appeared on *American Bandstand*, it was 18-year-old timbales player Leo Rosales who became identified with the song.

"If truth be told, I lip-synched it," said Rosales. "Back in those days on *American Bandstand*, everything was overdubbed or lip-synched; nobody played live music on that program. It's still that way to some extent with some programs, but it was my face on the show that was viewed by millions and millions of people."

He really did sing it on other programs, as he did last week at Hood Mountain from the Levi Lloyd stage. Momotombo played it as the sun was setting and the dance area was filled with swaying couples, whispering "Suavecito!" to each other.

Rosales introduced it that night as "the unofficial Mexican national anthem," though he later explained, "People that are of Mexican descent have really loved that song for so many years. Being that it came out of San Francisco, a lot of people here, whether of Mexican descent or from Nicaragua, Cuba, South America, Central America, they love that song. For some reason, Chicanos and Mexican culture have really embraced that tune."

Rosales added, "And I know that a lot of low-riders name their cars Suavecito."



MOMOTOMBO From left, Gabriel Manzo (guitar), Leo Rosales (timbales), Ben Kobler (drums), Adrian Areas (congas), Dave Margen (bass), John Marin (guira and vocals). Horn players Bill Ortiz, Tom Bertetta and Ruben Sandoval not shown. (Photo by Christian Kallen)

A durable iteration of Malo played until fairly recently under vocalist Arcelio Garcia and guitarist Jorge Santana, but in 2020 both men died within months of each other. Though Jorge Santana was never officially a member of Momotombo, Rosales said he played with them frequently.

"Jorge was very, very proud to play with us," said Rosales. "And I think he felt like he was part of the band. And I told him always that he was."

But Momotombo is not Malo, or Santana, or a cover band. Its current 10-man lineup is about equally divided between former members of Malo and Santana, and a few seasoned Chicano rock veterans to round out the performing group.

As Jim Corbett, Sebastopol's Mr. Music, said when introducing the band for its second set at Hood Mountain last week, "Not only is it taking us back to Malo and Santana days, but it's right here, right now."

Momotombo SF will play two sets at the Raven Theater on Saturday, Aug. 5, at 7:30pm. General admission is \$25. The theater will remove the stage extension so there will be more room for dancing.