

UNITY: THE LATIN TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL JACKSON

Unity: The Latin Tribute To Michael Jackson is a testament to the power of music and one man's indomitable spirit. The passion project of Peruvian-born, Miami-raised producer/multi-instrumentalist/arranger Tony Succar, *Unity* features more than 100 musicians, such Latin superstars as Tito Nieves, Jon Secada and Obie Bermúdez, and the mixing magic of Jackson's legendary engineer Bruce Swedien in the first ever Latin album salute to The King of Pop.

Fueled by his relentless commitment, quiet determination and passionate faith in the loving message behind much of Jackson's music, Succar has spent the last four years carefully creating *Unity: The Latin Tribute To Michael Jackson*. He overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles, turning each roadblock into a stepping stone to take the project to new heights. In the process, he married Jackson's timeless pop and R&B tunes, such as "Thriller," "Billie Jean," and "I Want You Back," to his glorious salsa and tropical rhythms, creating innovative, vibrant arrangements that snap to life with exhilarating energy.

"American funk, soul, jazz—all those styles that were influencing Michael—were inspired from African music," Succar says. "Same with Afro-Peruvian music, Cuban music. These songs were meant to be. Their original flavor lends itself to these Latin rhythms."

Succar, 28, grew up listening to his parents play Jackson's music, and by 13 had begun his own music career. He started on piano and segued to percussion, graduating with a degree in jazz performance at Florida International University in 2008. But it wasn't until after the superstar's untimely passing in 2009 that Succar, who earned his Master's in jazz performance from FIU in 2010, took a deep dive into the music and the man. "That's when I became a fanatic, memorizing all his lyrics," he says. "He was an amazing singer. I started analyzing every single detail."

As Succar pored through Jackson's material, revisiting songs like "Man In the Mirror," "Earth Song" and "They Don't Care About Us"—all of which are reimagined on *Unity*—he came to a realization: "Michael wasn't only a

musician, he was a spiritual person. He was speaking to people's hearts through his music. He was a true role model and leader, not only in the music industry, but life in general," he says.

Concurrent with his discovery, Succar arranged a salsa-infused version of "Thriller" for a Halloween party at Miami's legendary, now closed Van Dyke Cafe. The reaction was so immediate and overwhelmingly positive to the performance of this new arrangement, that Succar recorded a version in his bedroom with his band, posted it online and gave away copies. DJs started playing the track and Succar began getting requests from around the world for a full album of Latin-flavored Jackson songs. "That sparked it," Succar says. "I was such a fan. I felt like I had to do something."

He launched a Kickstarter campaign and raised more than \$10,000, which allowed him to record basic tracks and the idea and harmonious ideal of *Unity* was born. "The one thing that stood out in Michael's music was love. The reality was unity," he says. "I also wanted the title to stand for something: a real marriage between Latin roots and American pop culture, and to help keep Michael's legacy alive."

Part of keeping Jackson's legacy alive meant incorporating elements of the original production in each of his fresh renditions for *Unity*. "Even the horn lines, I would transcribe them from Quincy Jones' productions and then apply them to the arrangement in a different way," Succar says. "The essence of every song was respected. I gave it my best to create this very thin line between what Michael did with his production and what I brought to the project."

As Succar proceeded, an astounding number of coincidences buoyed the project. Succar's initial plan was to record the album with one vocalist, soulful Broadway veteran Kevin Ceballo, but as Succar finalized the arrangements, the idea of a compilation album came to him. The first artist he reached out to was legendary salsa singer Nieves. He heard nothing back for months. Then, one day in the studio someone suggested Nieves for "I Want You Back." Succar explained he'd had no success contacting Nieves. It turned out a studio visitor knew Nieves, called his manager, sent Nieves an MP3, and, within 10 minutes, Nieves was on the phone asking when he should come in to record his vocals.

Nieves became the project's godfather, bringing in other Latin stars, such as India and Jean Rodriguez. "If it weren't for Tito, I would never have been able to develop this into what it is," Succar says. "He really opened the doors for me." Nieves even brought in his son, Tito Nieves Jr., to duet on the album closer, an emotional take on "You Are Not Alone."

As the project progressed, Succar sought out Secada, but once again, was running into walls. He had switched to a different studio and the recording engineer just happened to have worked with Secada, and upon hearing Succar's story, gave Succar the singer's direct email. Secada immediately replied that he wanted to record "Human Nature," his favorite Jackson track.

But there was more to come. Succar contacted Swedien about mixing some tracks, but failed to get a yes after more than a year's effort. He met his engineer Nick Valentin through a mutual friend, who piped up that he'd been Swedien's assistant. He volunteered to send Swedien some music, and next thing Succar knew, he's sitting beside his hero at Swedien's ranch as Swedien mixed "Earth Song" and "Smooth Criminal." "He was the cherry on top," Succar says. "When we were mixing, he would put up the original Michael songs and put on our remixes to compare and contrast. He mixed the tracks on the same Harrison 32C model console he mixed 'Thriller' on."

The groundbreaking album, a joint project between Universal Music Classics, Universal Music Latin Entertainment and Universal Music Mexico, embodies Jackson's spirit of harmony and bringing diverse cultures together through music.

Where there once was nothing but a dream, Succar now sees unlimited possibilities. Not only will there be a tour to support *Unity: The Latin Tribute to Michael Jackson*, but he is considering future Unity projects that could salute the music of other timeless artists, such as the Beatles or the Bee Gees, filtered through a Latin musical lens. "Unity is going to become a movement," he says. And given how far Succar's come already, who could possibly doubt him?

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