

Cut loose at LEAF

Arts festival shakes the leaves off the trees

by Melanie McGee

It's no secret that the Lake Eden Arts Festival puts on a dandy show. The weekend gala, held twice a year in Black Mountain, regularly features a lineup of world-renowned musical luminaries. This fall is no different, with such artists as Ricardo Lemvo and his band Makina Loca, Pinetop Perkins (playing with the Steady Rollin' Bob Margolin Band) and Geno Delafosse all scheduled to perform. But the festival, say organizers, adds up to more than just the sum of these legendary parts. With a holistic twist to its proceedings, LEAF promises not just to grab you by the ears, but to feed your soul, to boot.

"Our lives are so crazy on a daily basis, with no positive stimulus, that we try to create a week where people can leave their worries behind and totally let loose," explains festival Director Jennifer Pickering, who, along with co-director Carol Mallet and a host of volunteers, works hard year-round to book top talent and keep LEAF young.

To some, that translates into nonstop enjoyment of LEAF's "full smorgasboard of entertainment." Others may be sated with a simple hike, or a canoe ride on Camp Rockmont's small lake. But the festival, says Pickering, also has a contemplative side. Some 40 healing-arts workshops will be offered, including lessons in reiki, yoga, meditation, tarot interpretation and homeopathy. "Almost all of our musical performers conduct at least one workshop," notes Pickering.

And then there's that *other* form of psychic joy – the one that comes from shaking your bootie to great music. LEAF provides plenty of opportunities for that, too. As Pickering herself describes it, "We have a dance floor that holds 500 people, and the sight of all of those people dancing together is really quite stirring."

Ricardo Lemvo and Makina Loca

"Whether you are a dancer or not, you will dance. You have no choice."

Many of Ricardo Lemvo's sentences erupt into a rich bass-drum laugh, but not this simple declaration of faith. The singer heads up Makina Loca (Spanish for "crazy machine"), a nine-member band that has taken the international scene by storm. After only a few years on the L.A. club circuit, Makina Loca is now carrying its animated blend of Congolese and Cuban rhythms around the globe.

"What sets our band apart is that we are not [exclusively] an African or salsa band, but fall somewhere in between," says Lemvo. "My influences come from Cuba and the Congo. I listen to many kinds of singers, from Nat "King" Cole to the Mexican singer Javier Solis. My music is a direct result of the music I listened to growing up, and from that, I was able to create my own sound."

Lemvo was born in Kinshasha, a city in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). Deeply affected by such bands as Kalle's African Jazz – a major force in the "re-Africanizing" of the Latin sounds played by black musicians in Central and South America – Lemvo was an avid music fan from early on. He moved to Los Angeles at 15 to go to school. After earning a political-science degree and becoming proficient in five languages, he briefly flirted with the idea of a career in law. But Lemvo chose to remain true to his first love, music – and, in 1990, Makina Loca was born.

On the group's latest release, *Mambo YoYo* (Putumayo World Music, 1998), Lemvo sings in Spanish, as well as in the African dialects Kikongo and Lingala. But you don't need to know the meanings of the words, the singer insists, as long as you feel the emotions behind them.

"People who do not understand the language will still 'get' the music," Lemvo maintains. "You don't have to speak the language to understand. People from all over the world love this music: They all get the message."

That said, however, Lemvo still makes it a policy to explain the songs to audiences before performing them.

The musicians in Makina Loca come from a wide variety of musical and cultural backgrounds, but all have proven quick studies, the singer reports.

"A lot of the guys in the band were just learning about the two genres that we perform when they joined the band, but they have still contributed immensely to our sound," says Lemvo. "They brought in their own experiences to what we are trying to do. Our drummer played some African, but no Cuban; our bass player is from Holland and had never played African or Cuban music before – he's come a long way."

Lemvo is also proud of the cross-generational and multiethnic crowd the band attracts.

"When you come to our show, you'll find everyone there," he predicts. And, what's more, they'll be dancing.

"Believe me," booms the singer, "they will not sit still for long."

Pinetop Perkins

"I tell people I was born in the honey," reveals piano legend Pinetop Perkins, during a recent phone interview from his Chicago home. Geographically speaking, that is. The 85-year-old bluesman's roots lie deep in the Honey Island area of the Mississippi Delta bottoms, near Jackson.

"I tell you, I got into this business to play with different bands. ... I didn't go to school that much, but I knew about playing music," says Perkins, his words glossed with the measured patience of one who's been asked to tell his story many times.

And play Perkins did. In the '30s and '40s, he toured with harmonica great Sonny Boy Williamson. In the '70s, Perkins was a fixture in the Muddy Waters band. Today, he's nothing less than an elder statesman of blues.

But it took this musical veteran more than six decades to earn headliner status. The first step came in 1980, when Perkins joined other former members of the Muddy Waters band to create the Legendary Blues Band. Two records later, Perkins ventured even farther into the spotlight – this time, holding it alone.

"I turned my band loose and told them, 'You keep the band, I'll be the legend,'" recalls Perkins with a laugh. His recent Grammy will testify that this wasn't just a bluesman's bravado. But despite the success of his solo career, Perkins maintains that he's never been completely comfortable playing alone; "I always feel better behind a guitar and drums."

But – as *Portrait of a Delta Bluesman* (Omega, 1993) demonstrates – even by his lonesome, Perkins is a showstopper. On the album, Perkins' unaccompanied playing is interspersed with anecdotes from a lifetime spent studying the blues.

On his most recent release, *Born in the Delta* (Telarc Blues, 1997), a gem of classic honky-tonk blues, Perkins is joined by some longtime musical cohorts. And, to support the release, Perkins once again finds himself on the circuit – a schedule the pianist can't help but view with mixed emotions.

"They try to keep the old man going, but I'm getting too old. I'd like to sit down and rest," he says, "But I still turn it loose, once in a while. Give me some money, and I'll try to do something."

The LEAF scoop

Now in its seventh year, the LEAF festival runs Friday through Saturday, Oct. 16-18, at Camp Rockmont in Black Mountain. The festivities start at 5 p.m. on Friday and run through 4 p.m. on Sunday.

This year's performers include: Grammy Award-winning, Delta-blues veteran **Pinetop Perkins** and the **Steady Rollin' Bob Margolin Band** (Friday, 9:30 p.m.); multilingual rhumba maestros **Ricardo Lemvo and Makina Loca** (Saturday, 8:30 p.m. and Sunday, 2:30 p.m.); fiery Creole zydeco traditionalists **Geno Delafosse** and **French Rockin' Boogie** (Saturday, 11 p.m.); klezmer pioneers **Henry Sapoznik** and **Freylekh! Freylekh!** (Friday, 6 p.m. and 9 p.m.; Saturday, 12:45 p.m. and 6 p.m.; and Sunday, 1 p.m.).

And then there's **Wild Asparagus, Dry Branch Fire Squad, The Blue Rags, Billy Jonas and the Bucket Brigade, Roger Howell and the Carolina Old Timers, the Atomic City Rhythm Rascals, Loafers' Glory Northwest Morris Dancers, Red Herring Puppets, Nedy Arevalo, Lawrence Dillingham and John Lunsford with Carol Mallett, Walter Parks, the Asheville Suzuki Group, Valorie, the Bob Willoughby Trio, Rosario Carelli, Debra and**

Joe Roberts, Eliot Zaiken, Don Pedi, George Marshall, Beverly Smith and Rodney Sutton.

Activities include tai chi, yoga, massage, Rolfing, meditation, herb walks, arts and crafts, storytelling, pony rides, poetry and much more.

Tickets: Day passes on Friday or Sunday are \$18 dollars for adults, \$13 for youth Saturday passes are \$25 for adults, \$20 for kids. Passes for Saturday night only (after 6 p.m.) are \$20 for adults, \$15 for youth. Day passes are valid from 9 a.m.-2 a.m. Special LEAF community passes for Buncombe County residents **What??**, with no overnight stay, are \$35 for adults, \$25 for youth.

To get to Camp Rockmont...

From the west: Take I-40 to exit 59 (Swannanoa), go left from the exit, right at the light onto U.S. 70; left at the next light, cross the bridge, right at the stop sign; go one mile to light, then left onto Lake Eden Road.

From the east: Take I-40 to exit 65 (Black Mountain), go straight through town (2.5 miles); turn right at the light onto Blue Ridge Road (by the Ice Service store), then immediately left (at the blinking yellow light); go 1.6 miles to second light, right on Lake Eden Road, continue 1.5 miles to main gate., call (828) 686-8742 or check out www.theLEAF.com.