

A hot ticket

The Firewalkers serve up smoldering throwback R&B

By Melissa Walsh

The final act of Detroit's 2019 Erotic Poetry and Music Festival Feb. 23 escorted patrons back in time to another era of musical sizzle.

It was the debut performance of rock band the Firewalkers, featuring Laura Mendoza, who blasted steamy rich vocals from a petite frame dolled up in a red 1940s-era gown.

"I was super nervous that first show," says Mendoza.

Mendoza concealed that nervousness onstage, and the Firewalkers treated the audience to a smooth performance of throwback R&B and soul, revealing the history and heart of America's yesteryear sounds.

"She's so talented; she's just amazing," says Detroit music promoter Stirling, a close friend of Mendoza's who supported her backstage that night. "She's the real deal. She can read music. She can play music. She can play multiple instruments.... She's performing in multiple genres.... She's a badass, a real firecracker."

Mendoza, known in Detroit's music scene as a bass guitar-swinging rocker, and the Firewalkers have impressed with their five performances so far — as evidenced by the local musicians sprinkled in the audiences.

Rudy Varner on stand-up bass and Loney Charles on drums are a package rhythm section that have played rockabilly and R&B more than 25 years, starting with the Swingin' Demons, then Jack Scott, and several other bands.

Firewalkers guitarist David James, described by Varner as "a young guy who can play any style," was discovered via Craigslist.

Though each member performs with other bands, "the Firewalkers is our first priority," says Varner. The group continues to rehearse hard and is adding originals to its playlist.

At a July 11 standing-room-only Whitney Garden Party show, the Firewalkers appear anchored in their style with Mendoza as their star, opening with Big Mama Thornton's original arrangement of "Hound Dog."

"I liked the fact that they're very old school, very vintage," Lisa Browne of Waterford says during the Whitney

show. She was drawn to the band after enjoying their "artsy and eclectic" performance opening for the Corktown Popes at Ferndale's Loving Touch June 6.

"(Mendoza) was wearing a long bright emerald dress," says Browne. "Her voice was just amazing. She's just got a rich, deep voice. It seems it's some trained and some just natural."

Mendoza began training her voice as a child in her West Carrollton, Ohio, school choir.

"She was in all her high school plays," says Mendoza's dad, Jay Nilsson.

"At Midway Speedway in Ohio (for an Indy car race), she was 12-years old and wanted to stay in the karaoke tent all night. She just wanted to sing."

In 2000, Mendoza moved to Chile — from where her mother had immigrated — and earned a degree at Santiago's Instituto Profesional Projazz. She returned to the United States in 2007 to pursue her career.

Mendoza's mother, who died from cancer in 2014, was also a petite, strong woman. She left a deep influence on Mendoza's character.

"My mom was always tough," she says. "So I had a really strong example of a tough woman."

In addition to contributing some original songs to the band's playlist, such as "Don't Shut Me Out" and "Please, Please Baby," Mendoza pays tribute to her Latin American heritage with 1940s afro-Cuban and Mexican ballads, singing in Spanish while strumming an acoustic guitar.

"The boys had a little bit of trouble kind of grasping the whole Latin thing," she says, adding that she assured them, "It's a lot more basic than you think. Don't overcomplicate yourself with it."

Mendoza says James, who "has a strong relationship with his instrument," adopted the genre's embellishments and solos well.

James, who studied jazz at Chicago's Columbia College and plays multiple

instruments, finds a "sweet escapism" in the Firecrackers' repertoire.

"I definitely dig the retro vibe, the old rhythm and blues and soul," he says. "There's some jazzy stuff in there, as well. It's very fun and there's something about just the way they capture that essence like I'm going back in time."

"This thing does appear to be a niche, but it's really a broad range," says Stirling.

Elaborating on Mendoza's charm, he adds, "She could just stand there and sing and be a B+, but she does it all and is an A+."

The Firewalkers were born out of the discovery of Medoza's vocal talent

cover songs at this point. And that will change. It is changing. We're writing."

"Laura's coming from a background of rock 'n' roll, and hard rock, and rock," says Charles. "And we're coming from a background of rockabilly, R&B, jump blues, swing. We're kind of bringing our music and influences, and me being the maniac record collector, I'm bringing originals and trying to do obscurities that are going to be super interesting. And Laura's a singer that can pull it off."

From his collection of vintage 45s, Charles chose late Detroit R&B artist Sherri Taylor's "He's the One that Rings My Bell" and Terry Timmons' "Got Nobody to Love."

"The power of the band is the vocal," says Charles. "People have never seen (Mendoza) sing like this, but this is absolutely what she's suited for, and I think she's discovering some things about herself, too."

"I tend to pick songs that, knowing Laura's voice, will fit her vocal range," says Varner, such as LaVern Baker's "Love Me Right," Ruth Brown's "Mama, He Treat Your Daughter Mean" and Jesse Mae's "Don't Freeze on Me," which is one of Varner's favorites to play.

"I adapt to the environment around me," Mendoza says of her ardent stage presence, which transports listeners beyond timeless sensuality and deep into the crevices of every woman's broken heart.

"I had to walk this road by myself," Mendoza sings with veracity. "I was put on a shelf..."

Detroit artist and drummer Joe Leone, with whom Mendoza plays in several rock bands, says, "She is very serious and very natural. She wears everything on her sleeve."

"That's not just on the technical end," adds Ricky Rat, who performs with Leone and Mendoza in the Ricky Rat Pack collective. "She's a true musician or artist in the sense that it's a feeling, which sounds cheesy, but the way she sings, the way she performs, it's like a true artist in how you get all your happiness out or all your frustration out. The feeling comes through. She's the real deal."

*The Firewalkers perform at 8 p.m., 10 p.m., and 11:30 p.m. on Friday, Aug. 9 at Willis Show Bar, 4156 Third Ave., Detroit; 313-788-7469; willisshowbar.com. Tickets are \$8 advance, \$12 day of show. **MT***



Laura Mendoza.

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by Varner and Charles, who, in 2017, invited her as a guest female vocalist, along with Wendy Case, Jennifer Westwood, with their band JC and the Royal Keys at Otus Supply.

"My only experience with her singing was with her band White Shag," says Varner. "So I had no idea that she was able to sing all this stuff.... I invited her on and picked songs that fit her vocal, like Mama Thornton, LaVern Baker, and she just nailed them."

Mendoza's songwriting inspired the band's name.

"Laura had written this song that talked about the fire within her," Varner explains, "and she had this red dress on and I said, 'How about the Firewalkers?'"

"Rudy and Loney are mainly responsible for picking out the majority of the songs we do," says Mendoza. "We have a lot less original songs than we have