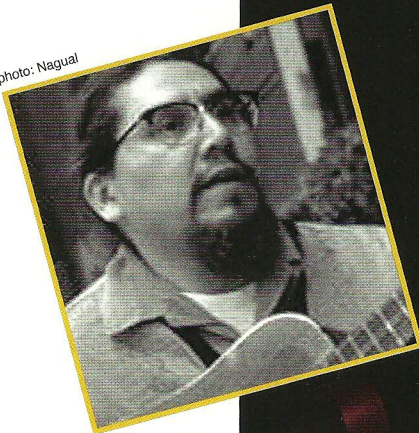


photo: Nagual



Victor Contreras

The name, Nagual, was inspired by a series of books written by Carlos Castaneda. It references a Pre-Columbian path of knowledge.

Victor Contreras remembers riding his bike from Del Paso Heights out to the tomato fields of Natomas as a boy. Contreras grew up to live in the Northgate Gardenland area, and to have a 20-year career with Sacramento County. But fans of the local music scene know him as the leader of Nagual, a jazz group that

explores a wide range of musical landscapes, performing original compositions. Nagual's members include saxophonist Scott Anderson, bassist Paul Relvas, congero Harold Muñiz, drummer Ron Ochoa, and

Contreras on lead guitar.

Contreras has been playing music for about 35 years. He started as a music major at CSUS, but switched to social sciences. He works in the county's homeless services program. For more than

seven years, most of his spare moments have gone to the duties of band leader: maintaining its Web site (visit the site for information on upcoming performances), finding gigs, making contacts and sending out CDs for promotion.

This year the band was invited to perform at the Festival of New American Music, a signature event put on by CSUS. "The festival organizer, Keith Bohm, liked the fact that we do original compositions. All of us felt it was a great honor. The festival audience had the opportunity to sit down and really listen to what we were doing. The response was great. That's very satisfying to a musician. We have different influences and styles, including Latin rock, but we consider ourselves a jazz group, and our music is a vehicle for improvisation."

Contreras has done most of the writing for the band, with Relvas and Muñiz collaborating on the group's second CD, Nagual II. He has been expanding his Latin rhythm

repertoire by learning to play the tres Cuban guitar. With three sets of double strings, the tres lends itself to a single note pattern rather than chords. "When you're playing chords on the tres, you're playing arpeggios. It's a different sound," he says. "It takes a lot of practice to get comfortable enough to improvise. I don't consider myself a tresero, I'm just scratching the surface."

Nagual comes from Carlos Castaneda's popular books, in which spiritual traveler Don Juan Matus provides guidance on a Pre-Columbian path of knowledge. "Turn off your internal dialogue," Don Juan says, "and let something in you flow out and expand ... don't try to figure out what I mean. Just let the whispering of the Nagual guide you." Good advice for jazz musicians.

Saxophonist Scott Anderson and the rest of Nagual back up Victor at the Painting for Miracles event recently held at ZAP Creative.



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