

Hip-hop heroes

S.F. youth group bears witness to police abuse [p.13]

Open air

It's time for the city to fund public-access TV [p.21]

Flying colors

Culture Shocked on the wild parrots of San Francisco [p.26]

Goooooooooal!

Andrew Goodwin delivers the World Cup, A to Z [p.48]

THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY

FREE

THE BEST OF THE BAY ... EVERY WEEK • WWW.SFBG.COM • JULY 8-14, 1998 • VOL. 32, NO. 40



Moon dance: Uva Luna performs at Esta Noche's fourth annual Gay Latino Beauty Contest July 19.

Willy Lizárraga on the women, the men, and the royalty at Esta Noche, S.F.'s only Latino drag club [p.26]

EPICEN

Crossing borders

At Esta Noche, it's always midnight on the border of Latin illusions. **By Willy Lizárraga**

AND NOW, ladies and gentlemen, we have the pleasure to present here at Esta Noche, de Guadalajara, Mexico, the one and only Naomi."

From a tiny door behind the bar appears a magnificently tall and curvaceous woman in a bright blue, skin-tight bodice who royally sways her way to the stage amid applause and *vivas*. The lights on the stage fade for a brief moment, giving her a chance to compose herself. Then the music hits — hard. Naomi starts to dance, fully incarnating the spirit of "Loca," the song by Conchita Alonso, the Venezuelan Madonna and soap opera superstar. And every time Naomi lip-synchs the line that ends with *loca*, she exudes this rather unfathomable emotion that combines tragedy and sexiness, sighing and protesting at the same time, as is suited to a universally misunderstood woman, whom everyone tries to put down, especially other women, because she dares to be herself.

The Wednesday crowd seems mellow — compared to the weekend, when there's more dance and party spirit. Well, it's not even midnight. Things don't really start to cook until late here. "She's pretty," comments a young Filipino next to me who doesn't quite look like a woman, although he's trying real hard. His three friends, who also share a similar awkwardness in the art of drag, all agree with him.

"Loca" lip-synchs Naomi as she kneels down and then appropriately turns her head toward the sky as though imploring the gods for justice or help. And the most feminine-looking of the Filipino young men imitates her with panache, as if saying to his friends I can do that, easy. Naomi continues her song, now lying down on the stage like a sleepy *Playboy* playmate.

Somehow the five of us end up exchanging our impressions of Naomi, who is back up on her super-high heels, singing from her heart and keeping an exuberant tragic-sexy attitude on her hips. I agree with almost everything the four of them say, but don't understand why they don't like her outfit.

Naomi finishes orgasmically *loca* and then walks back to the dressing room, gracefully thanking the fans who come up to her, like a

true and rising star not yet spoiled by the excesses of fame. She could absolutely pass for a tall, beautiful Miss Venezuela on her way to a Miss Universe contest. As she walks by us, we check her out, up and down, and I notice a hint of envy in the four Filipinos in drag around me, or perhaps it is just an eagerness to learn her secrets in the ineffable art of transforming oneself into a woman.

Then, as the Mexican diva disappears through the tiny door, the most masculine-looking of the four Philipinos coyly tells me that this is the first time they've gone to a club in drag.

Uva's story

"I really don't want to be a woman. In fact, I like men's bodies. But I enjoy performing in drag. It's like theater for me — better yet, a circus. I was born to be on the stage. And the minute I begin to put on makeup and the high-heeled shoes, oh my god, I begin to feel like Uva Luna. Sometimes, I have to admit, she takes over me and wants to run my life."

Reuben Jacobs, also known as Uva Luna, jokingly sneers at me. Then he laughs and resumes cutting lemons, one of his many duties as bartender at Esta Noche. I get the feeling that Reuben doesn't want me

to take anything he says *too* seriously. He takes another break from cutting lemons to play Madonna. As he sings a couple of lines and shakes his hips like a belly dancer, he tells me: "This is one of the songs I do. Well, I've done all Madonna."

Last year Luna (not yet Uva) was elected Ms. Gay Napa Valley, the place where he was born and raised. That's how he got the Uva (grape in Spanish), an honorific attached to all of Napa's winners. "Uva Luna" has a literary ring (unavoidably connected to Isabel Allende's Eva Luna) that suits well Reuben's artistic sensibility and education. He's just finished a B.A. at the San Francisco Art Institute and wants to continue studying interior decoration. He's also hoping to go back to the stage and work less behind the bar. "My shows are always different. More dramatic," he says. "What can I say, I see it as a total performance."

"Where did you get the 'Luna' part?"

"That's what I was called in my household when I was a kid."

Transformations

Every night there is a transvestite show at Esta Noche, the Finocchio's of the Mission, the only gay bar on 16th Street, the only Latino gay club in the city. And, like the taqueria Pancho Villa, the Roxie Cinema, the dope dealers and the preacher-barkers of a new and old faith at the BART station, the secondhand bookstores, the pimps, the whores, and the most variegated spectrum of pre- and postmodern restaurants and cafés, Esta Noche is indelibly linked to the Mission's history and to 16th Street's character.

"This was first a hotel," says Manuel Quijano, manager of Esta Noche. "It burned from the top down. Only the lobby survived. And this is it. Then it became a real macho Mexican bar called Durango. There were no mirrors. The wall behind the bar was covered with dollar bills. There was no stage, of course. And they had three or four pool tables. You can imagine the transformation that went on in this place when Anthony Lopez decided to open a gay club here."

Transformation, indeed. This chronicle is precisely about transfor-

Features, Ask Isadora, Travel, Fashion and Design



expressing ourselves. Quite different from the gay Anglo community, where transvestites are not seen with good eyes. I mean, the best and most chic gay clubs in Mexico City have a trans-

Queen of the night

A few weeks ago, on June 19, Esta Noche celebrated its fourth Gay Latino Beauty Contest. It's held right before Pride week, so the winners, Mr. and Ms. Esta Noche, can represent the gay Latino community in the parade.

It was certainly a most spirited fiesta. I managed to talk briefly with Vivian I, the brand-new queen of Esta Noche, a sweet girl-next-door from Nicaragua who confessed to me that she prepared herself for the contest last year, "but at the last minute I chickened out. I was intimidated and simply couldn't do it. This year, however, was different. I guess it's a question of confidence. Now I feel very happy with myself. And the feeling wouldn't have changed if I hadn't won the contest."

Vivian is 25 and works as a teacher's assistant in a kindergarten. She's studying to become a teacher and is living as a woman by day and night.

Most of the artists in Esta Noche are men by day and women by night and come from either Central America, Mexico, or the

Lucky seven: Above, Elizabeth Hopkins displays poise.

Reign o'er us: At left, Vivian I, newly crowned queen of Esta Noche, surveys her subjects.

GUARDIAN PHOTOS BY MARK MADEO

vestite show, and it's not considered politically incorrect. There is definitely a huge cultural difference, a gap, which in this case helped Esta Noche to be a success from its start."

For some reason, probably influenced by the vivid memory of *la Manuela*, the central character and transvestite artist of the novel by the late Chilean writer José Donoso *El lugar sin límites* (The Borderless Place), I expect Anthony Lopez or Manuel Quijano to suddenly transform himself into a Flamenco Queen, castanets and everything. But this is not fiction, although there's an element of unreality in it, the unreal quality of a nightclub in the daylight, of men in drag, of borders that no one should cross but that exist precisely in order to be crossed.

Moreover, this early in the morning Anthony Lopez, Manuel Quijano, and I are the only ones in the bar, and it takes a little effort to imagine Esta Noche in full bloom. More than a bar, it feels like an empty church or a closed theater. The semi-darkness makes our conversation ghostly. We are merely shadows in a cave. The cave is real, though, as real as the sunlit street scene just outside Esta Noche's entrance.

Caribe. Francisco, also known as Frances, comes from Mexico and performs in different gay clubs in the Bay Area. Celia, from Honduras, performs almost every night at Esta Noche, and with Tahina, from Cuba, and Marisela and Mitzzydee, both from Mexico, constitute Esta Noche's old guard. They're all in their mid-30s, have established themselves in their particular profession, and every night give life to their female personas. For which they are respected and paid.

"It's not only a question of moving your lips in sync with the song. You have to develop a female character and find the repertory that fits her. Then you have to consider all the work involved in finding and creating your costumes. I'm now Celia, and everyone knows and respects me for that. But I began as a bartender here in Esta Noche, and it's taken me many years of hard work to get to this point."

Continued on page 29

• SFBG.COM

In our archives you'll find all the Bay Guardian guides, five years of Best of the Bay picks, and almost 200 Superlists.

mation. From a macho Mexican cantina to a gay bar that nowadays functions more like a social club or a home to an extended family of performers and patrons. From cowboy boots to feathers. Or, in the case of Manuel Quijano, from El Salvador to San Francisco.

He came when quite young to visit an auntie in San Francisco and never went back. Now 36, he's been working at Esta Noche more than 15 years.

Anthony Lopez, Esta Noche's owner, on the other hand, was born and raised in the Bay Area and comes from a Mexican-Californio family that goes back to the times when Cal-

ifornia defined its border quite differently—when it was all Mexican.

"To give an idea of the beginning of all this, we have to go back to the mid-'70s in San Francisco," Lopez explains, "when the Castro was booming and I, as a young gay man, wanted to be part of it, but they wouldn't let me into the bars and clubs. They would ask me and my Latino friends for three pieces of I.D., which was absurd. And we felt so constantly insulted that one day I decided to open my own club, a Latino gay club where we didn't have to put up with that kind of discrimination. And it just happened that I sold a building—I

was working half-time in real estate—and with that money I bought a place and opened it in September 1979.

"Needless to say, Esta Noche was packed from the very first night," Lopez continues. "Gay Latinos finally had a club where they could have fun and feel safe. Moreover, there were many Latino transvestite performers who were dying to have access to a space where they could lip-synch in Spanish, a club where they could truly express themselves. 'Cause, as you know, in the Latin culture, cross-dressing and transvestism are very much part of coming out and

BORDERS *from page 27*

Of all the performers, Tahína and Marisela represent perhaps the most dramatic side of *Esta Noche*. Their repertoire tends to be romantic and soaked in pop drama. They incarnate glamour, and their personas flourish in grandiose gestures. They were born to be divas and won't settle for anything less, although, as Tahína says *muy cubanamente*, "The most important ingredient for a good performer is to be natural, not phony. People can always tell the difference. That's why the public loves me."

"I'm a little different from the other artists here," Mitzydee says, "if only for the fact that when I step down from the stage I'm sweaty all over. My background is dancing, and my show is very aerobic. Actually, I was a dancer in Tijuana when I was hired to come to work at Finocchio's 14 years ago. So my repertoire is cumbias and merengues. That's why they call me Ms. Cumbia and introduce me as a Salvadoran, because Salvadorans like cumbias a lot. But I'm from Puerto Vallarta. It doesn't matter anyway. I have my style. And nowadays I'm truly enjoying being a woman by day and night."

For the last year Mitzydee has been undergoing hormone treatments, but only in the last months has she been feeling the freedom of being almost a total woman. Her skin is softer. Her hair is fuller. Her breasts

are shapely. She feels younger, she tells me, and doesn't have to wear too much makeup.

"I don't want to go through the operation though," Mitzydee asserts. "I like myself just like this. I want to die with all the parts God gave me."

"Speaking of death, have the artists in *Esta Noche* been hit hard by the AIDS epidemic?" I ask her.

"When I look at photographs taken 5 or 10 years ago of all of us, it breaks my heart. So many have died, especially in the late '80s. I mean, Tahína, Marisela, Celia, and I are simply the survivors."

"Why is that?"

"Who knows. Maybe because we took care of ourselves. Maybe because we, although I should speak only for myself, have had pretty long-term relationships. I have my man and I don't fool around. But that's also part of getting old. When one is young, one tends to be crazier. Maybe we were just lucky."

"To be honest," Tahína says, "it never occurred to me that I could end up as a professional transvestite performer. In Cuba I was always hanging around the chorus girls behind the stage in the different cabarets, and of course I envied and admired them. But I never thought I would be earning my living doing this, ever. In fact, I never thought of coming to San Francisco. I did it without really knowing what I was doing, like a copycat. All my gay friends were leaving. So I jumped on the boat.



Moment of truth: As Marisela (right) applauds, Vivian I (center) enjoys her shining moment.

And here I am. Maybe that's why I always dream of going back."

A double illusion

Chablis, reigning Princess of the Imperial Court, a well-known transvestite performer in San Francisco, famous also for her own variety talk show on local television Channel 53, *City Beat*, participated at the *Esta Noche* beauty contest as a guest artist. As Princess of the Imperial Court, Chablis's duties are not that different from those of any ambassador. So she goes about appearing at all the different gay pageants nationwide and innumerable fundraising events for the gay community. For her, "this is just one more contest in a city thriving with contests. I mean, if you really want to, there's a title for you in the Bay Area. There are pageants for everyone, even for first-timers in drag. It's no big deal."

I guess so. But competing in a pageant does entail an enormous amount of work, dedication, and plain courage, especially when you intend to make a living of it. Or even if you just want to cross the street in drag.

Chablis's image, the golden wig, dress, makeup, and shoes, evanesces into midnight at the corner of 16th Street and Valencia as a dream, an afterthought, or an illusion. After all, we're talking about men pretending to be women and pretending to sing. A double illusion. A double challenge for those who dare. ■