

## MTA's Miguel Vazquez Took a Personal Journey to Find His Musical Soul

By BILL HEARD, Editor  
(Dec. 5, 2001) The MTA's Miguel Vazquez has been on a long and difficult personal journey – a voyage of discovery to find his musical soul.

Vazquez, 43, is a Revenue Department cash clerk who works at Division 2. But, his avocation is music and he is a conga player and percussionist with one of the area's leading Latin jazz and salsa groups.

Venezuelan musician Gilberto Torres, who has worked with Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Oscar de Leon and other top artists in the salsa world, is the group's leader. With Vazquez on congas, they play regularly at jazz and salsa clubs in the area.

Vazquez has established himself on the region's musical scene – he'll be featured in an ad and profiled in an upcoming article in *Latin Beat* magazine – but his road to success has been rough and marked by years-long absences from his craft.

Born in Los Angeles of Puerto Rican parents, he grew up in Pico Rivera. During his years at El Rancho High, Vazquez played congas and percussion in a Top 40 band.

### Fun and joy of music

The group played local park concerts, proms and even some Disneyland shows. He might have pocketed \$120 for a weekend's work, but that wasn't what excited him. "It was more the fun and joy of being around the music and to be able to create something people were enjoying."

Vazquez's involvement with music continued for several years but, eventually, work and family life monopolized his time.

It wasn't until 1989 that his interest was rekindled. A gospel band needed a percussionist, but Vazquez was hesitant. His family responsibilities and his absence of some seven years from the music scene seemed overwhelming.

The band's members were persuasive, however, and eventually he joined.



Miguel Vazquez and his congas are featured in the current issue of *Latin Beat* magazine.



On stage, Vazquez's rhythms are the backbone of the Latin jazz and salsa sound.

"It was like a renewing," Vazquez recalls. "I didn't realize during the time I'd been away from music how much I'd missed it. It was refreshing to have that sound come back again."

But, after two years with the gospel band, Vazquez dropped out of music again, dissatisfied with his progress and his style of playing.



Vazquez pounds out a solid beat during a performance at the Oxnard Salsa Festival.

Then, in the spring of 1995 – about a year after joining the MTA – Vazquez came to a fork in his musical road. Would he be a casual musician playing for his own amusement, or would he get the proper instruction to become a more accomplished drummer?

### **The lefty played right-handed**

Through a friend, he contacted a well-known musician and teacher. The teacher watched Vazquez play and noticed that, although he was left-handed, he was playing congas right-handed.

"He told me, 'Go with your strong point,'" Vazquez remembers. But, changing hands wasn't easy. "I couldn't play, couldn't get the timing or the rhythm. It was like starting all over again."

His big break came in 1998. Through a connection, he met Gilberto Torres. Torres had a gig lined up in Santa Barbara the very next weekend. Rehearsal was scheduled for that Wednesday night.

"It was horrible; I was intimidated by all those professional musicians," Vazquez remembers. "But, Gilberto told me, 'Don't worry, you're gonna be fine once we're in front of the crowd.' And, sure enough, when the curtains opened, it all fell into place."

Now, although Vazquez has reached a pinnacle on the local Latin jazz scene, his musical journey isn't finished. He wants to dig deeper into the roots of Latin percussion.

And, he credits his family for being with him every step of the way. His son, Michael, who now lives in Denver plays guitar, bass and drums. Matthew, 18, plays guitar and drums. His daughter, Melini, 13, plays piano, as does his wife, Marianne.

"My reason for doing all of this, and the one who gave me the motivation to play, is my wife," says Vazquez, eyes glistening. "She has literally put the song in my heart."

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