

PHOTOS BY ALICIA GOMEZ



Metro Red Line Operator Mickey LesPron is a founding member of the band *El Chicano*. The band has begun to tour once again.

The Music Lives On with Metro Operator Mickey LesPron

By Alisha Gomez

(August 9, 2002) The year was 1969 – Richard Nixon was president, bell-bottom jeans were a hot trend and first-class stamps were only 6 cents. For the first time, Americans watched a man land on the moon without stepping outside of their living rooms.

As for the music scene, groups like *5th Dimension*, *The Archies*, *The Zombies* and *The Foundations* topped the charts with hit singles.

And in California, Latin music was being revolutionized by Carlos Santana and up-and-coming bands like *El Chicano*.

Metro Red Line Division 20 Operator Michael “Mickey” LesPron, a lead guitarist in the band *El Chicano*, was a part of it all.

LesPron formed the band *El Chicano* along with the keyboard player, Bobby Espinosa in 1969. LesPron was only 20 at the time, but from the moment he saw his first guitar, he had found his passion.

First encounter with a guitar

“I was about 12 years old and a friend’s dad brought him a guitar from Mexico,” says LesPron. “He opened up his guitar and I smelled the wood and listened to the sound of the strings and I knew I was going to play the guitar.”

LesPron did learn to play the instrument and became a good enough musician to play professionally with some of the Los Angeles’ best Latin jazz bands for a number of years.

“Some of the members kept playing, but having a family, I opted to get a day gig,” says LesPron.

In 1979 he started his career with what was then RTD, now MTA, as a bus operator.

‘His first band was the *Monotones*. The second was *In Crowd* and the third was *VIP’s*, which became *El Chicano*.’

“I drove buses for 15 years and then in 1995 I transferred to the Metro Blue Line,” says LesPron. From there he went onto the Metro Green Line and finally the Metro Red Line, where he is now.

LesPron was about 17 when he started to play in different



neighborhood groups. By then he had self-taught himself how to play. Later, he eventually took Jazz lessons to learn how to read chord charts and the style.

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Growing up in San Gabriel, the band members of *El Chicano* pretty much knew each other from their neighborhood.

Their first hit was "Viva Tirado," an instrumental piece. After that hit, they started touring and one of their first main gigs was opening for Jerry Butler at the Apollo Theater.

In the height of the 70's, *El Chicano* toured constantly. They made a name for themselves with two other hits, "Savor a Mi," sung in Spanish and "Tell Her She Is Lovely."

At the top of their game

"We opened for groups like *Earth, Wind and Fire*," says LesPron. "We also opened for *BB King* and *ZZ Top* and we performed at concerts and colleges all throughout the United States."

The band also toured overseas in countries like Singapore, Malaysia Hong Kong, Guatemala, El Salvador and Venezuela.

With a total of 12 albums, nine originals and three greatest hits, *El Chicano* members grew up with groups like *Tierra*, *War*, and *The Midnighters*.

They developed an original sound by experimenting – Latin jazz and rock.

"We started to play Willie Bobo's songs and Tito Puente's songs," says LesPron. "But we transposed them into our version and played them our way, our style, which became the *El Chicano* style."

Then 1978 came, and disco rocked the nation, knocking many bands, including *El Chicano*, out of business.

Although by 1979, he was a Metro Bus Operator, LesPron was determined to keep his talents tuned. During that time, he kept playing with club bands to keep with his music and "maintain his chops," as he says.

Continues to groove

"I've never stopped playing," says LesPron. "It was rough. I would play Saturday nights and have to wake up and go to work on Sundays because I

didn't have seniority back then to get weekends off. But now I do."

But the other original member, Bobby Espinosa, kept the name going. After releasing one more recorded album about three years ago, Espinosa asked LesPron back this past April.

Since then, LesPron has been touring on weekends with *El Chicano*, flying to Denver, Albuquerque and Fresno, and playing alongside bands like *War* and *Tierra*.

He continues to play local club dates and private gigs with the Bobby Z Band and appears in concert events with *El Chicano*.

***El Chicano* rocks on**

With LesPron as a member again, the band is getting back to its original sound. And people definitely want to hear them.

"We're going to go for a little bit of the new, but maintain that original sound that reflected the guitar sound of Wes Montgomery, which I grew up listening to," says LesPron.

El Chicano is about to record its first CD since LesPron rejoined the group and they have already done a cable show with Edward James Olmos for a Spanish station.

"The CD is going to be original songs, some shuffled blues and some Latin Jazz songs," says LesPron. They have an upcoming concert Aug. 24 at the Montebello Inn.

When LesPron is not playing with *El Chicano*, he is playing with his club group.

He plans on playing music for the rest of his life and hopefully will retire from MTA in a year.

"My passion is music," says LesPron. "Who knows if it will go somewhere? But at least I'll have fun doing it."

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