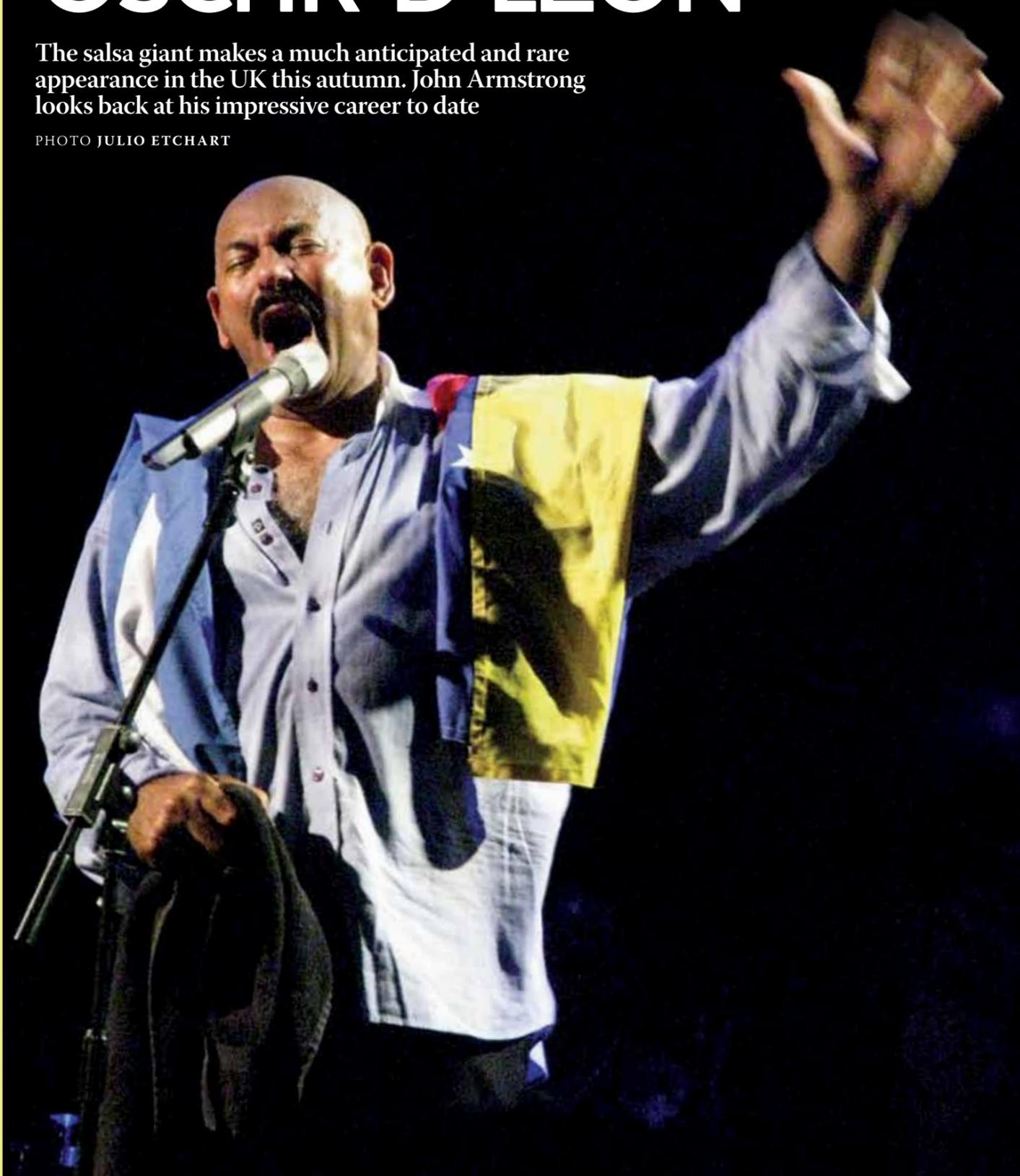


→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

OSCAR D'LEÓN

The salsa giant makes a much anticipated and rare appearance in the UK this autumn. John Armstrong looks back at his impressive career to date

PHOTO JULIO ETCHART



Europe's Latin music lovers, weaned on Buena Vista Social Club and the Fania dynasty, may be surprised to learn that the artist widely regarded by his peers as the greatest *sonero* since legendary Cuban superstar Beny Moré happens to be a former cabbie from Venezuela.

The apocrypha of the genre has it that Antimano-born Oscar Emilio León Somoza, a mechanic and part-time taxi driver in 70s Caracas would maximise his tips by singing the latest tunes to his customers. With the cash thus generated, he purchased an Ampeg baby bass, a cheap piano and a set of *tumbadora* drums, the initial capital investment for his first professional band, La Dimensión Latina.

If you were a fan of live Latin concerts in the mid-70s, you could hardly imagine a better place than Caracas. North America's burgeoning salsa industry, always eager for fresh audiences, would often tour their latest sensations in Venezuela, stars such as Celia Cruz and Rubén Blades, playing there on such a regular basis as to have established fan clubs hungry for the latest offerings from New York and Puerto Rico.

But it wasn't just the visiting US talent that made Caracas so interesting and full of potential for budding musicians and music-lovers alike. Venezuela was among the first of the South American countries to start dismantling the Cuban trade embargo, the result being an influx of Cuban bands and soneros who couldn't play anywhere else in the world outside Castro's state.

At the same time Venezuela was playing an integral part in enlarging and preserving international Afro-Latin dance music. Salsa, *guaguancó*, *merengue* and *cumbia* were in the good hands of Sexteto Juventud, Nelson Y Sus Estrellas and a host of other *salsa dura* bands, whilst Grupo Mango, Guaco and El Trabuco Venezolano were exploring the far reaches of jazz-Latin-folklore-funk fusions.

And in the case of Oscar Emilio, at least, none of this was falling on deaf ears. La Dimensión Latina, consisting of some of Venezuela's strongest *salseros* of the time such as trombonist César 'El Gordo' Monge and percussionist Elio Pacheco, recorded their first LP in 1973. The next-but-one release, in 1975, contained arguably Oscar's best-loved theme, 'Lloraras' – written and re-recorded many times since by Oscar himself and by countless international Latin bands in many styles. But the real strength of this aggregation was Oscar's exceptional skills of vocal improvisation (he would reputedly make up whole songs from scratch as the band played a couple of circular *sones*) and his brilliance as a bass player, spinning his stylish, white plastic Ampeg whilst dancing around it.

After the seventh and last Dimensión Latina LP for the TH-Rodven label, in 1976, he produced five more exceptional albums, on the Color label, as La Critica De Oscar D'León. His performances with La Critica cemented his growing reputation not only as a sonero but also as an elegant *bolero* and a gutsy *merengero*.

Confusingly, he continued until 1992 with TH-Rodven, thenceforth billed variously as Oscar D'León Y Su Salsa Mayor, Oscar D'León Y Su Orquesta or just plain Oscar D'León, recording an impressive 24 more albums.

By this time, he was recognised throughout the competitive and critical world of Latin music as a world leader, signing a deal with the New York entrepreneur Ralph Mercado's RMM Records and spending the rest of that decade with RMM who, despite making enemies with controversial business practices, nevertheless exposed their artists – including Oscar – to the sort of mainstream attention that would pave the way for the international Latin explosion of the 90s and its crossover to the 'world music' market.

Since 2000 Oscar D'León has taken his 19-piece orchestra to the far corners of the globe and played to sell-out audiences. He's one of the few acts that appeals equally to the 'dance-class crowd' as to the 'serious' salsa aficionados, combining as he does an abundance of dance-floor classics and showmanship with a

transparent love, respect and knowledge for the music's history that has become synonymous with his name.

He first visited the UK one rainy Saturday night in 1988 at the then-crumbling Hackney Empire, booked independently by the pioneering Peter Ind's Bass Clef Jazz Club, and playing to a sold-out mixture of Latin American students and bemused but delighted Latin jazz fans. Because of unforeseen circumstances the next booking, in Paris, was not until the following Tuesday, so the full orchestra, with time on their hands, played an unscheduled concert on the Monday night at the tiny Bass Clef itself, in Hoxton Square, to about 40 or 50 lucky customers. There appeared to be more people on the stage than on the dance floor but Oscar, ever the gentleman, literally brought the show to the customers with a long-lead microphone, dancing with almost every woman in the audience during the course of the set.

Oscar D'León still has that unique ability to make a 3,000-seater feel like a hot little salsa club. Miss him at your peril. **M**

DATES Oscar D'León and his big band play at the Roundhouse on November 3. See *Gig Guide* for details

Oscar D'León is one of the few acts that appeals equally to the dance-class crowd as to the serious salsa aficionados

BEST ALBUMS



Dimension Latina 75 (TH-Rodven, 1975)

This has the original version of 'Lloraras' (You Will Cry), one of the most covered salsa classics of recent times. It's one of those rare dance tunes that bears repeated listening for the melody alone.



De Venezuela Para El Mundo/La Salsa Soy Yo (TH-Rodven, 1987)

A great set of songs and his first serious calling-card to the wider world. The three-trombone, three-trumpet soundwall cuts it up over eight tracks with no filler.



Auténtico (TH-Rodven, 1991)

With his *sonero* skills in full bloom, this includes another classic almost as essential as 'Lloraras' – 'Detalles' – as well as a tribute-medley to Beny Moré.



El Sonero Del Mundo (RMM, 1996)

A Grammy-nominated collection of grace and soulfulness. A landmark album in Latin music that really brought the sedate Cuban *son montuno* bang up-to-date.

BEST AVOIDED

Pretty much all the US and Venezuela-generated 'Best Of's,' with their confusing tracklisting, poor remastering and cheeky habit of inveigling you into buying the same track three or four times over!

IF YOU LIKE OSCAR D'LEÓN, YOU'LL LOVE...

GILBERTO SANTA ROSA



Irrepetible (2010)
Santa Rosa is a wonderful Puerto Rican sonero who has notched up more

Billboard Latin Top 40 No 1 albums than any other artist. This album deservedly won the Grammy for Best Salsa Album of the Year in 2010, and combines melody and danceability over a collection of mostly new compositions including cameo appearances from Rubén Blades and merengue veteran Johnny Ventura.

