

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Latino singer Amanda Martinez strikes the right chords

By **SHELDON KIRSHNER**
Staff Reporter

Toronto chanteuse Amanda Martinez is living her dream and doing it to the mesmerizing and infectious beat of Latin American jazz, Brazilian bossa nova and Mexican and Afro-Cuban rhythms.

"I feel very lucky," said Martinez, the first hostess of *Cafe Latino*, Jazz.FM's popular Saturday afternoon radio program dedicated to Latin music. "I'm really enjoying myself."

Having released two albums, *Sola* and *Amor*, and a sizzling single, *Suenos Posibles*, in the past four years, she may well be en route to stardom, not only in Canada but in the United States, too.

For as long as she can remember, she has aspired to be a professional singer.

"I always had music in me," said Martinez, 39, who as a little girl put on faux performances for her dolls in her bedroom and who as a child and teenager studied piano at the Royal Conservatory of Music.

Her yearning to be a singer notwithstanding, Martinez was given to understand by her pragmatic parents that music might not be a practical choice in terms of earning a livelihood one day.

Being level-headed, she shelved her musical dreams and studied science at the University of Western Ontario, specializing in biology, and took a master's degree in international business, working for a bank in sales and marketing.

"I was searching for security," she explained.

For most people, financial stabil-

ity usually comes before anything else, but for Martinez, there was more to life than just bringing home a regular pay cheque.

In an allusion to her job at the bank, which lasted less than a year, she said, "I can't say I enjoyed it. I was stressed out. I felt the world closing in on me. I couldn't bear the thought of not trying to follow my dream. I knew, in my heart of hearts, I shouldn't be doing this."

One day, during a lunch break in the concourse of the office building in which she toiled, Martinez stopped to listen to Amy Sky, a Toronto-based performer.

She was instantly smitten.

"She helped me realize I wanted to be up there on the stage, like her."

Martinez asked Sky for advice, and Sky gave Martinez the

name of her singing coach. Seriously committed to changing her vocation, Martinez hired Sky's coach and went into reflective mode. "I took time off to figure out what to do," she recalled.

Then, in a courageous leap of faith, she resigned, ditching corporate Canada and doffing her power outfits, and proceeded to pursue her childhood dream.

"I couldn't ignore my calling. I jumped right into it. I was confident I was doing the right thing. My parents were very worried. Now they're my biggest fans and come to most of my concerts."

In 2001, Martinez landed her first gig, in a jazz club in midtown Toronto. To make ends meet while she completed her apprenticeship, she also worked for a local cable-TV provider.

For the next few years, she per-

formed in a variety of venues in Toronto, from the Sassafras restaurant and the Rex Hotel to Harbourfront and the Lula Lounge.

She sang mostly in Spanish, a language she learned as a child and perfected as an adult.

Her strong, tender voice, registering a range of emotions from passion and joy to plaintiveness and reflection, touched people.

Not one to depend on a single source of income, she auditioned for and got acting roles at CBC, Global, City TV and the Disney Channel.

In 2005, she was hired to host *Cafe Latino* after sending Jazz.FM a demo tape – "a pretend show" – that impressed the powers-that-be.

She left in 2008, handing the baton to the current hostess, Laura Fernandez.

"I was getting too comfortable. I wanted to put all my energy into my singing career and didn't want to be tied down. But I loved *Cafe Latino*, and still miss it."

While hosting *Cafe Latino*, she recorded her first album, the template for her second album, released three years later. The songs, written mainly by Martinez about relationships, love and the joys of motherhood, were primarily in Spanish, with a sprinkling of Portuguese and English numbers.

Since then, Martinez, accompanied by her band, has blossomed as a performer.

She has sung at folk and jazz festivals throughout Canada, appeared at clubs and concert halls in New York City and popped up at pay-the-bills corporate events here and in Mexico.

Last summer, as part of the World Cup festivities in South Africa, she sang her new, uplifting song, *Suenos Posibles (Dreams Realized)*, at three concerts over two days in Johannesburg and Soweto. She was invited to South Africa by the International Federation of Association Football, known as FIFA.

It was an overwhelming experience for Martinez.



Amanda Martinez
[Joanne Klimaszewski photo]

She was cheered on by her greatest fans – her mother, Hilary, a native of South Africa and a school teacher; her father, Gustavo, a convert to Judaism and engineer who was born and raised in Mexico and arrived in Canada in 1956; her sister, Michelle, an occupational therapist, and her husband, Drew Birston, a composer, bassist in her band and the father of her two-year-old boy, Leo.

Currently working on her next album, Martinez is now focused on polishing her skills as a musician so she can accompany herself on piano and guitar in the not-too-distant future.

Although she has been quite successful, Martinez hopes to do even better in the future. She believes time is on her side. "I do feel I have an audience that is very receptive to my music."

She added, "I feel there is a lot further I can go. I hope to do more touring in the United States and Latin America, break into the European market and start working with a record label, which could take my career to a new level."

Judging by the body of her work so far, it may just be a matter of time before Martinez hits the big time.