

Conge guru Mongo Santamaria and his eight musicians hit Houston through a maelstrom of thunder, lightning and rain and left the audience of the Sam Houston Coliseum breathless, drenched and feverish with enthusiasm.

Cuban-born Santamaria is regarded as the pioneer of Cuban jazz and is receiving worldwide exposure through American jazz festivals and recording. Cohesion and warmth, the highlights of the group sound, soared through the Coliseum night air as the music rolled and flowed with the insistent rhythms of Africa.

Santamaria, conguero, leads the band with a sizzling, syncopated rhythm that is rooted in his Afro-Cuban heritage, yet his music reaches beyond any one beat or pattern.

Santamaria has toured and recorded with such jazz greats as Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Cal Tjader, Carmen McRae and the Jazz Messengers.

"Watermelon Man," a swinging composition by Herbie Hancock, opened the first set. Then the audience, which was packed to the rafters, went to batá country as the music rolled and flowed with Santamaria's "Batá."

The thunderous concert (which lasted two and one-half hours with one intermission) featured traditional Afro-Cuban folk chants, soul stirring ballads, Latin jazz interpretations and such jazz war-horses as "Green Dolphin Street" and "Just Friends."

Santamaria also added his own compositions and excitement.

In 1976 on the Fantasy label, Santamaria released "Watermelon Man," which went gold and received a special award for being one of the year's best.

The 1978 Sono-Cuban Conference album won the prestigious Grand Prix du Disque in France.

Santamaria's influence with his talents and innovations is felt in the music of younger percussionists. In addition, other musicians (such as drummers, piano players, bassists, horn players, singers and dancers) come to him for inspiration, guidance, advice and information into the African-American background of Latin music.

Now, with his own Battle Records, Santamaria has total creative freedom, which gives him greater incentive. The latest recording is "Watermelon Man Goes Calypso."

Mongo Santamaria and his group:

Top row (left to right): Mike Colby, Richie Bastar, Steve Berrios, Doug Harris.

Seated: Vince Herring, Mongo Santamaria, and Errol Parker.

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PAUL H. GALLAGHER



Mongo Santamaria and his group achieved a rare mixture of talent, task, speed, clarity, and total impact. Leading a band is no easy assignment. It takes special talent, balance and ability to bring out the best in all members and simultaneously be a solo artist.

Santamaria, with his congas, fulfills all of these.

The group also performed a medley comprised of music by Stevie Wonder.

Other highlights included Santamaria's composition, "Prelude to a Kiss," a feature for Mr. Colby on piano, and "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most" with a vocal spot by Richie Bastar.

The band has been together for four years (except for drummer Vince Herring who joined in January) and their solid cohesiveness and confident rapport spoke well for their professionalism.

The Nightfires, a jazz-rock group, opened the concert with a set of tunes well-executed but rather routine in nature.

Mr. Levin's low-keyed, rather restrained vocal style, good range and warm sound were best assets. He played the flute and sax with ease, enough drive and confidence to serve well as background music for an appetizer but not for a main course.

Nightfire: innovative and unclassifying

The band is inventive, observes each has talents and is willing to stretch each one's ability to the limit. Particular outing: Santamaria has a definite and curious changes.

The most noted are his unclassifying music, language and the mix of Latin, jazz-rock and fusion. It can't be defined, it must be experienced.

As Lennis Levin, Nightfire's jazz-rock leader, said, "We don't classify with a set of tunes, well-executed but very through their first song, 'Can You Sense,' a good start, but what will really have something new to say comes with time."