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INTERVIEW: And now for something completely different from Sofía Rei

January 1, 2021 John Soltes 0 Comments Sofia Rei

Photo: Sofía Rei had a busy December, releasing a new album and new Christmas song. Photo courtesy of Sherwin Lainez / Provided by Cindy Byram PR with permission.

Sofía Rei, the accomplished singer who has mined [many Latin American musical traditions throughout her career](#), has a stated purpose of changing things up each and every time she heads into the recording studio. Her albums are almost always departures from what came before, and this keeps her musical output fresh, creative and endlessly fascinating.

This past year, Rei released her much-heralded album *Negro Sobre Blanco*, a set of songs that marries South American folk sounds with electronic instruments. Add in some pop and improvisation, and the result is wholly unique and pure Rei. Then, in time for the Christmas season, Rei released a reimagined version of “Little Drummer Boy,” which was a collaboration with percussionist Pedrito Martinez and [trumpeter Bria Skonberg](#) (it’s called “El Niño del Tambor”).

Recently *Hollywood Soapbox* caught up with the very busy Rei while she was taking a break from the New York City scene and enjoying some downtime with family in her native Argentina. “I’m in the middle of the mountains

in Argentina,” Rei said in a recent phone interview.

Although she was a continent away, the memories of her collaboration with Martinez and Skonbeg were fresh in her mind. “We did this in record time, honestly,” she said. “I’ve known Pedrito almost since I moved to New York. I moved to New York in 2005. We were kind of part of the same circle of musicians that were doing Latin jazz or knew different Latin projects in New York, and he would frequent The Jazz Gallery. I was there all the time, and he was friends with a lot of friends of mine. Then he called me to be part of one of his projects, so we did a few shows with him. And then we remained friends.”

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Six years ago, Rei and Martinez joined with Skonberg to perform at the Town Hall’s annual holiday bash, and that’s when they debuted “El Niño del Tambor.” For those who know Rei, seeing her perform a traditional Christmas song must have come as a bit of a shock.

“I kind of hate them, to be completely honest,” Rei said with a laugh. “I cannot listen to ‘Rudolph the Reindeer’ one more second, and I don’t appreciate walking into every store in New York and hearing this music since November until February.”

What Rei does like are traditional Spanish-language songs that center on the baby Jesus. They are tunes she has been singing since her childhood in Argentina (she moved to the States when she was 24 years old), and she still holds fondness for those compositions.

“So what happened was during that show at the Town Hall, [the director] asked the three of us separately to do something, so the three of us did something separately,” Rei remembers. “He really liked very much the music that each of us made, and was like, ‘Oh, you know what, why don’t you put something together? The three of you as a trio.’ That’s kind of a cool idea. No piano, no guitar, no harmonic instrument, just percussion, trumpet and voices because the three of us sing also, and I play little percussion as well.”

Thus, “El Niño del Tambor” was born. Rei was asked to play a little box drum called a cajita, but she was nervous performing next to Martinez, a legendary percussionist. “To me, it was like shameful to record it next to him,” she said. “I was like, ‘I’m not recording this. You play it.’ ‘No, no, no, you have to play it.’ So, yeah, playing percussion with Pedrito was never in my wildest dreams anything that would happen, so that’s fun.”

This year, the musicians reformed, but still managed to stay socially distanced, and they made that once-in-a-lifetime performance at the Town Hall a permanent reality. Now listeners have a chance to hear the many instruments and traditions come together into a recognizable tune that has a unique flair.

“We finalized the arrangement in the studio, and we recorded it in two hours,” Rei said. “We did some improvs between the trumpet and the vocals, and we finished figuring out the vocal arrangement. I think it worked out really

nice.”

This sense of collaboration and exploration has been with Rei since the beginning of her musical career. She is by nature a curious person, and she likes to challenge herself musically. Case in point: her new album *Negro Sobre Blanco*.

“This new project that I put out in December right before this, I think it was Dec. 4, is veering in a very different direction from what I was doing before,” she said. “The idea behind it is it has a foundation in South American folk music, in terms of the rhythms and the grooves and some instruments that we use like the charango that I play. Some other instruments also veer more into electronic music production, so it was a huge, huge undertaking for me because although I’ve been playing with electronic instruments for a long time, to do something more fundamentally on that side was a complete challenge. And I had to learn a lot about production. I had to learn a lot about the way that world works. For me, it’s a learning curve, and it’s fascinating. It’s super-interesting to me because it gives me something to keep learning and expanding.”

By John Soltes / Publisher / John@HollywoodSoapbox.com

Sofía Rei’s new album is Negro Sobre Blanco, and her new single with Pedrito Martinez and Bria Skongberg is “El Niño del Tambor.” Click [here](#) for more information.



Pedrito Martinez collaborates with Sofía Rei and Bria Skongberg on a new take of an old Christmas song. Photo courtesy of Danny Clinch / Provided by Cindy Byram PR with permission.



Bria Skonberg brings her trumpet skills to a new collaboration with Pedrito Martinez and Sofía Rei. Photo courtesy of Georgia Nerhem / Provided by Cindy Byram PR with permission.

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