

## The band Sarazino blends Algerian raï, reggae and more for a fresh, upbeat groove

By Andrew Gilbert  
Correspondent

Posted: 06/12/2010 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 06/15/2010 04:42:52 AM PDT

"World music" is an impossibly vague and imprecise term that raises more questions than it answers. But for vocalist, keyboardist and producer Lamine Fellah, "world music" neatly sums up the geographic range of his influences.

The creative force behind the Afro-Latin reggae band Sarazino, Fellah was born in Algeria and grew up in a globe-trekking family that moved every few years, due to his father's position in the North African nation's diplomatic service. After the age of 8, he spent much of his youth abroad in Spain, Switzerland, Burundi, Chad and Burkina Faso, and he soaked up musical inspiration from every country.

Fellah founded the first incarnation of Sarazino during a long sojourn in Montreal, where he moved to attend college in 1988. But since settling in Ecuador's capital of Quito about seven years ago, he has replaced the band's original Francophone repertoire with Spanish songs, recruiting a fascinating cast of collaborators for his first album with U.S. distribution, "Ya Foy!" (which means "no problem" in the West African language Dioula). From funk and hip-hop to reggae and Algerian raï, he has

forged an infectiously grooving sound held together with Latin-American soul.

Rather than easing onto the U.S. scene, Sarazino makes its American debut with a series of high-profile dates this month. The group kicks off its tour opening for the Skatalites at San Jose's Music in the Park on Thursday, and for Angelique Kidjo at

San Francisco's Stern Grove next Sunday. The band also headlines at Moe's Alley June 23.

By phone from his home studio in Quito, Fellah describes his transnational mission. "It's a romantic idea of mixing African and Latin music," Fellah says. "These continents have so much in common, and the goal is to unify these two visions through reggae, and the musicians I've experienced in Ecuador. The goal is to make something international that, wherever we go, people can understand. We didn't want to make sad music."

Fellah's rejection of lugubrious sounds might seem like a given considering reggae's association with joy, defiance and spiritual longing, but his history makes the desire to avoid dwelling on darkness entirely understandable. His family was forced to flee Algeria after his father was assassinated in the horrific bloodshed that consumed the country after the military canceled elections won by a hard-line Islamic party in 1991. Fellah's musical mission continues to be shaped by the trauma of exile and violence.

"You keep that wound forever," says Fellah, who still identifies with North Africa, despite not living in the region for decades (sarazino is non-pejorative French slang for people of North African descent). "In my work today, the idea of freedom is very present in all the songs I'm writing and recording."

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Less a bandleader than a producer, Fella has turned Quito, usually considered a cultural backwater, into a musical hotbed. "Ya Foy!" features guest appearances by Jamaican reggae great Toots Hibbert (from Toots and the Maytals), and toaster Blanquito Man from the Latin ska/rock band King Chango. Fella also tapped into Ecuador's hidden musical treasures, such as Benin-born vocalist Revelino Aguidissou, and guitarist Pablo Estrella, while collaborating with lyricists like Spanish poet Isidro García.

"I love to write songs and invite people into my house," Fella says. "I spent a lot of time producing new songs with people, mixing sides, but we haven't really performed much as a band. We did some festivals, but this is really Sarazino's maiden voyage."

For his inaugural U.S. tour, he's assembled a new group featuring a young Ecuadorean rhythm section (bass, guitar and drums) and vocalist François Kency from Ivory Coast, who infuses Sarazino's music with its essential West African feel. Despite the fact that his band is making its debut on some of North America's premier stages, Fella seems sanguine about the challenge of connecting with American audiences.

His label, Cumbancha, is also optimistic about Sarazino's prospects, if not quite as relaxed about the road ahead. Rather than releasing "Ya Foy!" on Putumayo World Music directly, the label's founder and owner Jacob Edgar created another business model, Cumbancha Discovery, for largely unknown musicians who partner with him on projects.

Edgar first encountered Fella when he was in Ecuador as head of A&R and music research for Putumayo. He included Sarazino tracks on the popular compilations "World Party" and "Latin

Reggae." Once he launched his new label, Jacob couldn't resist Fella's sound and story.

"His whole personal history is fascinating, from Algeria to West Africa to Montreal to Ecuador," Edgar says. "Reggae is the base, and he puts a different spin on it. I call reggae the skeleton key of music, since it fits in almost any lock. You can put it in almost any recipe and make it taste better. My biggest reservation is that Fella's not known, but he has such a positive spirit. I've put out about 18 records so far, and I love them all, but his record I never get sick of."

### Sarazino

When: 5:30 p.m. Thursday

Where: Plaza de Cesar Chavez, Market Street between San Fernando and San Carlos streets, San Jose

Admission: Free

Also: 8:30 p.m. June 23, Moe's Alley, 1535 Industrial Way, Santa Cruz, \$9, \$12, 831-479-1854, [www.moesalley.com](http://www.moesalley.com)

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