

Woman on the Verge of a Nervous Breakthrough

As leader of Tango Conspiracy, and a producer in her own right, Jimena Fama is making her play for fame

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Jimena Fama, the elegant frontwoman for the electronic fusion band Tango Conspiracy, can call her ensemble of male musicians to task with a quick dart of her piercing brown eyes. But once in a while, the quiet intensity becomes too much. There was, for instance, the gig last summer at the Delano when her DJ, Marc Marshall, leaned over after a packed show and gently told her, "You can't take this stuff *sooo* seriously."



Tango Conspiracy: Can someone take our order?

Details:

Jimena Fama's music is available locally at Base, 939 Lincoln Rd, Miami Beach, or online at her Website, www.maktubrecords.com

Subject(s): [Jimena Fama](#), [Tango Conspiracy](#)

But ask the Argentinian wunderkind outright if she thinks she's too demanding and she'll tell you, "Yes, and I should probably be *more* demanding." Then she giggles sweetly, exposing the charm that invariably soothes her bandmates, and has won them over to her ambitious mix of traditional tango and electronic funk.

"She's striving for perfection, which is a good thing. Jimena likes everything tight, and that's a challenge because all the musicians are trying to keep up with her," Marshall explains.

Although she's only 26 years old, and a relative newcomer to Miami, Fama has already created quite a stir — as a performer, composer, and producer. She chooses her words, and her creative projects, carefully. In fact you might say Fama is *of* the local music scene but not really *in* it. Just about everyone in Miami's world music scene knows and admires her work. But she's usually too busy in her home studio concocting her chilled-out lounge music to visit local jam sessions.

Her talent for composition and performance, combined with her smooth marketing skills and a manic production schedule, have led her to develop a series of ambient CDs for Graziano's, an Argentine restaurant chain, on her own label, Maktub Records. She's also contributed to numerous compilations in the United States and Europe.

When Fama does get out, it's usually for highbrow performances. Her fledgling band has already opened for the likes of Oscar-winning troubadour Jorge Drexler. For dance gigs, she enlists the full five-man Tango Conspiracy outfit. The troupe produces a satiny mix of acid jazz, bossa nova, and dub, layered over a tango foundation. For more subdued shows at jazz clubs, Fama strips the band down to classical piano, percussion, and guitar, offering a repertoire of American and Latin jazz and bossa nova, some originals, some covers.

Fama's eclecticism traces back to her youth in Buenos Aires. Hailing from a non-musical family, her ear was open to everything. At age eleven she began piano lessons, plunking out classic American and British rock, jazz, and funk, as well as bossa nova and tango. Hoping to emulate those sounds on the strings, she picked up guitar next. A quick learner, Fama completed a bachelor's degree in music, art, and advertising at nineteen.

After a year in Hewlett-Packard's advertising department, recording a demo CD in the evenings, she got restless-cubicle syndrome and started planning her great escape. "I realized that I was spending my workday thinking about getting back to the studio to make music," she recalls.

When her father died later that year, Fama packed her suitcase for a week in the countryside, then changed her mind and boarded a plane to Miami, a place she'd always thought about visiting. "I turned twenty on the plane ride over," recalls Fama during a lunch interview at South Beach's Argentine bistro Panizza.

Fama's sleek black hair, fine facial features, olive skin, and petite frame make her a striking archetype of the Argentine woman. She wears the image with class. On this day, she looks all grown up in a pink dress shirt, slacks, and heels, with her guitar sitting next to her. (She didn't want to leave it in her vintage two-seater convertible for fear someone might rip the top off and steal her instrument.)

The conversation is interrupted momentarily when she asks the waitress — a fellow *bonairense* — for a fork and knife to eat her empanada. "Oh, excuse me," the waitress says with surprise. "This is the first time an Argentine has ever asked for utensils with an empanada."

Fama smiles apologetically. "Yeah, I know, it's rather unusual," she says. Everything about Fama is unusual, though. While most artists spend years fumbling for the right contacts, Fama has a way of gliding into perfect scenarios. As soon as she made her move to Miami, Derek Lopez, an old friend and successful local Argentine musician, put her in touch with pop music producer Tony Bongiovi (cousin of rock icon Jon Bon Jovi).

Bongiovi liked her demo tape so much that he offered to master the songs in his studio, free of charge. Fama was soon collaborating with him on stock music for use in movies and television. After a year, she was itching to break out on her own, to explore world-beat versions of electronic music.

"Normally you go into a studio, play your music, sing, and then take off. I would stay in there following every single step because I was so fascinated by the editing and arranging. All I wanted to do was learn," she recalls. "When everyone would run off to lunch, I would stay there examining all the equipment."

Inspired by her tenacity, Bongiovi's producers helped Fama set up a home studio in 2002, where her conspiratorial mix of electro-world sounds began to pulsate. She soon realized she needed the support of a band, so one evening she walked into Jazid and

started handing out business cards. First to sign up was French bassist and producer Cedric Munch, who confessed he didn't have a bass in Miami.

She drove him to the music store the next day to buy one, a gesture that sparked an ongoing collaboration between the two artists. "I really fell in love with her pure, soft voice," Munch says. "Then I noticed her humility and her talent as a producer. She really puts the music ahead of herself as an artist."

For the next year the two performed their mix of bossa nova and jazz at various Beach haunts. Occasionally they recorded songs and put them up for sale online. By 2004 Fama was exploring experimental tango in the studio, and in early 2006 she added DJ Marc Marshall for electronics and percussion, and more traditional musicians including pianist Howard Schneider, guitarist Cezar Santana, and veteran *bandoneón* player Alberto Quiroga in a live lineup that would become known as Tango Conspiracy.

Meanwhile in 2005 Fama founded her own label, Maktub Records, under which she composed and produced the two ambient albums for Graziano's, *Electro Dub Tango* and *Electro Dub Tango Meets Bossa Nova*. She also collaborated on and began distributing Munch's own acid jazz compilation, *Lullabye Mood*. It took Fama just four months to record *Electro Dub Tango Meets Bossa Nova*, and she did it all by herself. "I used to stay up for days on end editing and mixing. I wouldn't even want to eat," says Fama, now picking mindlessly at her chicken empanada with her fork.

Fama composes melodies — some modern, some based on traditional South American tunes — and then records the instrumental tracks, performing them by herself or with musicians she contracts in Argentina and Miami. After adding a few of her own soothing vocals to the mix, she splices the sounds together to create a geomusical journey.

For Fama, the production is as magical as the composition. "The names of the songs, the themes, the order in which they appear [on the album] is a way of making dreams more concrete, more real," she says.

Fama's dreamy tunes have become favorites on lounge music compilations (she's widely featured on European mixes) as well as soundtracks. She has three songs, for instance, on the recent documentary *La Gata*, which chronicles the resilient life of

local 79-year-old tango interpreter María Angelica. [Full disclosure: As the filmmaker, I selected Fama's songs.]

Ask Fama about plans for the future and she'll say — earnestly and emphatically — that she's creating that future every moment of every day. She approaches her music, like everything else, with an urgent sense of mission.

This notion is embedded in the very name of her label, Maktub Records, which was inspired by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho. In his novel, *The Alchemist*, a young shepherd departs on a mystical voyage to understand the Arab term *maktub*. The expression, which translates to "it is written," suggests that engraved within the soul of each person is a mission, and that one should pay careful attention to the signs in order to find it. "We all have dreams waiting for us to search for them because they want to take on a life of their own," Fama explains. "They have our name. It's written."

Her accomplishments thus far lead one to wonder if there's something prophetic about a name. In English, of course, hers translates as "fame."