



Francisco Centeno Holds Down *Hairspray*

BY CHRIS JISI

"This is like no other band on Broadway," says Francisco Centeno, leading the way down to *Hairspray*'s orchestra pit. The musical version of John Waters's campy 1988 film has already surpassed the record for advance ticket sales set by *The Producers*. As the 15-member unit begins assembling, mingling about are session heavies like guitarists David Spinozza and Peter Calo, saxophonist David Mann, trombonist Birch Johnson, and drummer Clint DeGanon (best known to bassists as Will Lee's partner in the Hiram Bullock trio). And then there's Centeno, a first-call studio anchor since the mid '70s—that's him on such hits as Ashford & Simpson's "Solid as a Rock" and Diana Ross's "The Boss." His session work led to current high-profile roles as Aretha Franklin's bassist and sub duty for Lee on the Letterman show. Credit Broadway's No. 1 contractor, bassist John Miller, for putting together this outfit. "John is the best at matching musicians with the right show," Francisco says. "We rehearsed and edited music from the Seattle production for three days, recorded the cast album, and they began previews."

Upon entering the pit's blackened interior—some eight feet beneath a hole in the stage where musical director/keyboardist Lon Hoyt peers over the boards at the actors—Centeno's well-equipped

corner can be found to the right, in front of the drum booth and next to Spinozza. Hanging on the wall is his main bass, a Hartke XK-5 aluminum-neck 5-string, sporting Dean Markley Will Lee-gauge SR2000 Super Rounds. Wedged beneath his chair is a Hartke Kickback 15 combo. To his left is a Sabine rack tuner and a Masque Sound Pitmix 16-track monitoring mixer with headphones. (Francisco creates his own mix of each band member plus the singers onstage. The sophisticated mixing system demands a click track, a bit unusual for a Broadway pit band.) Straight ahead is one of several video monitors for the musicians to watch Hoyt's cues. Only DeGanon has an additional monitor with the onstage action, which he uses to coordinate some second-act drum hits.

With everyone in place for the curtain, Hoyt counts off the prologue, and energy surges through the cramped quarters. By the first song in Scene 1, "The Nicest Kids in Town," Centeno is bouncing in his seat, nailing the "Cool Jerk"-style groove. Following some underscore (background music), the band moves into the medium shuffle "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now." Francisco's ghosted pickups and spontaneous upper register fills inject feel and emotion into his written part, and the vibe quickly spreads throughout the pit and into the house. By the time the electrified

ensemble reaches the greasy grind of "The Madison," Centeno and DeGanon are anticipating bar lines together and shooting each other smiles. The first ballad of the evening, the "Sea of Love"-like "It Takes Two," settles things down. Francisco veers from the notation at the bridge to play a different rhythmic line, which he has penciled in above the staff. "The original bridge part was a continuation of the verse part, and it needed to be broken up," he explains. Adding and altering are not the only changes he makes: On "Big, Blonde and Beautiful," he simplifies his written part to make it flow, ghosting some notes and leaving out others altogether.

Although *Hairspray*—the story of a high-

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school girl who dreams of dancing on a local TV show—is set in 1962 Baltimore, score composer Marc Shaiman takes some liberties. He encompasses later Motown styles ("Run and Tell That!"), James Brown feels ("You Can't Stop the Beat"), and even '70s grooves ("Without Love"). As a result, Centeno can get away with his 5-string's low B as well as tasteful slap sections on all three tunings. He also contends with rumba and swing feels (in two and in four).

How does he maintain his enthusiasm, show after show? "For me, the quality of the songs is what keeps it vital. I try to play the show like it's an R&B gig: I listen to the singers and where they're going instead of just mechanically reading the parts. Also, the band plays off each other; if one of us throws in a lick, the rest of us are right on top of it. We have fun." Shaiman agrees: "Francisco is tremendous. From the first rehearsal he sort of became the band's centerpiece with his freshness and inventiveness. He plays the show every night like he enjoys it, and it's infectious." DeGanon concurs, "Francisco is our shining light down there."

Lately Centeno (<http://pages.prodigy.net/fcenteno>) has been doing TV theme work for *The View*, *Montell Williams*, and *Monday Night Football*. He can also be heard on an upcoming Anita Baker CD. The rest of the time you can find him under the Neil Simon Theater, fortifying the *Hairspray* roots. **BP**