



Ernie Sanchez, right, owner of Norma Jean's and Franco's Restaurant, kissing Francine—the first “Mrs. Franco’s”

Ernie Sanchez claims to be experiencing a lot of stress. The man who in two short years has turned Norma Jean's, a run-down Castroville bar and grill, into the hottest Latino gay nightspot between San Francisco and LA, has just ten days more to bring off one of the most ambitious events of his career, a dinner and dance “Evening of Unity” for the Latino AIDS Task Force and *Salud Para La Gente*. “At the meeting last week,” he says,

QUEEN OF HEARTS

“instead of blowing my top I just got up and left.”

But as he ladles cream and then one, two, three teaspoons of sugar into his coffee, Ernie looks anything but anxious. He's wearing a purple and black shirt and thick black-frame glasses; there's a diamond studded ring as big as a jaw breaker on his wedding finger and a bar of green jade set in gold on his pinky. Above his widow's peak Ernie's hair is cut in a streamlined mod pompadour. His new mus-



tache is coming in strong and neat.

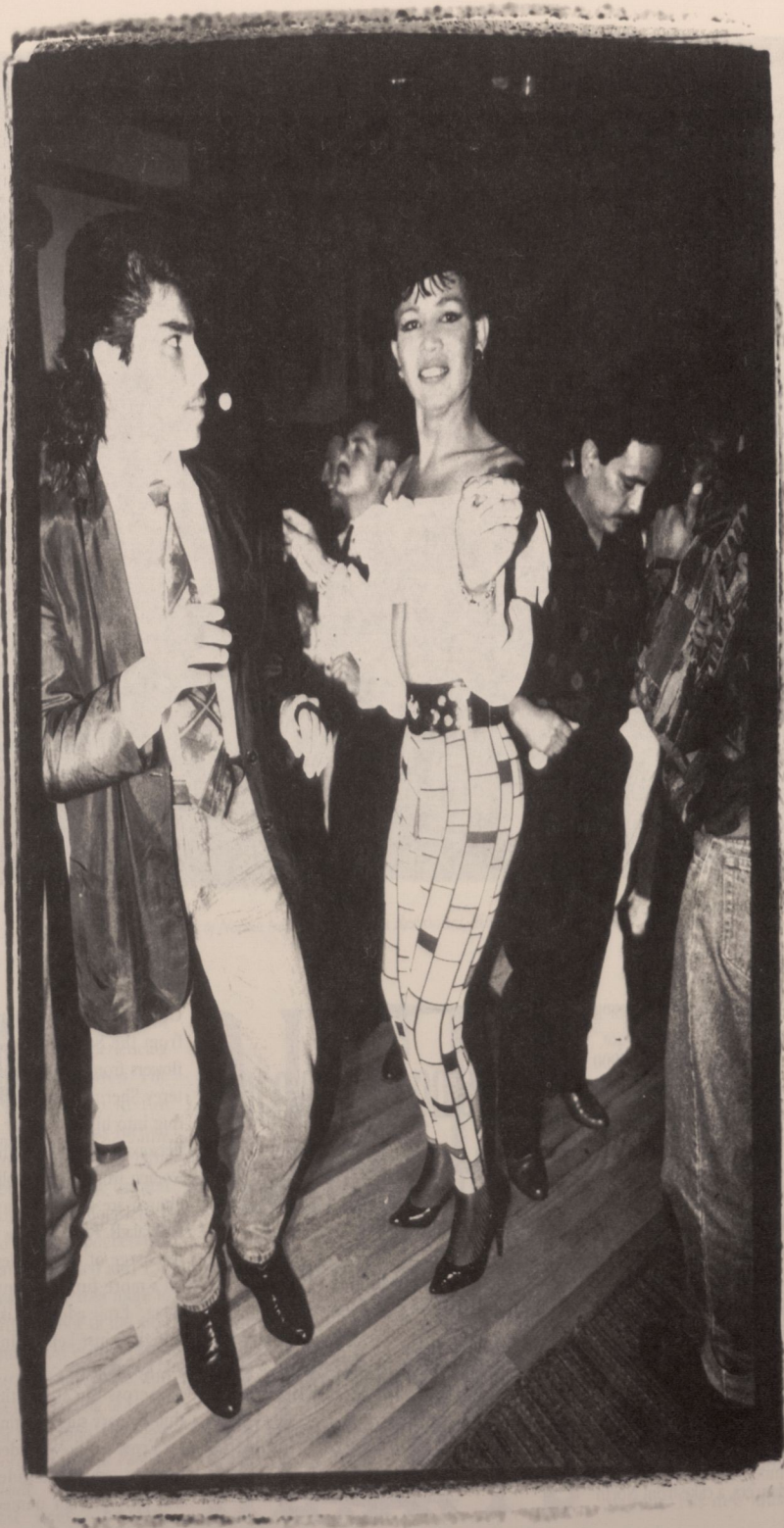
And in fact, with \$900 in raffle tickets and \$1300 in cash collected in advance, the "Unity" extravaganza already looks like a winner. "I didn't know I was such a good hustler," Ernie says. He got his signmaker to donate a neon sign as a raffle prize, a pledge from his plumber, tablecloths from the linen company, a free band, *marachis* courtesy of Watsonville grower Monico Romero, the deFranco dancers, a cake from North

Dancing till Dawn in the Artichoke Capital of the World

BY CARTER WILSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BROOK DILLON

County Bakery, balloons from the Salinas florist, flowers from Gilroy. Monterey Sheriff Norm Hicks dug into his pocket for a personal contribution. The women from the Catholic church are doing desserts and salads, *Pueblos Unidos* is in charge of the tamales. "It's more fun than anything," Ernie admits, "Like a high. I just kept going and going."

Across the street the thin January sun is setting on Ernie's yellow-facaded domain, which includes not only the bar named



after the 1951 Artichoke Festival Queen who went on to bigger things, but Franco's Restaurant and a Norma Jean gift shop as well. Now 36, Ernie has had the business for five years. Before that he spent ten years behind the bar at Mariano's in Salinas, though he himself doesn't drink. ("The only *vicio* I have is men," he says.)

Ernie thinks in the beginning the owners gave him the lease to Franco's, historically an Anglo-Italian restaurant, to spite Castroville. "It was the shock of the town, me being Mexican, being 31, and being gay." He brought with him Vicki, who's the cook (and currently proud holder of the title of Miss Franco's). "They thought we were lovers, but we weren't," says Ernie, "and they called us queers, *jotos*."

Ernie began catering to a Mexican clientele. But when there got to be too much fighting in the bar, he had to throw some people out. They in turn threatened to boycott him. "It was all just too stressful," he recalls, "I had always wanted to open a gay bar and call it La Noa Noa. And I started thinking 'When am I ever going to get my gay bar?' (And you know I *always* do get my way.) So I stood up to them. The following week I started gay night. I was within an inch of getting my ass kicked, but I stood up to them. And that's what you have to do."

Ernie gives generous credit to his friend Jesse. One Saturday right after Ernie started his gay night, Jesse went to After Dark in Monterey where they were having a drag show and spread the word among the Latinos there that they should come over to Castroville and support their own bar. "And about 12:30 that night," as Ernie remembers it, "a big old crowd came in."

Those first shock troops included the indefatigable Francine, current Empress of Monterey and Norma Jean's usual Mistress of Ceremonies, and three other drag queens from Salinas. Ernie's policy is, "Drags have always been welcome here. I say if they have balls enough to get up and do a show, then go for it." He encourages lesbians to strut their stuff too, although at the moment only Debbie will step into the limelight. He also encourages the guys who lip-sync to male singers.

"What do we call them?" Ernie shrugs and shows his fine, regular toothy smile. "Male impersonators, I guess."

The other three original "girls" turn out to be a disappointment. "They became drags here. This is

where they learned how to do it. But then they started going into straight bars and passing themselves off and they didn't come here anymore. When Francine started doing it too, I had to get up and do the mike."

That was the beginning of Ernie's own career as an emcee. Nowadays, even though Francine has come back and generally reigns overwhelmingly at Saturday's 11 PM show, Ernie himself is no longer shy about getting up and pulling a laugh or a big hand for the next performer out of his widely bilingual audience.

"Ora un aplausa por favor para—FULANA! Es su ultima presentacion aca, senoras. Ya se va, porque no es mas que una pinche lechuguera!"

The Mexican transvestite tradition has many outposts in California including Esta Noche in the city and St. John's in San Jose. In his free time, Ernie has taken to visiting other places where *travestis* put on shows, and to following his own regulars—Paloma, Vicki, Francine, Madonna—to lend them support. Surprisingly, Ernie thinks Watsonville has always had more drags than Salinas. "Watsonville treats 'em rough, though. They'll take 'em out to the beach, tie 'em up and fuck the hell out of 'em." Drags in Salinas used to hang out mostly in Chinatown, at a place called the Wagonwheel, now gone. There is even an occasional lip-sync show at a bar in the little agricultural town of Huron. "But not at this time of year," he says. "Those are the *lechugueras*, the drags who follow the lettuce. By now they're in Yuba, Indio...."

Ernie attributes the success of Norma Jean's to the way he provides what his crowd wants, and to the fact that he's there all the time. "The reason there isn't any trouble in my place is that I circulate, I'm in the bar, and everybody knows me. They have a certain respect for me. This year I got over fifty Christmas cards. It was really touching."

Though he wants Norma Jean's to be atmospherically friendly to all gays and lesbians, Ernie pays special attention to his Latino customers. "I give them mariachis four times a year, on *Dieciseis de Septiembre*, *Cinco de Mayo*, my birthday [June 1] and the anniversary of my going gay [February 16]. Food, theme nights, the Mr. Franco's Contest, the Marilyn Monroe Drag Lookalike Contest—" Ernie's held three or four gay wedding parties at the club and looks forward to doing more.

Despite success, there is still criticism and prejudice. Ernie digs out a clipping from the Watsonville *Pajaronian* where, obviously for journalistic "balance" the writer ends his story with

◆
"One night this woman at the bar complained to me, 'There's nothing but Mexicans in here,' so I told her, 'If you don't like it, then you can get the fuck out.'"



Veronica

the grandson of the original owners of Franco's saying, "My grandmother would turn over in her grave." Still exasperated, Ernie indicates the Artichoke Capital of the World's dusty main street, the heavy trucks lumbering by. "Look at this town. Everything's all boarded up and I'm successful, bringing in business. And they want to close *me* down."

But he keeps plugging. The upcoming benefit will be held at the Castroville Community Center instead of at Norma Jean's so straight people will feel comfortable coming. "This fundraiser is to reunite Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties," Ernie says. "The Monterey County AIDS Project wasn't doing anything for the Latino community until I did something. If you ask, 'Why aren't you doing anything?' they say you're racist. But that's already changing."

Racism is one thing this generally tolerant man has no patience with. "One night this woman at the bar complained to me, 'There's nothing but Mexicans in here,' so I told her 'If you don't like it, then you can get the fuck out.'"

By now, evening and some salty fog have come in.

Time for me to go. On the way out, that old one more question, *la del estribo*. "Ernie, do you ever think about dressing up yourself?"

"That's what they're always asking for—and the one thing I wouldn't give them," he says. "Then at Christmas I was upstairs and I noticed this red dress hanging there and I thought, 'Would that fit me?' So I tried it on, and it did. Made me look 50 pounds lighter. So I did it. Actually all I had to do was put on the nylons. Vicki and Paloma did the rest. Combed me out and everything. All in an hour."

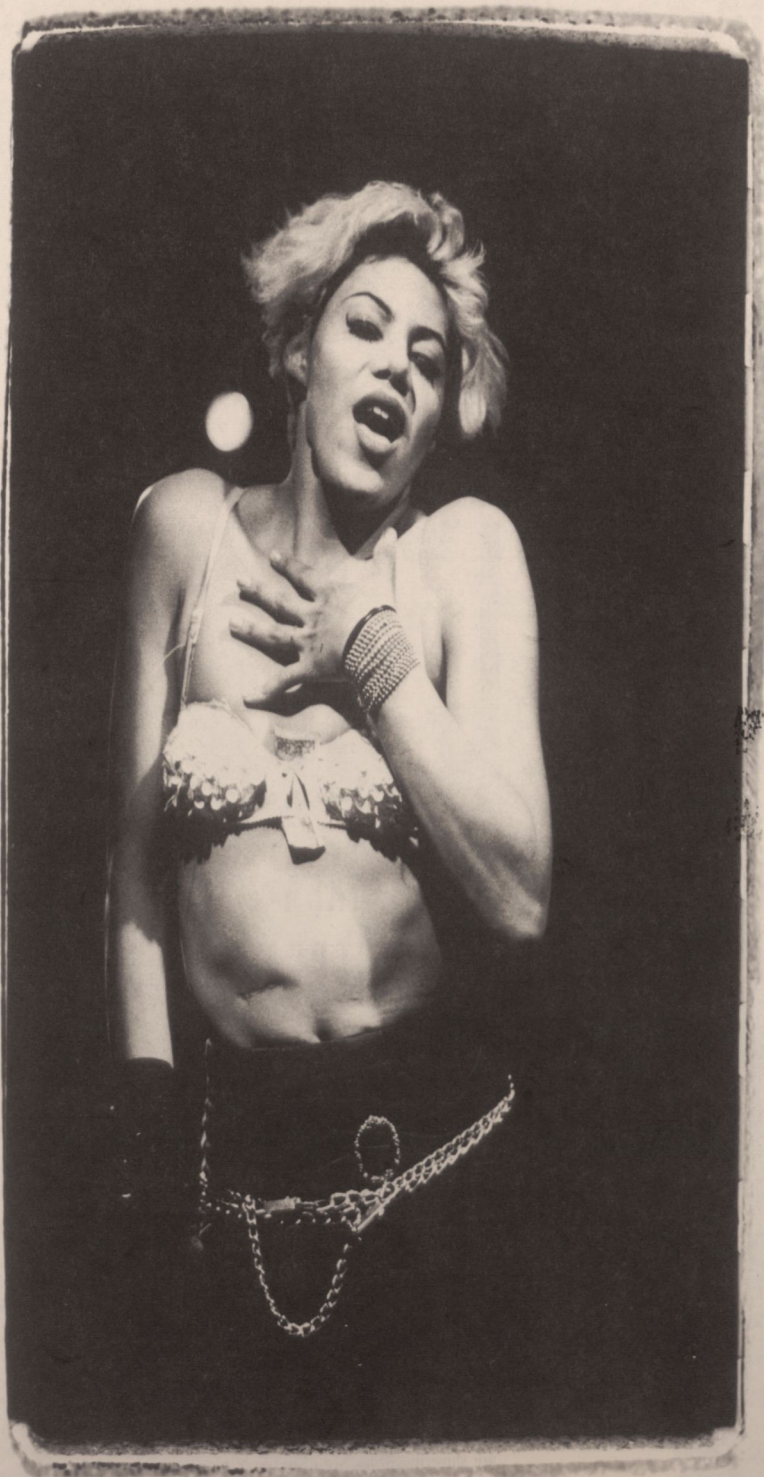
They didn't have to stuff the front of the dress. "Didn't need to," he says, briefly weighing one of the *dichis* inside his shirt, "I've got plenty already."

"But you shaved your mustache."

"Oh yeah, mustache, the whole bit."

And his drag character's name? "Well," Ernie explains, "you know they call the great Mexican singer Lola Beltran *Madre de Todos los Mexicanos*. So I just called myself *Lola Beltran, Madre de Todos los Jotos*." ♦

This article originally appeared in the Spring 1992 Lavender Reader (from Santa Cruz County, California).



Madonna