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Passion for samba, carnival fuels Brazilian businessman

By VANESSA PETIT
Associated Press Writer

MIRAMAR, Fla. --

Paulo Gualano sits in the middle of his living room, energetically strumming his guitar while singing a medley of samba songs and ballads. A drum set is in the kitchen. His two-car garage is packed with instruments, beaded bikinis and nylon stockings, and costumes neatly wrapped in plastic bags. Wildly colored feathered headpieces hang on the walls.

Gualano's is passionate about samba and Brazil's carnival, one of the world's best-known street celebrations. That passion fueled the growth of his samba performance company, Brazilian & Latin Sounds Co., which he operates from his home in Miramar, just north of Miami.

His dancers and percussionists have traveled throughout the United States and the world performing Brazilian carnival shows, including at the Second Annual Greater Miami Mardi Gras celebration on Sunday.

Although his samba school is smaller than the ones that parade through the streets of Rio de Janeiro and Bahia during carnival celebrations, Gualano's company exudes the spirit of carnival: shimmying dancers in skimpy beaded and feathered attire and unrelenting drummers beating out rapid-fire samba tunes.

Brazil's annual four-day, pre-Lenten bash, which wound down Wednesday morning, is traditionally a time for Brazilians and tourists to drink and dance the night away.

"There is no bigger party anywhere in the world," said Gualano, who himself has never actually been to Rio during carnival.

Still, samba is in his blood. "Samba is a rhythm that is taught from one generation to the next," Gualano said. "To dance the samba is in one's nature, as is to play the music."

Katia Santos, a samba dancer from Rio de Janeiro who has been with Gualano's school for more than 11 years, said Gualano runs his business by the book.

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"He works like a general. He knows how to lead his troops," she said. "That is something hard to come by in this business. We work and he pays and his checks don't bounce."

A self-taught musician, Gualano plays the guitar, the drums and all types of percussion instruments. "I have a good ear for music and practice until I get the right notes," he said.

Gualano, 47, first arrived in the United States 29 years ago as a teenager. "My dream was to become a famous rock and roll drummer," he said. "I grew up listening to Led Zeppelin and the Beatles."

He first moved to Chicago with family friends, finished high school there and eventually dropped out of business school at Loyola University. He moved to Miami and found a job playing guitar in a Brazilian restaurant.

After seeing him perform, members of the Kiwanis Club of Calle Ocho invited him to participate in one of their festivals.

"Can you imagine I had just two drums, one girl in a bikini but it was the start of something bigger," he said. "From there everything just happened naturally."

His company now performs about 100 shows a year, mostly for Latin and American customers. The cost of his shows depends on the number of dancers, drummers and costumes that will be used. His shows can cost from \$7,000 to \$12,000 but he charges much less for smaller performances.

Gualano travels once every two years to Rio de Janeiro to buy new carnival costumes. The prices range from \$2,000 to \$8,000, depending on the beads, feathers and other detailing. Some of costumes can be as tall as 9 feet, including the headpieces and weigh up to 90 pounds.

Ringo Cayard, founder of the Greater Miami Mardi Gras celebration, hired Gualano last year and again for this year's parade. Gualano is the main event with 40 drummers and 12 dancers.

"It's not just the show that he puts on. It's his personality. He is a detail maniac, a perfectionist," Cayard said. "When you see Paulo leading his drummers and his beautiful girls with such elaborate costumes, it's like they are coming down from heaven."

On the Net:

Brazilian & Latin Sounds Co.: www.aboutshow.net



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