

Caribbean band gets audience on its feet at city's summer concert series

By Charnaie Gordon

Grupo Fantasia, a Latin American/Caribbean band from Boston, Mass., kicked off the annual Community Health Center's free summer concert series on July 12. The concert was held in the North End at the Luis Lopez Community Herb Garden, located at the intersection of Main and Green streets, and was sponsored by The Middletown Commission on the Arts and The Community Health Center.

The Luis Lopez Community Garden used to be an abandoned, trash-filled parking lot. The garden was started several years ago by a group of volunteers that wanted to create more green space on Main Street and rejuvenate the North End of Middletown. The volunteers also thought it would be nice to have a quiet place of serenity in an area known for its bustling city atmosphere.

Mary Farnsworth, art director, manager and swing dance teacher at Vinnie's Jump and Jive, was in charge of overseeing the concert and selecting Grupo Fantasia as one of this year's performers. Farnsworth wanted to create a summertime theme and have a fun, edgy band that could get people dancing for the two-hour concert.

Judging by the reaction of the crowd to the upbeat music and catchy lyrics, Farnsworth selected the perfect group for the occasion. People learned how to do the salsa, cha-cha and merengue

from a salsa dance teacher that was in the audience. Near the end of the concert, people even formed a conga line and danced around the fountain in the garden.

"I decided to choose Grupo Fantasia after listening to their music clips online and reading about them on the website matchbook.com," Farnsworth said. "I also appreciated the groups' broad and deep sense of music history and hope audience members learn some of that history while having a great time. I also hope some people are exposed to different kinds of music they may not have heard before. I want to broaden the cultural events in Middletown and celebrate music that a lot of people in our community are familiar with."

Grupo Fantasia began performing together in 1993 under the direction of Angel Wagner, the groups' bandleader and master percussionist. The group started with a few members from Wagner's

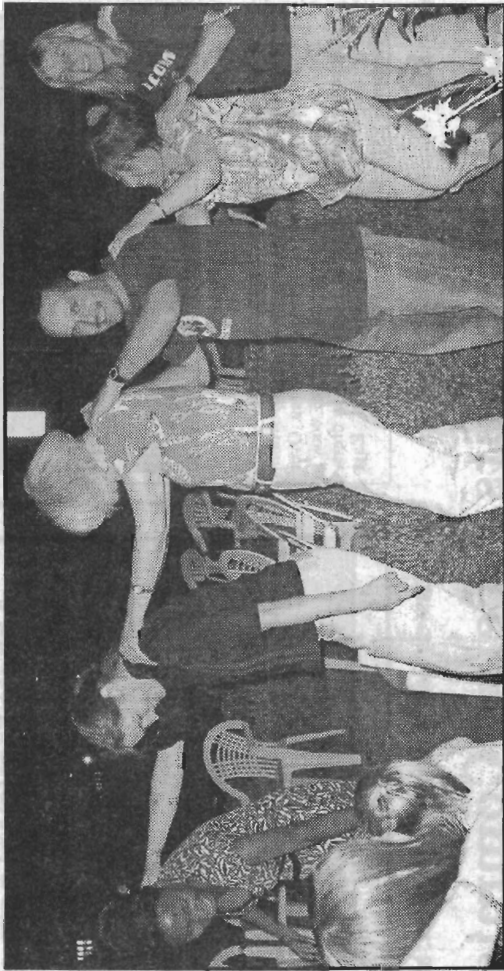


Photo by Charnaie Gordon

Audience members form a conga line during a performance of Grupo Fantasia, a Caribbean band that performed July 12 in the Luis Lopez Community Herb Garden in the North End of Middletown.

church more than 15 years ago. Since Wagner comes from a family with a musical background, it made sense for him to start his own band after graduating from Berklee College of Music in Boston.

"American people are in love with the salsa and merengue songs we sing," Wagner said. "We get a great response from the audience members each

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