



## Carlito's way

BY SANDY M. FERNÁNDEZ

Carlos Leon **does not** want to go on a date with me

He and *Latina* have been hashing it out for days, and he won't say no, but he won't say yes, either. What he does is set conditions. He won't do a photo shoot, he says. He won't talk about Her. And, above all, he will not do the story that *Latina* wants: "A Date with Carlos Leon."

Which is a big problem. Because despite our inducement, for us, it's all about Madonna. What is it like, we wonder, to go out with the guy the Material Girl dumped after he gave her the pretty Latino genes to create daughter Lourdes Maria Ciccone Leon?

Then as negotiations drag on, our interest begins to shift. Leon is engaging, funny. The guy *Details* magazine declared a "has-been" is now a struggling actor but still refuses to play his publicity trump card.

Maybe we're *babosas*. But by the time Carlos decides (against the advice of his agent) to give us his first print interview after the breakup, we're willing to give him a chance. Because if it weren't for Madonna, Carlos Leon would be a success story, not a has-been.

"Isn't this place great?"

A full six feet tall, 32-year-old Carlos Manuel Leon is a monument to exercise and nutrition. He's one of those men who makes others around him look *machacados*. Dressed completely in *color crema*, standing at the edge of a lake in Central Park, he looks like a disco Jesus, all flowing hair, smooth brown skin, perfect limbs. He has the longest, lushest eyelashes I've ever seen on a grown man.

Leon has chosen to start our afternoon here, just a stone's throw from where he grew up. As ducks paddle placidly nearby, he tells me he used to come here to escape that then-tough neighborhood. "Up the street were the projects," he says. "There were bums in the hallways, drugs, knifings."

Leon was no angel: He scribbled graffiti and "got into a lot of fights" growing up. His Cuban American parents—still in their teens when he was born—raised him with a strong immigrant work ethic and a belief that there was a future out there for him. But after graduating from high school in 1984, he drifted, doing a little college and a spate of jobs, including racing bicycles competitively. Then he found the career he became famous for.

"I needed a job," he says. "Bike racing wasn't cutting it, so I started working at a gym. I loved it, and I was good at it."

Sure, people laughed at the news that all-powerful Madonna had been impregnated by a personal trainer. But in New York—where the right boutique salesgirl can earn six figures—top-notch hairstylists and trainers can become minor celebrities. Leon made a name for himself, and he made a good living, charging well-heeled clients *dinerazo* to benefit from his determination and gritty optimism. He also started studying acting, thinking that the skills he



brought to the gym could be used in front of the camera.

"I'm not the best trainer in the world," he says now, "but I'm a good motivator. Even when I felt like crap, I'd go in there and be the happiest guy in the world. It's acting."

It was then, at 27, that he met Madonna. For two years, they kept their relationship pretty much out of the public eye. But in 1996, she became the Material Mom-to-be and, in typical style, revealed both that fact and the baby's paternity in a gossip column.

Overnight, Carlos Leon, star trainer, became Carlos Leon, boy toy. At first, most press was condescendingly fascinated. ("What exactly makes a couple click is a matter best left to the philosophers [or Oprah]," wrote *People* magazine). But after the couple's split in May 1997, the media was downright vicious. Even Rush Limbaugh weighed in, telling Madonna that if she ever wanted another child, she should "do what

'Like every good father, I support my daughter'

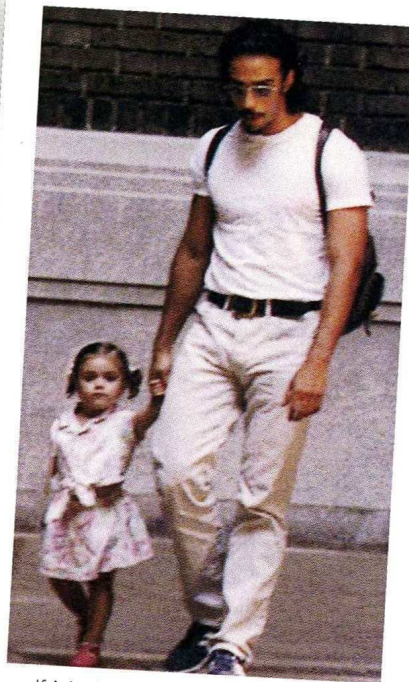
you did [before]. Take a walk in the park, stake out some gang member-type guy...pay [him]...and bed him."

When I ask him about this last jibe, Leon explodes, but not at Limbaugh.

"Madonna and I had a loving two-year relationship, and that's all I'm going to tell you, that's all," he snaps. It's the first time I see him get testy. He'd told me earlier that he's "very anti-press," but all afternoon he's not once gone off the record or refused to answer a question. This feels like a fit he's been expecting to throw.

Redirected toward Limbaugh, he shrugs off the comment.

"First of all, that's racist. We're not all gang members," he says. "He's just ignorant. And that's his problem, not mine."



If Madonna calls, I'm not here.  
(Leon with Lourdes in July 1998.)

This invulnerability, a rock-solid and even bull-headed sense of self, is one of Leon's strongest characteristics, inexplicably overlooked in the press. A profile for *Vanity Fair*,

tee. Unlike previous partners, he has not told all. In fact, he has said nothing. And if, as has been widely speculated, Madonna provided him with a payoff or any kind of palimony when they split up, he's doing a damned good job of impersonating a starving actor.

Leon lives in a small apartment in Los Angeles, goes on auditions *como todos los demás* for the usual bit gang member and drug-dealer roles, and takes jobs where he can get them. His recurring role last year as an auto detailer on TV's *Nash Bridges* was one of his biggest so far. Most parts have been more like the one in the film *The Replacement Killers*, where his character died in the first five minutes. His first starring role is in John Mendoza's *Adventures of a Catholic Atheist*, which is due out soon but needs a quick cash infusion in order to finish production. Leon cares deeply about the independent black comedy, in which he plays a Chicano who, to the *familia's* horror, renounces his belief in God. The ex-altar boy took the part for no pay.

"I'm living the early-career lifestyle," he says. "But money isn't everything. I guess it helps you live comfortably—like, I need to make money so I can go see my daughter wherever she is—but struggling isn't bad."

As a father, he seems to take comfort in knowing that his daughter is

Madonna's favorite forum, hinted at the role the quality played in their relationship, saying that while most of her boyfriends have seemed "easily controllable, Carlos Leon may not have been as malleable as he looked."

Leon is also, for someone so widely mocked, honorable and dignified to a



Carlos Leon, right, in *Adventures of a Catholic Atheist*.



benefiting from things he never had. "I want her to have material things," he says. "If she wants to take an art class, I want to be able to get it for her. There wasn't money for that sort of thing when I was a kid. I think I'm a good father, and like every good father, I support my baby spiritually, emotionally, and economically."

And what about his plans for Lourdes' cultural heritage? His daughter remains "very Latina," Leon says. "She sees her grandparents a lot, and her mother has Latin

friends. So she's gonna have both worlds, you know what I mean? She'll have the Latin world, and she'll have the world she's in right now. I mean, she has everything."

Leon himself seems to be in the process of reassimilating into the Latin world. At the restaurant we visited (a hip Latino place he hadn't been to in a while), he was the only one who ordered in English, and all the Latin music he told me he and his daughter listen to—Marc Anthony, Cachao, Buena Vista Social Club—sounded more out of the pages of *The New Yorker* than off the Latino airwaves. Meanwhile, Latinas seem to have decided that he's strictly vanilla.

"I'm not the typical Latin guy. I'm not like, 'Your wife should stay home and cook.' My mother is a strong woman, so I'm attracted to powerful, independent women," he says. "But lately, Latin girls are not into me."

"They're not into you?" I ask pointedly.

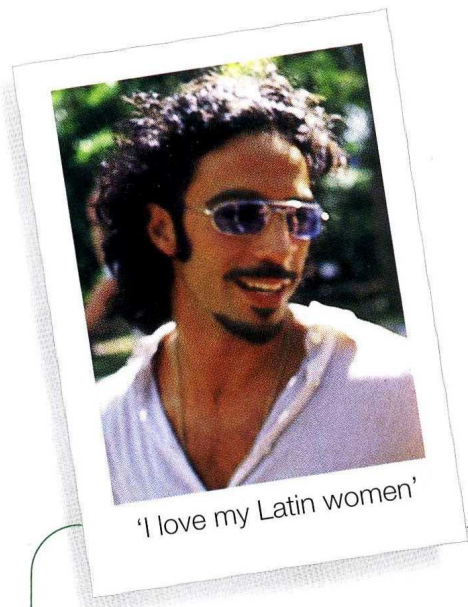
"I'm into Latin girls, let me tell you, honey," he cracks back. "I love

my Latin women. They haven't been coming across. I get more American women, European."

While white folks give him drug-dealer parts in movies and brown girls give him the cold shoulder, Carlos Leon, ever the motivator, soldiers on. Things are, he says, starting to change for him. At the time of our interview, he was filming *The Last Marshal* with Scott Glenn and William Forsyth in Miami, another drug-dealer role but at least a sizable one. He appears in *Tyrone*, a film starring braided rap star Coolio, which is scheduled for release this winter, and *Adventures of a Catholic Atheist* will, he hopes, make him leading-man material.

After we wrap up the interview and the tape recorder is turned off, Leon turns to me with a pensive look on his face. "You think," he asks, "that Latinas could be an audience for me, that they'd be interested in me and not...who I was with?" □

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## A su manera

A los 32 años y con seis pies de estatura, Carlos León parece un dios, con el pelo suelto al aire, y la piel color caramelo.

Sus padres de ascendencia cubana le inculcaron la ética del trabajo y la creencia de que él tendría un futuro mejor que ellos. Asistió a la universidad por un tiempo, y luego tuvo varios empleos hasta que se convirtió en entrenador físico. Comenzó a tomar clases de arte dramático pensando que sus destrezas como entrenador le servirían ante las cámaras.

Conoció a Madonna cuando tenía 27 años. Los amores entre ellos

fueron discretos, hasta el embarazo. De la noche a la mañana, la prensa lo transformó de entrenador estrella al juguete de ella. Los medios expresaron escepticismo, pero cuando se separaron, se enojaron con él.

Cuando se le pregunta sobre eso responde molesto, "Entre Madonna y yo existió una buena relación por dos años y no digo más". Se ha rumorado que Madonna le pagó cuando se separaron pero, si es así, él está haciendo muy bien el papel de actor pobre.

León ocupa un pequeño apartamento y compite como cualquier otro actor para conseguir trabajo. Pero

pronto lo veremos en *Adventures of a Catholic Atheist*, película independiente donde hace un papel estelar.

"Mi estilo de vida es el del actor que empieza. Aunque necesito dinero para visitar a mi hija, no estoy mal". En cuanto a la formación cultural de Lourdes, dice que ella visita a sus abuelos paternos frecuentemente, y que su madre tiene amistades latinas.

Con respecto a lo personal, comenta con preocupación que últimamente las latinas no le prestan atención, y me dice, "¿No te parece que las latinas podrían interesarse en mí y no en con quien estuve?".