

# Rockin' La Casa

Reflections  
on the New  
Latin Groove  
BY ED MORALES

My boy Rodrigo is a Nuyorican from around Jackson Heights way. He's mad into 2 in the Room and Proyecto Uno and all that Latin house flow; he's got La India in his ear and even bugs out on that trippy new King Changó album. He gets on the D.L. with bilingual rappers Delinquent Habits. He's got a soft spot for slow jams, but he believes they're just shadows of Hector Lavoe singing a ballad like "Sombras Nada Mas." He knows that Dominican bachata is the most important and subversive folk music since the '70s' nueva canción. He is an absolutely state-of-the-art Generation Equis Latin music aficionado, but today he's waxing ecstatic about a show he's just seen at Rose-land.

"Did you go see the Sex Pistols?" he shouts, getting all up in my face about it. The Sex Pistols? Just when I thought I had my finger on Rodrigo's music vibe, he throws me a curveball. Maybe it's because Rodrigo, like me, grew up absorbing New York's crazy-quilt culture that he's got such an eclectic range of listening interests, or maybe it's just the times we're living in. The feds may be beefing up the Border Patrol,

## Latin Grooves

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but they can't keep the music from flowing across. After all, the Sex Pistols, as well as Alanis Morissette, have included Mexico City in their recent tours. Where for previous generations, the debate over Latin cool focused on salsa and merengue, the New Latin Groove knows no boundaries and, in fact, thrives on its hybrid consumer profile. Listen, this is not the Age of Macarena. While Latinos are amused by its dogged clinging to the top of the charts, and happy to have our beats noticed for once, we know America's summer dance craze is probably a meaningless mutation of an old Cuban step by some Spaniards vacationing in Havana.

Back in the day, at the Cheetah, the Corso, and the Village Gate, La Musica Latina was a monolithic, salsa-driven culture. The Fania label ruled the airwaves, and singers like Lavoe, Rubén Blades, and Celia Cruz grafted songs of popular protest onto indestructible party grooves. Since then, we've been waiting for a renaissance; instead, in the '80s, we got salsa sensual, a sugar-coated soap-opera music whose leading figures were more heartthrobs than poets, and the ascension of merengue. Outside of Juan Luis Guerra, whose music is more of a world-beat fusion, merengue has limited aesthetic appeal, primarily providing an ecstatic exercise

in booty shaking. Still, merengue is Latin culture's ultimate social barometer: one of the current biggest-selling Latin records is the "Chupacabras Mix" compilation featuring Roka-banda and Rikarena; its title refers to the mysterious "alien" creature whose reign of terror has ruled the trash tabloid shows south of the border.

There has been talk lately about a new generation of salseros, particularly the much-hyped Marc Anthony and

the equally boosted but far more interesting La India. While his voice is commanding, his shows dynamic, and his connection with his audience deep, Anthony seems caught in a limbo between pretty boy and his occasional haunting evocation of Lavoe. Salsa's vitality is currently maintained by the quietly maturing Jerry Rivera, the always downplayed Dominican tenor Jose Alberto, and the Colombian powerhouses Grupo Niche and Joe Arroyo. Isaac Delgado's recent conquering of S.O.B.'s suggests that a lot of New York soneros would be out of work if there were open cultural exchanges between the U.S. and Cuba.

The New Latin Groove is literally about the mix—of traditional and modern music, of world beat and rock and roll. It all started about 10 years ago in the cuchifrito circuit. Between sets of salseros like Eddie Santiago and Lalo Rodriguez at the Palladium, the DJs would rev up Lisa Lisa-style Latin hip-hop and nascent Latin house to keep the kids riveted to the dance floor. Salsa's percussive, repetitive piano runs segued into the synth-driven kineticism of early house, and nothing was lost in the translation.

It's no surprise that La India had her origins in this scene and has a long-time business and personal relationship with club DJ and producer Little Louie Vega. Her recent CD, *Jazzin'*, with Tito Puente and the Count Basie Orchestra, presents another phase in her "rediscovery" of her roots. The loungey album, packed with Latin-flavored

standards, combines Vegas hyperbole and bossa nova cool. La India has an electrifying stage presence, and her voice has inspirational power, albeit sometimes lacking in range. She's number-one New Latin Groove sistah, brandishing her Santería-signifying references to Yemayá (water goddess) and Elegguá (cigar-smoking trickster).

The Latin house legacy of the clubs now manifests itself in carefully manufactured studio groups like Dark Latin Groove and in the raucous hip-house tribalism of club favorites 2 in a Room. DLG, whose moniker offhandedly refers to the ne-grophilic aesthetic of urban Latino culture, is essentially a collaboration between a sonero (Huey Dunbar), a rapper-toaster (James "Da Barba"), and keyboardist, drum programmer, and producer Sergio George, backed by a rhythm section of veteran salsa session players. Their eponymous first record is a collection of New Latin Groove classics, with enough trad salsa to appeal to the nationalist homeboy/girl and enough techno-dancehall percussion to crack the club-hopping whip. My favorite sequence in the album plays with one of New Latin-Groove's strengths: it doesn't fear contradiction. "Triste y Solo (Broken Hearted)," a song about pining for your ex, shifts almost violently into "Suelteame," a jubilant request to be set free of a failing romance.

Like most club music, Latin house isn't something you want to sit around listening to in a five-CD changer with Latin jazz and boleros. But it's a bomb when you're dizzy from kamikazes in some after-work shindig at Spy or Les Poulets. On "Carnival," 2 in a Room's contribution to Cutting Records' compilation *Tumba La Casa*, they "get with the tribal shit," fusing Latin beats, house, and some very bottom-heavy Brazilian carnival drums.

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La India: number-one New Latin Groove sistah

## SalSoul Men

Grupo Niche  
Madison Square Garden  
August 31  
BY CAROL COOPER

Anyone who doubts how close r&b and salsa are in spirit needs to catch a show by Colombia's Grupo Niche. As part of this year's 21st annual Salsa Festival at Madison Square Garden, the band's two lead singers, Javier Vásquez and Willy García, dressed and stepped and sang with as much soulful elegance as the Temptations, the O'Jays, and the Spinners ever had. Vásquez, who has been with Niche for 10 years, currently sports a sexy demeanor and shaven head à la R. Kelly, while the newer vocalist, García, assumes the staccato delivery and emphatic boy language of a hip hopper. In 14 years, Niche has produced 16 albums, of which *Etnia* (Sony Discos) is the latest. The title track is a bold examination of color consciousness with-

in the Latin community—including praise for the cultural contributions of black Latinos and a plea for unity.

To say that Grupo Niche is a "black" band may be a bit of an overstatement, according to how North Americans interpret race and ethnicity. But most of the members of Niche's big band ensemble are visibly people of color—as were the seminal bands and composers of Afro-Cuban music upon which most salsa is based. Lyrically proclaimed pride as Colombians and as people of African descent has always been an important part of Grupo Niche's artistic presentation, setting them apart from many

other popular Latin bands. "Hay Jiménez negro hay Segarra blanco/Hay Rivera negro/Por el hecho que le haya caído menos leche al café todos son Jiménez," they sing on "Etnia."

Jairo Varela, writer, founder, and artistic director of Grupo Niche, is the grandchild of Eladio Martínez, one of Colombia's first black industrialists. His mother was the famous regional poet Teresa de Jesús Martínez Arce. It was Mom who encouraged Varela to form his first band at the age of eight in the little town of Quibdó, where he was born in 1949. In the '70s, he relocated to Bogotá, where he formed Grupo Niche in '82. These days Varela no longer tours with Niche and long ago determined not to be its front man.

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# MUSIC SLIP

## Purple Hearts

The sympathy vote is the white squall of award shows. During Sunday night's ceremony at Webster Hall, the late Michael Callen's posthumously released album, *Legacy*, swept the Gay/Lesbian American Music Awards (GLAMA), nabbing four awards and nine nominations. It was, of course, inevitable. Callen's decade-long fight with AIDS (to which he succumbed three years ago) makes him a martyred soldier. Don't get me wrong: *Legacy* is a stirring compendium. Yet something about the pop-slick album, featuring several song collaborations with Elton John, Ogden Nash, Cris Williamson, and Henry Mancini, leave it poised for canonization.

Celebrating our collective heritage of survival is already one of GLAMA's aims: Ferron and Tom Robinson received what amount to purple hearts for fashioning fertile careers in spite of their openly out status. Along with identifying gay, lesbian, bisexual, and (as Lypsinka quipped) "otherwise confused" recording artists comes the historic necessity of beating back the homophobic past by acknowledging, albeit belatedly, musicians who by standing out have become activist-icons.

Given the diversity of queer music, GLAMA nominees were surprisingly homo-genous: too pop-ballad heavy. "That's one of the big things we want to look at," observes exec producer Tom McCormack, who conceived GLAMA with Michael Mitchell in 1995. The domination of indie-label nominees like Jeff Krassner, Turtle Creek Chorale, Moran, and Karel are good harbingers of what we might expect from this queer-music awards show in the future. If he were alive today, Callea would surely approve. —RANDY GENER

### ALSO IN THIS SECTION

JUAN GABRIEL  
DANILO PEREZ  
LATINO SKA  
JAGUARES

**Jaguares**  
**El Equilibrio**  
**BMC**

In a mystical act of self-transformation, Caifanes, a seminal act in the golden age of Mexican rock, has died and been reborn. After a messy legal spat with lead guitarist Alejandro Marcovich, lyricist-singer Saul Hernandez has reappeared with a new group, Jaguares, and a new album that might be his best. *El Equilibrio's* songs don't depart from the Caifanes formula: anthemic art rock that thematically draws heavily from Mexican legend. In his spooky, raspy tenor, Hernandez ostensibly sings love songs, but between the lines he's making political commentary and dispensing spiritual guidance.

Hoping to break the band to a U.S. audience, BMC flew down several journalists—including this one—for the album's premiere presentation at Mexico City's Auditorio Nacional, where 2000 wildly devoted fans sang along with almost every song. In the midst of a new round of Mexican guerrilla activity, the country's rock scene continues to provide a rallying point for the nation's youth. The video for *El Equilibrio's* first single. >>>

# Morales

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The New Latin Groove, while grounded in urban hybridity, is also taking on an internationalist flavor, especially with recent releases by Colombian neo-vallenato guitarist Amparo Sandino and New York-bred Venezuelans King Changó. Discovered by Mark Kamins, A&R honcho and signer of the Material Girl, Sandino is already delivering big results with her fusionist pop. Her CD *Punto de Partido*, a wide-ranging record that melds traditional favorites like vallenato and cumbia with soca, calypso, and Andalusian gypsy rock, has been high on the Latin charts. "People in Colombia are into everything: punk rock, salsa, even tape-looped Mexican rancheras," she says, after dropping the names of Celia Cruz (her idol), Colombia punk rockers Aterciopelados, and her collaborators for one track on *Punto de Partido*, the Gipsy Kings.

Sandino seems clearly a product of the MTV Latino generation. Headquartered in Miami and serving a rapidly growing youth culture in much of Latin America and pockets of the U.S., MTV Latino plays Sandino fol-

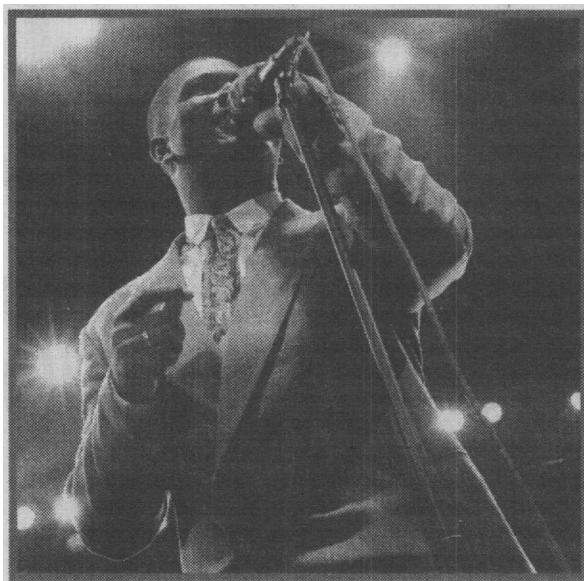
lowed by Argentine prog rockers Soda Stereo followed by Mexican juggernauts like Jaguares, breaking down old rivalries between nationalities. But due to the corporate politics that decide which channel we'll see on our Time Warner entertainment filter, MTV Latino is unavailable in most of the New York area.

Another MTV Latino natural, and perhaps David Byrne's dream band, is King Changó, whose new Luaka Bop release offers a greatly enhanced ver-

sion of the versatility they've demonstrated in countless area shows. After expanding their horn section and fleshing out their influences, King Changó has become much more than the standard bearers of the Latin ska movement. They have a Warholian instant-pop flair; their shows are about theater and agitprop; their lyrics talk about lighting candles for Yoruban orishas; their press materials rant about Japanese science fiction; and their signature song might just become "Revolution/Cumbia Reggae."

## Latin Grooves

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Grupo Niche: as much elegance as the Temptations ever had

That brown-skinned Mexican kid you saw walking down St. Mark's Place the other day wearing an Exploited T-shirt is not an aberration; he's the leading edge of a new pop reality. The New Latin Groove is against forming a consensus; it's an all-inclusive social experiment. Our schlock levels are raised to fever pitch by Luis Miguel and Ricky Martin, our cool moments orchestrated by jazz masters Danilo Perez and David Sanchez; the soundtrack to erotic afternoons is provided by Brazilian beats or a Carlos Gardel tango. Rodrigo thinks that the central gangsta problematic for rap

after Tupac will be figuring out how we are all a cipher for Scarface, an imaginary Cuban drug dealer played by an Italian guy from the Bronx. Latin rock will continue to spawn Mexican space rock, Argentina ska, and bilingual labels like Grita, run by ex-Bad Religion drummer Jay Siskrout, and Aztlan, making the world safe for Spanish hardcore. The New Latin Groove is not the hokeypokey in a mariachi suit but a full-blown fin de siècle force. And you can dance to it. ♦

## Cooper

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His approach to creating a supergroup is to handpick singers and players who can execute increasingly higher concepts, which has ultimately made Grupo Niche Colombia's number one salsa outfit.

As the new album demonstrates, Varela is a versatile songsmith. His bolero "Cobarde" and his merengue "Dominicana" are as deftly executed as the Colombian cumbia "La Canoa Rancha." But there's more than Hispanic folk music up his sleeve. You can hear funk in his *ritmo* too. And August 31, as the band blasted through "Etnia," "Gotas de Lluvia," and "La Negra No Quiere" to a sold-out Garden crowd, the sweat and savoir faire of Garcia and Vasquez owed as much to Sam and Dave as to Cheo Feliciano or Beny Moré. ♦

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