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COVER STORY

It's Not La Vida Loca to Her

Some say Jennifer Lopez is risking a lot by making the leap to music. But she and her backers are supremely confident she can ride the new Latin wave.

May 30, 1999 | ED MORALES | Ed Morales is a staff writer at the Village Voice and is writing a book about Latino identity in the United States for St. Martin's Press

NEW YORK — Sitting in front of a mirror in the greenroom at MTV's Times Square studios, amid a swirl of makeup artists, publicists, wardrobe consultants, her manager, personal assistant and various other handlers, Jennifer Lopez is grooving on her first big moment as a pop star.

Having just premiered the first video from her debut album, "On the 6," she is planning a live appearance on David Letterman's show the following week. "Are we getting Sheila E. for the band?" she pleads with her manager, Benny Medina, whose other clients have included Sean "Puffy" Combs, Will Smith and Babyface.

"How about white Adidas, something real Bronx old school?" she adds, lobbying for her band's wardrobe. "I mean, don't you want to see something different?"

Lopez is banking on a hunch that Americans are in the mood for something different, too. Why else would the actress who starred in "Selena" and "Out of Sight" put her red-hot film career on hold for

more than a year to make an album?

That disc, due Tuesday from Sony's Work Group label, is an eclectic sampling of what Lopez calls "Latin soul."

Though there's too much production sheen for the album to fully convey the character suggested by the term "Latin soul," it is state-of-the-art dance pop. It's not a casual vanity project by any means. (See review, Page 67.)

Indeed, "If You Had My Love," the mid-tempo debut single from the package, just became the No. 1 single in the nation, dislodging Ricky Martin's "Livin' La Vida Loca." Even if Lopez's vocals are largely anonymous on the album, you get the sense that there is a lot of ambition behind her and her camp.

It's a point she stresses once her entourage is finally chased from the room.

"The idea to do an album is not a gimmick," says Lopez, who comes across as strong-willed and supremely confident. "It wasn't, 'Oh, I'm doing good as an actress, maybe I should make an album!' I had a record deal [with Giant Records] before my movie career, luckily enough, took off.

"When I did 'Selena,' it all came back again, having that interaction with the fans and the public, which you don't get in movies. I missed that very much. I missed the excitement of the stage, which I had early in my career with the musical theater."

While some may feel that the shift into a musical career is a risk, Lopez and her backers hardly think so. Even though she had been offered a variety of major film roles after completing "Out of Sight," the 1998 crime caper comedy that teamed her with George Clooney, Lopez was dead-set on making the record.

"She made a conscious decision when doing this to commit herself to this project," says Thomas D. Mottola, chairman and CEO of Sony Music Entertainment. "I contend that this will make her an even bigger movie star. The kind of exposure you get from a recording career is in some ways even broader and bigger. It covers more areas

of media, gives you lots of other outlets that are even more immediate than film."

Medina, her high-powered manager, agrees that Lopez is capable of meeting the challenge of blending music and film careers--something he's seen client Will Smith do so spectacularly.

"What attracted me to her is that she is the total embodiment of an artist," says Medina, who has worked with Lopez for about 18 months. "In her film career, she has been extremely selective about the types of roles that she's taken on. She's always had a consciousness about her Latin background, but also a great desire to break the mold in terms of casting.

"I was initially concerned with her getting involved with music because when you've had so much integrity in one area, it's important that you be a little cautious about doing something that could potentially erode that. . . . But the music convinced me. The thing that impresses me most is her incredible focus. I've never seen anyone work harder or with more passion. I think Jennifer Lopez will be a brand name that will cross over into all media."

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The public may know Lopez best from her high-profile film roles, but she originally came to Hollywood a decade ago with an eye on a singing and dancing career.

The Bronx native's first break was winning a national audition in the early '90s to join the Fly Girls, the in-house dance troupe for the TV comedy show "In Living Color."

Jeff Ayeroff, at the time co-head of Virgin Records with Jordan Harris, was approached about a record contract for the Fly Girls. Ayeroff recalls thinking of the group as a potential Spice Girls, but the deal fell apart. His interest in Lopez was renewed when he saw her as a dancer in the 1992 video for Janet Jackson's "That's the Way Love Goes" video, which was released by Virgin Records. But she started concentrating on acting.

After "In Living Color" was canceled, and after a recording project with Giant Records was shelved, Lopez acted in two short-lived series, "Second Chances" and "Malibu Road," as well as the TV film "Nurses on the Line: The Crash of Flight 7." In 1995, Lopez got her first significant role in Gregory Nava's "Mi Familia," then went on to play opposite Robin Williams in Francis Ford Coppola's "Jack" in 1996.

After a respectable performance in the otherwise panned "Money Train," Lopez--whose lineage is Puerto Rican--was ready for the intense auditioning for "Selena," a role she landed despite pressure to cast a Mexican American actress.

After moving on to form the Sony subsidiary label the Work Group, where he helped turn Fiona Apple and Jamiroquai into hot properties, Ayeroff heard that Lopez was cast in "Selena," and he kept calling Lopez's representatives every few months, hoping to convince her to sign a record contract.

It was during the making of "Selena" that she decided to refocus on a music career.

Having thrown herself into the character of the tejano pop singer, who was murdered just as she was about to release her first English-language record, Lopez suddenly found herself at a crossroads.

"I grew up on that movie," says Lopez, 29. "It just made me realize that you don't know what's going to happen, you need to do whatever you want to do today, because tomorrow might not come."

Selena's father, Abraham Quintanilla, has said he was surprised by Lopez's reaction after portraying his daughter for a scene in the movie in which they re-created a performance at the Houston Astrodome. Quintanilla says Lopez came off the stage, breathless, and said immediately that she loved the feeling of being on stage in front of a crowd. "She said right then she wanted to do what Selena did, for herself," Quintanilla said.

After wrapping "Selena," Lopez recorded a demo tape that ultimately

set off a bidding war between Sony and EMI Latin.

"We had to go to Tommy [Mottola] because it's [such a big deal], and Tommy takes her under his wing," Ayeroff says. "He takes her down to Emilio Estefan in Florida, and that's how it all starts."

Mottola, who had scored huge successes with Celine Dion and Mariah Carey, and had also been instrumental in establishing Gloria Estefan and Julio Iglesias as major forces on the American scene, OK'd the deal.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that the current fixation on Latin pop coincides with the release of "On the 6."

"Everything happens for a reason," Lopez says. "When I went into that studio to make this album, in my head I knew what it was going to be. I knew the kind of music that moved me and what I wanted to make and what I wanted to try, and the elements that I wanted to incorporate for it to be Jennifer Lopez's music."

"It's like when you hear Sade or George Michael--it has a specific sound, and I felt like, 'What is going to be that sound for me?' And there was no question; I knew I have to combine these elements in a way that is unique and different. And I think it still needs to evolve. Right now I would define it as pop music with influences of Latin and R&B music, urban."

Although she is part of the new Latin wave, Lopez is also following in the footsteps of some stars Ayeroff helped develop, including Jackson, Paula Abdul and Madonna. But by doing the Madonna trip in reverse--establishing herself first as an actress, then a singer and dancer--Lopez is looking to break through as a triple-threat entertainment goddess in a way even the Material Girl never quite did.

"I don't think anybody is Madonna, I don't care who it is," Ayeroff says. "If she becomes the measuring stick, then Jennifer's pretty great. She's a great singer, dancer and actress, and she's driven--she's one of those people who wants what she wants and that's it."

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Dressed in a delicate light pink halter and form-fitting flared black slacks that announce, somewhat subtly, her famous derriere, Lopez shuffles about the dressing room regally as she deals with the deluge of questions and comments from her entourage.

On occasion she betrays nervousness during an interview, unconsciously tapping her sandaled foot and giggling like a high school senior.

"In this business it's always, 'What have you done lately?' " she says with a smile. "I don't feel bad that people are going to be skeptical of the fact that I'm making an album. . . . That's the nature of the business and of people."

Lopez and her three sisters were raised in the Castle Hill section of the Bronx, a stable, lower-middle-class neighborhood, with her father, who worked for an insurance company, her mother, who returned to the teaching profession after many years as a housewife.

As a little girl, Lopez would perform her own versions of music videos by such '80s stars as Depeche Mode for her bedroom mirror. It is fitting that the biggest Latina movie star since Rita Moreno was hugely inspired in her youth by Moreno's performance in "West Side Story," a work she hopes to revive someday.

With "On the 6"--named after the subway line she rode to and from Manhattan--Lopez is letting the world in on her roots in the Bronx. Although she is oozing with sexuality, there is something of a prudent Catholic girl always lurking, and the effortless, glib chatter that would later charm even David Letterman is a mask for the edgy street mannerisms bubbling under the surface.

"When you're doing movies, you're playing characters, and people think that's who you are," Lopez says. "I've actually changed the way I talk, I've changed the way I move my hands--I don't think you've ever seen me do this in a movie," she says, snapping her fingers and crossing her arms like a hip-hop princess.

Lopez, who was briefly married to Ojani Noa, a denizen of Miami's trendy South Beach, has denied rumors that she was romantically involved with Combs, portraying their relationship as strictly professional.

"Working with Puffy was, to me, a great honor," Lopez says. "He's the best hit-maker in the business, he's been doing it for years.

"He called me and asked me to do a video for him, and he gassed me into it. He said, 'Oh, I think it's time for people to see that you can dance again; they forgot, you been doing this acting thing,' and I said, 'Oh, all right, yeah, you're right, it is time!'

"As we worked together, he said, 'I heard you're about to make an album. I have a song I think is going to be perfect for you, but let me know what kind of music.' The process went on, then we bang into each other at the Grammys, and he said, 'We have this record for you.' Then my executive producer Corey [Rooney] got in touch with him, and that's when we started working together on that, and he gave me the set-it-off track, which is 'Feeling So Good.' "

The song, she explains, is a fond look back at her days in the Bronx, just after high school.

"You don't have a care in the world; it's sunny outside, you find a \$20 bill on the floor, the train is on time, you're going out with your friends, you've been looking forward to it all week, you get out of work early, that outfit you wanted was on sale--all that stuff," she says.

"I wrote that song because I was feeling depressed at one point when I was making the album. I was regretting how crazy this life is, how unstable. Then one day I woke up and I go, 'What the hell are you talking about? This is what you always wanted; you get to do what you want, you're the luckiest girl in the world.'"

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In addition to Combs and other pop powerhouses, Lopez has impressed Hollywood.

"She was a pleasure to work with," says Oliver Stone, who directed her in "U-Turn," the 1997 noirish thriller co-starring Sean Penn and Nick Nolte. "Her 'broken' nose as well as a fiery disposition gives her a macho beauty. She's a well-prepared and improving actress, clearly learning from veterans like Nolte and [Jon] Voight."

Despite critical acclaim for her work in "Out of Sight" and "U-Turn," Lopez feels her best performance was in "Selena."

Since Lopez hasn't taken a movie role since "Out of Sight," she's a little nervous about fine-tuning her acting skills again, but she's chosen a project she's comfortable with: the lead in New Line Cinema's "The Cell," to be directed by Tar Sem. About first-time director Sem, Lopez says, "If you see his videos and commercials, oh my God, he's so brilliant." Filming is scheduled to start in July.

In the movie, Lopez plays a psychiatrist who has a treatment for schizophrenia that induces a dream state and connects directly with the other person's mind. Lopez's character is then asked by the police to go into the mind of a serial killer to help find one of his victims-- call it "Silence of the Lambs" meets "The Matrix."

"I connected to the whole idea of an intelligent woman who's a bit eccentric and people don't believe in her," Lopez says. "Maybe it's the artist in me always trying to convince people that, yes, I can do this."

After wrapping "The Cell," Lopez plans to do another film, which she hasn't chosen yet, in November, and perhaps go on a concert tour next January. As a teenager, she did a European tour of "Golden Musicals of Broadway" and a Japanese tour of "Synchronicity."

For the next few months, however, she will be the star of her new official Web site, JenniferLopez.com, which was launched with her "interactive" video for "If You Had My Love."

The video, directed by Paul Hunter, is a timely thematic fusion of elaborate dance numbers, the voyeurism of the Internet and Lopez's raw powers of attraction on men, women and little girls.

But her life won't be complete without that special movie role.

"I think everybody wants to make that movie that's a classic 30 years from now," Lopez says. "With film, all the elements have to fall into place: the best director, the best actors, the best producers, the best cinematographers, the best script, everything--but sometimes it still doesn't work. It's like the planets lining up--that's how hard it is to make a great movie. I guess my goal as an actor is to wait for the planets to line up."