



AT EL CHOPO, MEXICO CITY'S MASSIVE ROCK AND ROLL SWAP MEET, THE HISTORY OF ROCK IS UP FOR GRABS.

# ROCK IS DEAD AND LIVING IN MEXICO

## THE RESURRECTION OF LA NUEVA ONDA BY ED MORALES

### ESCAPE FROM THE CRYPT

DEATH PRETTY MUCH HIT me as I walked off the plane into the Mexico City airport and took a few breaths. It smelled like I'd stuck my head into a lit oven. The sickly-sweet odor of petrol, the devil that the Mexican government sold its soul to in a failed attempt to gain First World riches, was a palpable reminder of my mortality. It was the week before Day of the Dead—the deeply ritualistic carnival of skeletons, ancestors, and the underworld in which Mexico's indigenous pagan roots overwhelm its Catholic facade—and I'd come to El D.F. (Federal District, a nickname for the city), the Great Circus, a 26-million-strong cosmopolitan with panhandling street jugglers and organ grinders, the true seat of post-modernism, with a hunch and a spiritual hunger. While the suits who flew down on the plane with me were there to jockey for pole position in case NAFTA hit, I was gambling on a kind of hallucination I was having, following a barely audible song emanating from this magic Valley of Mexico that promised I would discover the heart of rock and roll.

After years of floundering as a glimmer in Daisy Fuentes's eye—confined to a mere half-hour of rarely interesting Rock en Español on La Babe de Rock Video's *MTV Internacional* every Saturday—Latin rockers finally have a movement to get loco about. It's swarms of brown-skinned slamtancers in an Aztec moshpit, it's art rock and ska and psychedelic and alternative and gothic and metal and punk and pop. La Nueva Onda is the newest of new waves, and it reeks of death and spiritual transcendence.

And it's come just in time to resurrect my almost-buried Latin rock roots. Growing up Puerto Rican in the '60s in the northeast Bronx, I'd always been a rock kid. I swallowed the whole thing up: the Stones, Zeppelin, Quicksilver, Zappa. Some of it was natural, rumbas buried in the rock strata: "Twist and Shout" was kind of a mambo, the trancelike "96 Tears," by a

Chicano group, ? and the Mysterians, was driven by a deconstructed tumbao, the early Beatles ballads played like classic boleos; and some of it was just a would-be hyphenated American catching the tail end of boomer aesthetics.

Hendrix was my teen god, but ironically, my adolescence coincided with the start of the golden age of salsa: Rubén Blades, Hector Laveo, Willie Colón. Santana appeared as a brief crossover, proof that Latins rocked, albeit with Afro-Caribbean percussion sections, but they quickly became irrelevant. There was something about salsa that always appealed to my default rhythmic state, but it never came together with my roughest adolescent edges. By the end of my college years, I was swept up in a cumbersome dialectic. Haunted by a roots guilt that most college-educated Latins fall prey to, I dutifully immersed myself in tropical swing, while at the same time punk began snarling out of New York and London—I loved the Ramones and pogged with the mob at the Clash's first U.S. ap-

pearance at Harvard Square Theater. Still, as much as the music thrilled me, I was slowly withdrawing. From a distance I dug X, Flipper, the Replacements, but by the mid '80s I'd slipped into a world dominated by salsa, hip hop, house, and Prince. The rock and roll flame of my youth would be sublimated into other, not unrelated pleasures.

### MAGICAL PREHISTORY TOUR

I STUMBLED ONTO La Nueva Onda unexpectedly on a trip to Mexico City last winter to research the local performance-art scene. There, in a city that's a paradise of Paris with palm trees, I found an unassumingly hip culture thriving in layer upon layer of surreal contradiction, a syncretic funk mob of politicized apathetics, of technoshamans, of high-art kitschsters. It was like walking into an idealization of bohemia—a supportive, interrelated artistic community with none of the '70s cynicism or '80s commercialism that took over that world in the U.S.—and hints of transcendence were everywhere. My first taste came with a theater actor who took me to the ancient pyramids of Teotihuacán, about 30 miles outside the city. Teotihuacán was once home to a pre-Aztec indigenous civilization of goddess-worshippers who believed the world was created from the site of their pyramids, and they built what in 600 A.D. was the largest city in the Western Hemisphere, complete with extensive apartment complexes.

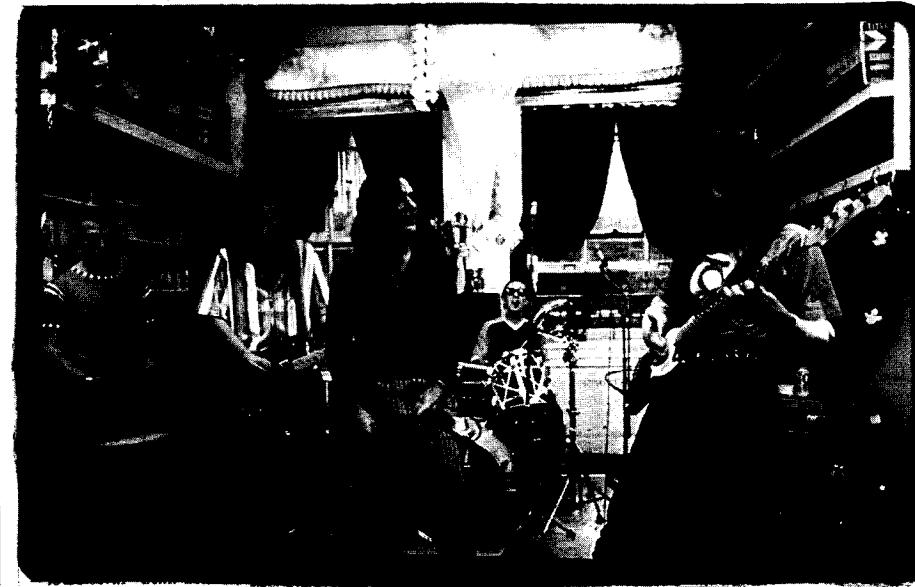
"This is a very powerful place," my actor-guide told me as she led me up the endless steps to the top of the Piramide de la Luna. Yeah, right, I thought, recalling every Carlos Castaneda-addled hippie I'd ever met who urged me to go to Mexico for some nascent New Age magic. The sky was a mixture of grays, reds, and neon blue, sometimes congealing into a kind of lavender. We sat down and I saw some clouds rolling in from the west, and bolts of lightning flashed in the strangest patterns I'd ever seen. My friend sat cross-legged with her eyes closed for a few minutes, then



SERGIO DORANTES



TED SOQU



TOP: CAIFANES PRACTICE THEIR MYSTICAL RITES OF TRANSFORMATION; CENTER: SLAM DANCING AS AN ACT OF LOVE; BOTTOM: FOBIA, MEXICO CITY'S MOST ALTERNATIVE BAND.

turned to me.

She told me that she had traveled back in time and witnessed ritual human sacrifice in the plaza below. Then she pointed to the bank of stratocumulus and said, "See those clouds over there? I could see us together inside them." It was kind of a big leap from someone who'd merely described herself as "spiritual," but it isn't every day someone offers you an out-of-body experience, so I allowed myself to believe her. The air was free of the city's noxious petrol memento mori, but it was still thin enough from the area's elevation, so a dizziness set in, enhancing my hallucinatory state. After we climbed down a light rain was falling, and she took a deep breath and said, "I love the smell of the damp earth," as if she'd seeped into her beloved Mexican soil and fertilized it herself. Leaving, as we walked along the Street of the Dead, I looked back and thought I saw in the pattern of the massive stairway to heaven an indigenous stick figure with both arms extended wide, as if crucified.

When I got back to New York, I couldn't let go of the Teotihuacan experience, making a little shrine on my bulletin board with photos I took of the pyramids and a *Science Times* clipping that coincidentally appeared a couple of months later. Hungry for another taste, I began devouring the Mexican rock I'd been hearing about. But nothing really registered until the third listen to *El Diablito*, the second album from Caifanes, one of the biggest-selling Nueva Onda bands. On the surface, Caifanes had the guitar drone of U2 and the goth keyboards of the Cure, but there was an unmistakable sincerity to frontman Saúl Hernández's feline yowls, and an eerie continuity of indigenous mysticism in his lyrics. I froze when I unconsciously translated these words from "Antes de que Nos Olviden" (Before You Forget Us): "We'll ascend into the heavens/And come down with the rain." It was almost the same image suggested by my friend at the pyramids. I remembered imagining being transformed into raindrops and falling from the pregnant clouds. Not only was I stunned that I felt somehow in synch with the dark secrets of Mexican magic, it was as if La Nueva Onda itself was organically transmitting this message, teasing me to discover its reinvention of rock's essential transcendence.

"That song is about the student protesters who were killed in Mexico City in 1968 by the national police, about how their souls watch over us," Hernández would tell me a few days later, before a Caifanes-Maldita Vecindad show at the Academy in New York. A tall, rock-god figure with long, curly locks tumbling over a leopard-print jacket, Hernández explained that the '68 massacre drove Mexico's counterculture underground. If rock became, for the most part, mass-marketed corporatized product and trivialized fashion in the U.S., in Mexico it was marginalized, creating a small, devoted community with strong, supportive bonds and a fierce resistance to co-optation. "There were times when you couldn't walk the streets with long hair," he mused. "Some of us were arrested under suspicious circumstances. But things have changed. There's a new perception. We're part of a movement, like the psychedelic one you had here in the '60s."

La Nueva Onda is born out of the ashes of the death of heroic student martyrs in '68 and the repression that followed a Woodstock-like concert at a suburb called Avándaro in 1971. Over the next decade rock survived in the proletarian periphery of the city, with impromptu street concerts, and a series of funky holes-in-the-wall called "hoyos fónquis." These were the strongholds of groups like Three Souls in My Mind and Dangerous Rhythms, Thorogood-like blues rockers that did covers and originals in English. Singing in English was a wannabe desire of Mexicans to emulate North Americans or Europeans, as well as an unconscious rebellion against the official national culture, which discouraged La Malinche, or outside influence, and was imposed by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), the institutional party ultimately responsible for the '68 student massacre.

Around 1984, all of this changed—cover bands singing in English disappeared. In a

groundbreaking 1990 article about La Nueva Onda in the *L.A. Weekly*, Rubén Martínez cites the '85 Mexico City earthquake as the central event in birthing bands like Maldita Vecindad, but my conversations with Mexican rockers indicate that the movement was already under way. The oil economy, which had once infused the Mexican middle class with aspirations of equality with the U.S., had also permeated Mexican youth with a reluctance to openly display its Mexicanness; as the oil economy collapsed, so did that shame, giving way to a strong desire to create a new Mexican identity. Dangerous Rhythms changed their name to Ritmo Peligroso and Three Souls in My Mind became El Tri, a group that is still enormously popular, having just released their 25th-anniversary album. Even though Mexican youth was accustomed to not understanding lyrics (to them, *heebopapula* was just as incomprehensible as *la bamba* was to Anglo youth), they welcomed this development. A compilation put out by Comrock, a Warners subsidiary, that featured El Tri, Ritmo Peligroso, Kenny y los Electricos, and Mask crept into the suburbs, becoming a big hit at teenage parties.

Comrock went bankrupt, but El Tri managed to switch to WEA Latina and into the vacuum came Botellita de Jerez, who single-handedly revolutionized Mexican rock. A flaky goofball trio consisting of Francisco Barrios, Armando Vega-Gil, and Sergio Arau, Botellita invented guacarock, a hybrid genre that started as a self-effacing joke, but became prototypical for many groups to follow. By reaching out to the petit bourgeois intellectuals reared on nueva canción and folklórica, Botellita practically created a new rock circuit at clubs and coffee houses that surrounded the immense university in the south of the city.

Their third album, *Naco Es Chido* (variously translatable as The Masses' Aesthetic Is Cool, Trash Is a Gas, or Brown Is Beautiful), was their peak, but also signaled the beginning of the end. By taking it upon themselves to vindicate the trashy, unsophisticated tastes of the lumpen, they at once encouraged a reintegration of the lower and middle classes in a rock context, but also opened up a contradiction that the Clash themselves stumbled upon: How much credibility could bourgeois intellectuals have in championing a class they didn't belong to? While they infused the middle class with a renewed dose of what they called "Mexican kitsch, double entendres, and rudeness," their keen sense of parody swallowed them from within.

The Botellita era coincided with a trickle of imports from Spain and Argentina like Radio Futura, Charly García, and Soda Stereo that had come to be marketed as Rock en Tu Idioma (Rock in Your Language). Caifanes was spawned from an earlier group, Las Insolitas Imágenes de Aurora, and Maldita Vecindad, a ska-punk-funk mélange who traded on their homeboy-from-the-hood image, emerged. As the '80s ended, there was an explosion: Café Tacuba, a less jokey variant of Botellita; Santa Sabina, a goth, prog-rock quintet; Fobia, jangly alternative; La Lupita, Cuca, La Castañeda, Mana, and a growing array of pop, thrash metal, punk, and the still energetic rock urbano (proto rock) have turned Mexico City, with its integrated network of support and homegrown dynamism, into the Seattle that few outside the Latin world know.

Much of the responsibility for the genesis of La Nueva Onda lies with Marusa Reyes, the tireless manager of Caifanes, Maldita Vecindad, and Santa Sabina. A native of Mexico City who's lived in Los Angeles, Reyes runs a bustling office full of women, ironically ruling with an iron fist a little universe of rock guys. "I got into the business when I was a teenager and I was working for a promoter who sent me to pick up Albert King at the airport," says Reyes. "We became great friends."

Married to Kevin Benson, a Hollywood producer who used to book bands at CBGB with Hilly Kristal, Reyes is ecstatic over having booked a concert at the Palacio de los Deportes mixing three of her groups with Stone Temple Pilots and Rage Against the Machine. At times, however, her enthusiasm is thwarted by acts of intolerance

# GUÍA DEL CONSUMIDOR

## La Lupita: *Pa' Servir a Ud.* (BMG-Culebra)

The disc's cover logo, a variant of the peace sign that's supposed to be someone's butt, together with the title (*At Your Service*), quickly establishes La Lupita's droll art-garage aesthetic. The music ranges from metal to blues to reggae/ska to arch disco and funk. Embellished and contained by Rosa Adame's Grace Slick-ish harmonies, Hector Quijada's rasp gurgles toward insanity. Lino Navarro's guitar, equal parts Steve Vai and Thurston Moore, comes on like an electric hangover—nostalgia for the worm at the bottom of a bottle of mescal. Highlights: "El Ombú de la Luna," a punky tell-me-you-love-me song; "Que Estás Haciendo," a Skynyrd-esque conversation with a street fighter that climaxes in a rocked-out Perez Prado quote; and "Contrabando y Traición," a thrash cover of an old norteno about crossing the border into California.

## Café Tacuba (WEA-Warner Music Mexico)

Somewhat controversial because

of their roots-purity attitude, Café Tacuba



PICK HITS: CAFÉ TACUBA, SANTA SABINA, MALDITA VECINDAD

are one of the tightest, most melodic, and pop-strong groups on the Mexican rock scene. A minimalist quartet of acoustic guitar and bass (brothers Joselo and Quique Rangel), all-purpose keyboardist (Emmanuel del Real), and vocalist (Juan), Tacuba reformulate traditional rhythms, particularly nortenos and boleros, into pomo reflections of their youth growing up in a modest northern suburb of El D.F. Juan's ready snarl may grate on you at first, but he's extremely charismatic live and has his soulful moments, especially on "María," their Sade-slow hit, and "Las Batallas," a peppy ballad about an adolescent boy scandalized by his love for his best friend's mother. But Tacuba are at their best in zany tunes like "Cometer Suicidio," a satire on teen suicides, and brown-is-beautiful anthems "La Chica Banda" and "Labios Jaguar."

Santa Sabina (BMG-Culebra) Everything revolves around diminutive chanteuse Rita Guerrero, whose black hair, red lips, and requisitely sexy voice get her vampire fate on. After their love of Jean Paul Sartre and María Sabina (Mexico's saint of psilocybin) seem dated, well, existentialism and hallucination are still news in Mexico, so get used to it. Produced by Caifanes' guitarist Alejandro Markovich, the disc trades on eclecticism, fusing prog-rock with funk and fusion—guitarist Pablo Valero and keyboardist Juan Sebastián Lach create a nice, spacy wall of sound, and Patricio Iglesias' relentless pounding marks him as perhaps the scene's best drummer. Still, the band lives and dies with Rita's mystic oracle act, best executed in "Vacío" (Empty-

ness), where she intones, "To be alone or to be among everyone is the same thing/He'd rather remain in chaos."

## Fobia: *Leche* (BMG-Ariola)

Probably the most alternative-sounding of Mexico's bands, Fobia thrive on obscure, sci-fi lyrics and aggressive distortion, but get around to pure pop when they feel like it. Leonardo de Lozanne's sneering vocals are underpinned by Paco Huidobro's steady wah-wah wails, and the production, by New York-based Marteen, is perhaps the most sonically crisp of all the Nueva Onda bands so far. "Los Ciberoides" twists their comic-book fetish into a clever metaphor for growing up American in Mexico—"The cybernoids came/Got in through the TV/And want to take your children away." "No Me Ames" and the haunting "Miel del Escorpión" resonate on the international pop level that escapes many Mexican groups, distancing Fobia from the center of the mythic nationalist aesthetic of their fellow rockers. But that's to be expected from loyal Soul Kitchen veterans who are New

York enough to thank Robin Byrd, Joey Arias, and Howard Stern in their liner notes.

**Victimas del Dr. Cerebro** (EMI) From deep inside a Mexican crypt, *Victimas* spin tales of loopy necrophilia that burst from your headphones like early Fishbone or Chili Peppers, with an added inner-Mexico City momentum. Vocalist Ricardo Flores' guttural voice cuts with a sneery grace that makes him a world-class punk. The band navigates a plethora of rhythm changes and genre parades in such a playful and authentic manner that they're destined to be La Nueva Onda's next big cult heroes. "El Esqueleto" (The Skeleton), a call to a spiritual mob of dancing unemployed youth, has all the visceral authority, and screaming sax, of X-Ray Spex's "1977," while "Sara" is a morbidly charming love song for the 21st century.

**Cafaines: *El Silencio*** (RCA) On their third album, Adrian Belew's lush production leaves behind the nagging Cure comparisons. Guitarist Alejandro Marcovich's lyrical noodling is layered elegantly, coming at you in waves and pushing vocalist Saul Hernández to the limits of his guttural journey—he plucks out audible tears that intersect with Saul's moans and a dramatic string section at the climax of "Nos Vamos Juntos." The punky intensity of "Metamorfófame" flows easily into the strato-pop of "Nubes" and "Piedra," the latter showing off a mariachi horn chart. In contrast to Café Tacuba or Maldita Vecindad's explicit roots tendencies,

Caifanes have perfected a more conventional poprock sound that subtly incorporates indigenous influences. And Hernández has become the kind of singular, mythological front man that rock legends are made of.

## Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del Quinto Piso: *El Circo* (BMG-Ariola)

Recorded in 1991, the first great Nueva Onda record will probably have the same freshness in another 10 years. Anchored by Pacho's extremely agile drumming, Maldita can sound like a transcendent Specials, but the ska-soul categorization is too limiting. Each song is a movielet with its own plot and characters that vividly emerge from Mexico City's working-class barrios, and the band provides a cool, visceral, ready-for-video soundtrack. Anthems "Un Poco de Sangre," "Tofo," and "Solin" stir and transfix like the mournful horn figures that introduce a bullfight. My favorite tracks are the unpopular "Crudeza," a postpunk classic about swearing off drinking which chugs like early Gang of Four, and "Pachucos," a hyperkinetic pogo generation-gap song where a *chavo* punk reminds his dad that he was once a street rebel, too. The samples of pachucos hero Tin Tan here and various found sounds sprinkled throughout also establish *El Circo* as a truly chaotic product of Mexico City's curious postmodernism.



## La Castañeda: *Servicios Generales II* (BMG-Culebra)

Shabby production doesn't do much to define their somewhat ragged sound. But the melodies and lyrics on this debut mark La Castañeda as a group to watch. Driven by Alberto Rosas' sax and some muddy prog-rock ideas, La Castañeda are all over the place. But lead singer Salvador croons with a Jim Morrison theatricality that draws you in. "La Fiebre de Norma" vibrates from the intense jangling scowl of Ozvaldo D'León's guitar, rising to epic status with Salvador's stately groans. And his practically a capella "Transfusion," a concert stopper, can sleep way under your skin.

## La Cuca: *Invasión de los Blistidos* (BMG-Culebra)

This Guadalajara-based quartet, spearheaded by mid-thirties front man Alex Fors, offers a crisp, straight-ahead rock, metallic in spirit, with tinges of country and roots punk. Carlos Aviles' thick-fingered bass thumping propels the sludgy "Necesito Cirugía" (I Need Surgery) and "Que Chingaos" ("How Fucked-Up"), a delight to sarcastic *cabezzabangers* of the heartland. But the band reaches higher ground with the Cheap Trick power riffs on "El Son del Dolor" and the enigmatic metal-rumba of "Don Goyo." The latter, a song about a man denying his part in a small-town murder, is eerily reminiscent of "I Shot the Sheriff," substituting the Wailers' rocksteady rhythm with state-of-the-art Mexican skronk. Just about what you'd expect from a record titled "Invasion of the Cockroaches."

typical of right-wing groups such as PAN. She tells me about how a show in Guadalajara was recently canceled due to right-wing pressure. Although she's made great strides to bring about the music's widespread acceptance, there are still occasional reminders of the repression of the past.

#### RITUAL DE LO HABITUAL

*If First World postindustrial countries assume the decadence of the modern belief in progress with either melancholy or disillusionment that stylizes ruins—as punk does—'underdevelopment' carnivalizes this decadence.*

—Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*

IT'S LATE SEPTEMBER, and La Castañeda is about to take the stage in an amphitheater in Mexico City's Cuauhtémoc Park after a workmanlike set by prole rockers Lira 'n' Roll. The free concert is one of a series commemorating the October 2 anniversary of the '68 student massacre, and the crowd is full of kids who couldn't afford the \$30 ticket price of the show. La Castañeda gave at Auditorio Nacional the night before, opening for Maldita Vecindad. La Castañeda is a concept band—their name is derived from the main asylum in Mexico City during the turn-of-the-century reign of dictator Porfirio Díaz. Some kept behind its walls were lunatics, others just enemies of Díaz. Affiliated with a group of performers under the rubric of Producciones Garra, La Castañeda create a catharsis by suggesting the escape of "lunatics" from the asylum.

The affable, theater-trained Salvador, Castañeda's lead singer, patiently holds court with me backstage. "We feel we're in a very important moment in Mexican cultural history right now," he smiles. "When I say 'Death to decadence, indifference, and the corruption of the spirit' I'm talking about the importance of not abandoning each other, of coming together as a people."

Salvador takes the stage with a gaggle of performers, insects on stilts, green-skinned women wearing papier-mâché sculptures of

bashed-up TV sets on their heads, others wearing oversized Ubu Roi-style masks. Barking out the lyrics of "Contra Las Profecías" in his oddly affecting husky voice, Salvador counsels, "The apocalypse shouldn't penetrate you/The world is ending and we have to/Go against the prophecies!" Then he takes a long stick and proceeds to smash it against an oil drum, placed strategically at center stage, in time to the music.

The crowd, which has been engaged in a mad-mosh sing-along up to this point, appears to fly upward onto the stage, until there are about 40 kids swarming around the band—three are embracing lead guitarist Ozwaldo, helping him with his bar chords, five are slung around Salvador, and one has taken the stick and keeps time on the oil drum. Security is mostly hands-off, just making sure no one gets hurt. I remember what Pacho of Maldita Vecindad told me about Mexican slammimg: "It's a loving, festive act. We joke that slamdancing comes from weddings when the groom is spun around by his extremities and they catch him. It's a communion of bodies, individuality is broken, and it becomes a collective feast." The heaving, pogonizing mass of brown-skinned kids and the bright red and yellow flags of the sponsoring student league swirl together and suggest a vaguely Situationist vibe—is this what London looked like in '77?

Afterwards, when I ask Salvador why there's so much performance going on in Mexican rock—goth-prog rockers Santa Bárbara use a satyr who prances around waving his huge purple penis, the old Botellita de Jerez featured Sergio Arau's antics—he explains, "It's part of the genetic syncretism of Mexican culture. It's a deep-rooted tendency, a sentiment of ritual and ceremony, a possibility of integrating different forms of expression in one context."

#### PLASTIC SYNCRETIC LOVER

*The habit of simultaneously processing different cultures in Latin America anticipated postmodern pastiche and recycling to the point where it could be affirmed that Latin American culture... was in some ways post-*

*modern before the First World.*  
—Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*

THE BUZZWORD ON everyone's lips in Mexico City is syncretism. The process started in the 16th century when the Spaniards built their palace right on top of a temple in Tenochtitlán, the Aztec metropolis that gave way to Mexico City. The temple, unearthed in 1978, is in the middle of the *zócalo*, the city's central historic district, and acts as a metaphor for the inability of the Spanish conquerors to bury the memory of the deeply entrenched indigenous culture. So many localities in the city have long, arcane Náhuatl names that can confuse Latinos from San Juan to Buenos Aires—it took me weeks to learn to pronounce Teotihuacán, the place I was obsessed with.

The legacy of the ancient empire is so entrenched in this town that even cab drivers will engage you in detailed explications of how the Aztecs thought Hernán Cortés was Quetzalcóatl, the bearded god of songs. The indigenous and Roman Catholic worldviews have become deeply entwined: the passion of Christ's crucifixion oddly congruent with indigenous notions of ritual sacrifice, the celebration of Christ's resurrection resonating with the celebration of the dead.

Death in Mexico is a party. When I come to El D.F. the week before the Day of the Dead—which is actually All Souls Day on the Roman Catholic calendar, two days after Halloween—the streets are, as always, a *circo* (circus), as the title of Maldita Vecindad's record blares. A young boy, propped up on stilts, wearing huge pads under his pants, shakes his butt at cars waiting at a stoplight as his father, painted in clownface, scoops up spare change. Vendors are selling red plastic devil's horns that light up. They're the same horns that Blaine Reininger—long-ago collaborator with expatriate Steve Brown ("I was living in Europe for 12 years and I wanted to get a little closer to home, but I just couldn't move back to America") in Tuxedomoon—wears to his show with Brown at El Habitó, a club in the Greenwich Village-like Coyoacan section.

Saul of Caifanes, a bit lonely for his fiancée, who won't return from Argentina for their wedding until December, meets me inside El Habitó—a performance space somewhat reminiscent of the Nuyorican Poets Café, with its exposed brick and alternative bohemian ambience—with great excitement. They love the remnants of the old idea of "progressive rock" in Mexico. Hector Quijada and Rosa Adame, vocalists for metal-funk group La Lupita also sit with us. After a long, spacy, and preciously avant-garde set, climaxed by an encore—Quijada jokingly calls for "a number by El Tri"—in which Brown sings "I need to see in more than three dimensions," I get into an equally spacy rap with Saul and some friends of his.

As we sit in a circle downing lethal *bulles*, drinks that mix beer, tequila, lime juice, and probably some kind of hallucinogen, I'm struck by how literate the discussion gets, how much they seem like bohemian poets/anthropology academics, yet remarkably unpretentious. Maybe it's their marginal status, and maybe they're just products of a European-like educational system and an atmosphere of government support for the arts, but it's a huge contrast to U.S. rockers, who are openly anti-intellectual when they're not self-obsessed.

They talk about the filming of the video for "Viento," an early Caifanes single, in a town in Chiapas where there was a tradition of having a huge party after a child dies. "The grief is there, but you don't feel it," says Saul. "It's like you get to this understanding that every moment in life is about earning your death." Saul is fascinated with pre-Hispanic myths, with the transformative power of Aztec legend. His lyrics are filled with ephemerality: He is at once in the clouds, in a stone, or transmuted into an *escuincle*, an indigenous dog.

"Since the colonial invasion, indigenous mysticism has evolved as a sense of protection, and you can experience this uniqueness," says Saul. "Maybe for an outsider it seems difficult or exotic, very strange. But we're just sucking in what's blowing in the wind." The sense of birthright that Hernández and his bandmates—all light-skinned, European-looking guys playing essentially

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Euro-rock-derived music—have in appreciating the indigenous underpinnings to their culture is an indicator of the completeness of the syncretic process achieved by Mexican society. It's why it's equally likely that he'd be swarmed onstage by the most Euro-looking, upper-class kid as by the most indio-looking one.

#### BROWN RIOT

CLASS POLITICS, if not as harsh as in El Norte, is tricky in Mexico. Led by the sweet-faced, authentically working-class vocalists Roco and their anthropologist/street rebel Pacho on drums, Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del 5º Patio are closer to ska and funk than classic rock. Their recent European tour has made them kings of the Mexican rock scene—their popularity demands the imminent release of a live album, the first by a La Nueva Onda group—but success is straining their (and Caifanes') street credibility.

Kids in the Mexican rock underground are just as, if not more, purist than their U.S. counterparts. On a rainy day in El Chopo, the huge, 200-stall swap meet dedicated to rock discs and artifacts by a railway station downtown, Hugo, a 17-year-old punk-thrasher, tells me, "I think Maldita Vecindad are fabricated. They started at the bottom, with El Tri. And they no longer remember those who helped them at the start. Then they say they're the real thing." A snitty review in the fanzine *Banda Rockera* of their recent show at Auditorio Nacional says the band is stagnating. "What we recommend is that the group understand what originality and real spectacle is," writes Juan Carlos Pérez Z., "and the way this show went, they achieved neither."

Less of a purist (and more of a neophyte), I was suitably blown away by that same show, filled with the band's inexorable momentum, charged by the spastic grace of their landmark ska-punk-funk fusion. The sweating, bare-chested Roco seemed to be channeling *pachucos* comic screen hero Tin Tan and Anthony Kiedis while punching the air, rallying the heaving kids. Horn

player Sax hands his trumpet to the front-row fans, inviting them to play, as Roco sings the chorus to "Toño": "He plays the trumpet/It's heard all around the city!" Reaching a climax with the anthemic "Sólo," the story of a homeboy who becomes a fabolous fakir, Maldita seemed to stake a claim at the top. Still, the kids seemed uncomfortable in the auditorium, unable to slam, harassed by security—and with high ticket prices, the question remained: Who is their audience?

The 32-year-old Pacho is the band's elder statesman. He's studied history, published several articles and a book about Mexican rock. When I first met him in New York, after telling me of Maldita's close encounter with Perry Farrell (which may have influenced the voodoo bent of *Ritual de lo Habitual*), he pulled out a copy of Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, asking me if I could get them together, he was a big fan. Ecstatic that Berman showed at their New York concert, Pacho now introduces me to his Mexican friends not as a journalist, but as the person responsible for his encounter with the Marxist academic.

In Mexico, we tour El Chopo together. The 200-plus stands sell all kinds of Mexican and Latin rock cassettes and CDs, with sections that specialize in thrash metal, hardcore punk, and rarities like out-of-print Three Souls in My Mind records with silly psychedelic covers. There're also burgeoning bootleg live cassette vendors, tolerated by the artists—Café Tacuba's Joselo Rangel even says it was on the basis of the number of Tacuba bootlegs sold at El Chopo that they got their record contract. There are T-shirt, jewelry, and hair-dye stands, and even a tattoo artist who got his rep doing Caifanes' and Maldita's body art.

Alternately mobbed by fans and warmly greeted by vendors, Pacho is in his element at El Chopo. But a month later, we hook up at the opening of Mexico City's first Tower Records, and he's appropriately dubious and cantankerous. Tower's Mexican flagship is ensconced in the Zona Rosa, a tourist area that is simultaneously sleazy and gentrified, and the opening is worthy of

West Hollywood: klieg lights, limos, a swarm of black suits and women decked out like Mexican pop star *Playboy* pinup Alejandra Guzmán. The place is thick with free food and booze, and the media has turned out to celebrate the official arrival of Rock en Español.

It's a celebration that's been staged frequently of late: MTV Latino zapped onto the air throughout Latin America as well as Fresno, Sacramento, Tucson, and Boston this past October 1, featuring Maldita's unofficial photographer, Gonzalo Morales. As one of the VJs, Scenes in Argentina and Chile are gaining momentum, and there's word of Colombian bands, even a slew of Venezuelan ska bands. Nueva Onda bands fly out for one-off gigs in Chicago, said to be the hottest live venue in the U.S. right now, with a lot of radio play and numerous impresarios. At an August Los Angeles show, Café Tacuba's fans make such a ruckus that security freaks and pulls the plug on the band.

If El Chopo helped Mexican rock survive its underground era, Mexico City's new Tower Records legitimates its commercial viability. It looks like any Tower Records except that there's free tequila, the book section is stocked with Octavio Paz and Aztec histories, there's a three-story mural with a faux-indigenous theme, and the first floor is all tropical music and Rock en Español. The rockers were properly offended by the crass materiality of it all, insisting they would wait until Saturday to buy cheaper at El Chopo. Class attitudes here are a little like the U.S. counterculture's: Even if you are relatively well-off, you show a marked disdain for material status symbols. Pacho was pissed about Televisa, the national TV monopoly that practically works in conjunction with the government, anticipating that they would censor his interview. No one really believes Mexico is a democracy—people feel powerless to suggest a change in NAFTA policies, they feel that when the PRI names its next presidential candidate it's tantamount to naming the next king, and everyone is cynical about the obvious collusion between the government and Televisa. I suggested that

political bands like Maldita wouldn't be as necessary without creepy governments.

"Our work is not political," says Pacho, "if by political you mean doctrinaire, ideological songs, like the '60s protest songs were and the '70s, with the folkloric Chilean music and *nueva canción*. We don't intend to educate anyone, we don't believe in ideologies or doctrines. It is political in the broader sense of the word since we speak of the street life, of the everyday person. If you write about them, you're going to confront things that could be considered political."

If Maldita were no longer the sole authentic voice of *los chavos banda*, the boyz from the hood, then who ruled the prole rock world? There's always El Tri, but not only is their sound predictably derivative, they're such big sellers that their audience is much broader than just prole kids. In Los Angeles, I went to a Transmetal show in a community center called La Casa. Bona fide *chavos banda*, California style, lined the hall, but it was a pretty uninspiring night. In a downtown record store located in a swap meet on Broadway, the L.A. thoroughfare that seems like an endless 14th Street, early-'80s style, a crusty old-timer who called himself El Tio turned me onto Heavy Nopal, a group that did a record full of garage-rock protest songs by Rockdrigo Gonzalez, a rock urbano champion, wrote some poignantly amusing songs before he died in the '85 earthquake. In "Prestame Tu Maquina de Tiempo," he pleads with a friend to lend him his time machine—kind of like Richard Hell begging to "let me out of here"—while "Los Intelectuales" is a devastatingly funny indictment of petty bourgeois thinkers.

I felt like I was getting closer to the soul of prole rock when Ricardo Bravo, an earnest freelance rock critic for the Mexican daily *El Nacional*, suggested I try a tape by El Haragán as we spun around El Chopo. Haragán's sound was wide-open raunch, something like a cheezier, more metalized Cramps with a head full of tacos. The opening tune, "Juan el Descuartizador"—about a guy who by day was from a respectable

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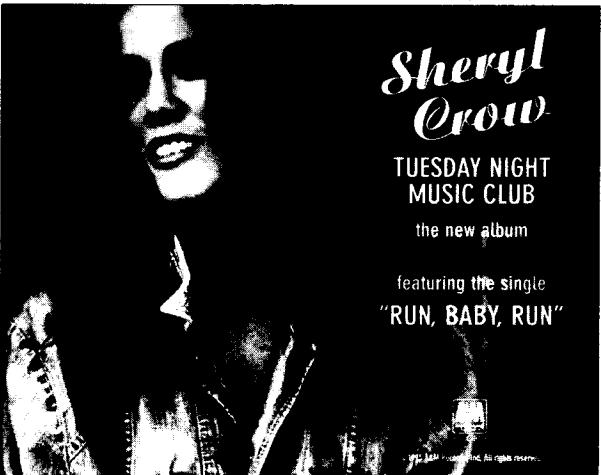
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family and by night a "sexually depraved" murderer who didn't care if his victims were men or women as long as he could hack them into quarters—haunted me for days with its cynical, head-banging sneer at middle-class privilege.

One night, after a miscommunication that caused me to miss a ride to a La Lupita-Santa Sabina show, I wandered over to Teatro Ciudadela to see Neurona Violeta (Violet Neuron), a weird conglomeration of aging lead and bass players and some barely '20s kids, the lead singer being something of Eddie Vedder en Espanol. It was a kind of off cross between grunge and progressive rock that didn't really work for me, but the crowd, mostly college kids, acted like they'd found their own Pearl Jam.

After the show, Ricardo Bravo introduces me to this older longhaired guy who kind of looked like a biker and two kids with hair dyed purple and orange, a trio who turn out to be the core of Las Víctimas del Dr. Cerebro. Taking their name from a kind of fake title for a horror movie that doesn't exist, Las Víctimas are a high-concept hardcore-funk-skaterfusion from deep in the heart of Neza, an infamous northern area that was home to several *hoyos fonqui*. Accused of being *fresa* (literally "strawberry," a nonpejorative term suggesting a degree of wealth or education) by some of their peers, Las Víctimas possess an authentic loose rowdiness as well as a wacky vision of the Mexican rock of the future: tec-nopal (cactus-flavored techno).

I hitch a ride back with them in their van, and lead singer Ricardo Flores bubbles with a benignly demonic intensity so Lydon-like it's almost scary. He's going on about *Alarma!*, a trashy tabloid that specializes in printing graphic pictures of dismembered corpses. Another member of the Víctimas touring posse jumps at me, asking me if I know about *naguals*, the spirits who could transform themselves from bulls into dogs. When I tell Flores I'm from New York he smiles and asks, "How's the Bronx?"

A little surprised at how familiar he is with the five boroughs, I tell him I'm originally from the Bronx and that it's pretty

much the same, rough and ready. "Because, you know, we're from the Bronx," he says. "Neza is the Bronx." And all of a sudden everyone in the van, including Ricardo Bravo, is smiling at me. I had a light-headed feeling in me, a realization that I was hurtling through the endless Mexico City streets with the heirs apparent of the Mexican rock underground, and that they were strange, alternate-universe versions of my own sensibilities. Wacky, warm, and bent on irritating people, identified with mean, broken-down streets, Las Víctimas want to scare the dark-side societal skeletons out of the official culture closets and eviscerate the fear of urban decay, exposing it as a trashy, doowop cartoon.

Two nights later I take the trip to Neza to see La Castañeda and Santa Sabina, which is impossibly long and arduous—stuck in traffic caused by the first night of what will turn out to be the final stop of Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* tour. As we approach Neza, we're behind the worst exhaust-spewing bus I've ever seen, and I'm sucking in mass quantities of toxic shit, feeling close to death, and we pass an incredibly ugly patch of oil refineries. These people who live up in Neza are the ones that pay most dearly for the national oil experiment.

On unpaved streets, a small Day of the Dead procession comes, about 25 or 30 *chavos* punk with their girlfriends, and the Producciones Garro people from La Castañeda carrying candles trudge into the little community center where the gig will take place. The streets are bleak, but there doesn't seem to be the threat of violence in the air that might exist on a Friday night on the corner of, say, 138th Street and Willis Avenue. Rocío Macías, a journalist-rock hanger-on from a nearby community, insists it wouldn't be safe to hail a cab in the immediate area, but there all I see are quiet groups of prole rockers, laughing, gossiping, and a little stand where old ladies sell tacos and soda. As we walk over to get a Coke, I notice on an opposing wall a spray-painted scrawl, "Status Bronx," which I'm later told is the name of the local gang. The Víctimas, who like to say they come from

"Neza York," weren't kidding.

### THE UNBEARABLE TRANSCENDENCE OF BEING

*Everything happens in Mexico in a perverse way*

—Íñaki, of Fobia

*The human form is changing*

—Saul Hernández, "Metamorfearme"

FROM THE MOMENT of the magic revelation at the Teotihuacán pyramid, I'd begun to metamorphose. I stopped cutting my hair, started wearing an amulet—some weird cross between an West African and Egyptian goddess—I bought at Coyoacan Plaza. I began speaking in Mexican tongues: the slippery slangswords like *padre*, *chido*, *poca madre*, *simón*, *güey*. I was building a mental altar for the purpose of achieving the transcendence implicit in La Nueva Onda.

And I reached this exalted state several times:

● When Café Tacuba plays Manhattan's Roseland the small crowd is entirely Mexican rockers, a subculture completely overlooked in New York. My friend drags us closer to the stage when she notices the irrepressible lead singer Juan is dressed in a modest pleated skirt. I think it's an amazing transgressive statement, coming from the culture that brought us the word *macho*, but guitar player Josefo Rangel later explains it's a statement about non-gender-specific indigenous clothing style. With kids poguing all around us, I translate the lyrics to "La Chica Banda," in which the narrator dumps his *fresa güera* (blond) for a cut Aztec *chava* who "believes in punk" for my friend, who becomes incredulous with amazement. It's a spontaneous manifestation of pop-punk for the masses, and even I can't quite believe it's happening.

● In a convertible circling aimlessly on Mulholland Drive, blasting Fobia's "Miel del Escorpión" (Scorpion Honey), a deconstructed samba-lite funk tune, I suddenly

feel the song's sting of lost love. I look down at L.A., then the San Fernando Valley, and wonder what the Eagles and Jackson Browne would've sounded like if Los Angeles had remained part of Mexico. And I remember what Fobia's backup singer Íñaki told me in a Zona Rosa restaurant: "Until I went to Disneyland, I didn't know that the U.S. existed. I knew there was Mexico, and Disneyland, which was a very beautiful place outside of Mexico."

● At a La Lupita New Music Seminar showcase in New York at S.O.B.'s tripping out on Hector Quijada and Rosa Adams' X/Jefferson Airplane guy-girl harmonies floating over Lino Nava's skanky metal screeches and Poncho Toledo's Bootsy bass—Hector catatonically commands the stage with Rosa watching that he doesn't fall off; Nava lurches into a Hendrixian wah-wah interlude, then a reggae break. I realize that this is just the tip of the iceberg, that the Mexican rock underground is more extensive than I'd imagined previously. Peter Watrous from the *Times* mumbles something like, "This Mexican bohemia thing is very special, you know."

● At a restaurant down the road from Diego Rivera's studio, I jokingly ask Santa Sabina's bass player Alfonso Figueroa about his most recent psychedelic experience, and he straightforwardly tells me about the time a river began speaking to him, inviting him into its icy waters. I make a crack that everyone in Mexico seems to be tripping without ingesting any psychotropic drugs, and the band looks at me blankly as if to say, uh-huh, that's obvious. When I ask vocalist Rita Guerrero what kind of spirit force I can find on Eje 9, a crosstown street she mentions in one of their songs, she smiles and says, "There is no Eje 9." Later, they tell me they named themselves after mushroom-saint María Sabina, the medicine woman who, Mexican legend has it, turned the Beatles on to magic mushrooms. They can't believe I don't already know this.

● Listening to a demo tape of Los Botellos (Botellita de Jerez's latest incarnation) in a hotel room while watching a *Night of the*

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Living Dead sequel. I start tingling as their quirky charm comes through the Pavement-like chord finger paintings. In our interview they'd seemed so sarcastically proud of being out of style, of being thirty-something eccentrics without a major-label deal. "We don't perform that much because every time we do, we have to sacrifice one of our members," jokes Francisco Barrios.

"The group originally had 50 people, but many have fallen along the way," chimes in Armando Vega-Gil. "We do this with pride," continues Francisco, "because the sacrifices in the old days were done with love. We don't know why people don't accept this." "We're far too Westernized now," says Armando. "No one wants to give up their heart for their country."

At El Chopo, founded on October 2, the same day as the '68 student massacres, there's a Day of the Dead altar shrined with photos of Frida Kahlo and the scandalous femme fatale Nahuai Ollan, lace skeletons, black pumpkins, *xempazuchil* flowers, and spray-painted on the blue tarpaulin above the altar is a huge, smirking skull. Then I realize that the whole Grateful Dead thing is derived from Mexican codes—I remember all those teen babes in flower-print blouses and all those roses and skulls. Could it be the root of all classic hippie-dom comes from south of the border? When will Jerry Garcia own up to this?

STILL I COME BACK to Saúl, the Magic Man. The day before I have to leave Mexico, Caífanes is playing at Rufino Tamayo Museum as part of a Chilean-Mexican encounter between poets, painters, performers, and musicians. It's an unannounced free concert, but the place fills up with manic kids. Some are big fans, some are not. One kid tells me he thinks Saúl's lyrics recycle pseudomythic images to little or no effect, another says he thinks he's "buena onda." Yet another says, "I don't see him as a God or anything. I see Saúl as a human being, showing us that anyone can do what he's doing, that any of us can transform ourselves."

Under an unusually clear Mexico City sky, Saúl takes the stage dressed in a sleeveless black T that pictures a heart squeezed by a ring of thorns and that reveals his arms, covered with Aztec-design tattoos. There are multiple climaxes in which Saúl coaxes these uncanny yelps out of his diaphragm—"Metamorfóeame," an ode to self-transformation, and "Nubes," where he invites the crowd to "take a trip with me to the heavens, so we can see what's eternal." As the band plays on, Chilean painter Eduardo García de la Sierra paints a huge, center-stage canvas with an abstract smattering of blues, blacks, and pinks.

That evening after the show, Lobito and Isaac, the percussionist and road manager

from Maldita Vecindad, Victor "El Chino" Alatorre C. of *Concrete* magazine, and I pile into Saúl's Volkswagen Jetta to let loose at La Diabla, a recently opened *fresca* joint that has made it a point to book every rock act in town. Beers and tequila are opened and the sacred ritual of el Reventón, the great blowout, has begun. Saúl and Lobo get into a passionate argument over La Ley, a Chilean group who also appeared at the museum encounter. Correctly pegging them as hopeless poseurs, Lobo was ranking on them mercilessly. But Saúl, ever the diplomat, the Rock en Español affirmative-action officer, kept pleading. "What's important is that they got out of Chile and they came here and they're representing what life is like there." "But güey, *me vale madre*," Lobo scowled. "They have no quality!"

The debate fizzles as we pull up to La Diabla, and after everyone registers their appropriate discomfort with the Soho-art yuppie ambience (a painting of Sergio Arau's hands in one of the rooms), Los Gatos DF take the stage. It's weird—Los Gatos look like Los Lobos transformed into the Stray Cats—being in Mexico City is like seeing the entire history of rock and roll flash before your eyes before getting hit by a runaway train. I expected the worst. But after just a couple of tunes, it was stunningly clear that these guys could play. Millions of beers later, they're singing a song about how

mescaline puts them into a happy state, Saúl is tackling anyone who might want to dance with him, and suddenly huge streams of beer come flying out from his hands, showering everyone around us, temporarily blinding me as the drummer is just popping himself atop his bass drum.

We had tasted the fruit of el Reventón. It was more than a binge, it was in the tradition of the shaman, the medicine man, who goes into the wilderness and eats as many hallucinogenic plants and drinks as many intoxicating potions as possible to reach an altered state of awareness, to reveal some kind of universal truth. "There's a point you reach when you feel like you're part of everything but you're not really anything at all," says Saúl. I was feeling a little dull but flashing on the pyramid, on the van ride, on this afternoon's museum show. I'd crossed a border and created a space where I could live my fantasy of a mystic rock and roll that reflected my own hybrid way of growing up a stranger in a strange land. I'd even found a parallel New York universe where I couldn't wipe the smirk off of a Bronx kid's face even if I wanted to.

But soon it would all disappear, melt like morning dew on the leaves of a cactus, and all I'd have left was a strange dream that would keep me awake all night, of a skeleton man, or a devil dog with a guitar screaming for me to come back home. ■

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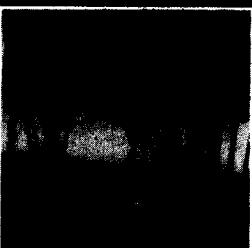


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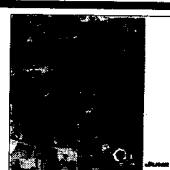


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