

Sunday, November 21, 2010 5:11pm

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LA SANTA CECILIA: A MUSICAL MISSION GUIDED BY A SAINT AND LED BY A DIVA

By [Melissa Henderson](#)

August 16, 2010|[Music](#)| Photography: John Gilhooley / Greater Long Beach



The stage is tiny. Six musicians are crammed elbow to elbow, a tangle of sparkly costumes, mic stands, guitars, congas, an accordion and a full drum kit. A photograph of the Beatles, with the faces of John and George colored in as *calaveras*, or skulls, hangs off the bandstand near photos of Janis Joplin, Celia Cruz, Nat King Cole and Lola Beltrán, the famed Mexican *ranchera* singer.

At the many little tables clustered around the stage, votive candles twinkle in bouquets of marigolds and sugar skulls. Half empty bottles of Absinthe and rum and the occasional pack of Camel filters remain untouched because no one's sitting there. The audience is further back, lining the periphery of the scene.

Widen the focus slightly and the nightclub is revealed to be a burial plot, a patchy bit of grass transformed into a ghostly bohemian café for the evening, one of the hundreds of altars at [Hollywood Forever's Día de los Muertos](#) celebration in 2007. Local artist Guido Mendoza created the altar to honor the legacy of dead musicians and invited his friends, the freshly-minted Latin-alternative band La Santa Cecilia, to help pay tribute to the immortality of music. It's fitting that the band was named after Santa Cecilia, the patron saint of music, since their performance rocked that altar hard enough to raise the dead.

[From the grave to the stage]

Flash forward three years and [La Santa Cecilia has a bigger stage](#), a tighter sound and their audience is going completely nuts. They're playing a benefit at Self Help Graphics in East L.A. in support of 1.8 Million Dreams, the project aimed at raising awareness about the plight of the millions of undocumented students in the United States.

The crowd is obviously a friendly one, since everyone who's trekked out to the parking lot at the back of the community center is united in the fight for immigration reform, but something special happens when La Santa Cecilia plugs in. Whether it's their huge, shiny sound or the band's ability to effortlessly shift from soul-wrenching *boleros* to *cumbia*-infused dance songs, the atmosphere is infectious.

And then there's that voice. An intoxicating fusion of soaring lyricism and raw emotion, Marisol Hernandez's singing is a punch to the sternum. Like any self-respecting diva, she has a stage name: *La Marisoul*.

[Chilling with the saints]

La Santa Cecilia's recording studio (aka the drummer's pad) is cluttered with stacks of CDs to be sold at shows and hand-painted toy guitars that are in various stages of completion and vying for space with chipped mugs of red wine, numerous threadbare couches and instruments scattered all over the floor. The band is in the middle of laying down tracks for a song that *might* be called "Mambo," front door wide open, giving the neighborhood an impromptu concert in the middle of a sunny Thursday afternoon in suburban Alhambra.

Hanging out with the band is a bit like visiting with the fun side of the family. They laugh and tease each other mercilessly, when they aren't bickering about what to call one of the songs they've been playing together for the last two years.

"It's called 'Mambo,'" says Miguel "Oso" Ramirez, the percussionist.

"No, no!" protests La Marisoul, or simply Marisoul for short.

"No?" Ramirez asks.

"That's not the name of the song," insists Marisoul.

"But we've never known any other name," argues Gloria Estrada, the guitarist.

"But that's not the name yet. We'll get a name," says Marisoul. "How about *La Ciudad*?"

The debate intensifies in rapid-fire Spanish. It's hard to follow since their communication is in that incomprehensible shorthand unique to all close-knit bands, regardless of language. A couple of *¡pero escucha tontos!* later, and things are somewhat resolved.

"Ciudad" is maybe a possible title for the song," Ramirez announces, somewhat formally. And then they all dissolve into hysterical giggles again.

[The long and winding road to sainthood]

The lineage of La Santa Cecilia is somewhat difficult to trace since they all "kind of knew someone" who "kind of knew someone," with Marisoul as the common link. She and Ramirez go back about eleven years "playing in really cheesy bands," and she and José "Pepe" Carlos, the accordionist and *requintero*, met busking on Olvera Street, also known as El Pueblo Historic Monument—or the birthplace of the city of Los Angeles. Marisoul's family has a shop on Olvera, which is where she feels she actually grew up.

"That's where I learned how to sing, with the trios and the *mariaquis* and just passing the basket around and singing," she says. "There were no babysitters, so after school and on the weekend I was just always there, you know?"

But the turning point was when Marisoul met Gloria Estrada at a house party.

"I was playing bass for this reggae band and this percussionist knew Marisoul," Estrada explains. "He said, 'You have to hear this singer. You're going to love her.'" It was his dad's birthday party, and it was, like, tequila at every table, booze all over the place..."

"Yeah, we were pretty drunk," says Ramirez.

"And it ended up turning into a jam," adds Estrada. "Everyone who knew how to play was playing that night. And I heard her sing and we ended up jamming a bit and I'm all like, 'We gotta work together somehow.' And within weeks, we hooked up."

"Oh yeah, baby," jokes Marisoul.

"We started our affair," Estrada laughs.

Enter Hugo Vargas on drums and Alex Bendana on full bass and the band was born.

[Latin alternative to what?]

Pinpointing the band's style is tricky. Influences range from *ranchera* to *cumbia* to bilingual covers of classic pop songs like The Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever," or as Marisoul sings it, "*Campos de fresas para siempre*." But it unfailingly enchants audiences wherever they go—including a memorable [Long Beach show in January at the Museum of Latin American Art \(MOLAA\)](#).

"A lot of it has to do with [Marisoul's] voice," says Vargas. "It's that tradition of Mexican female singers with a lot of bravado and feeling and rawness that you don't see so much in American music. Well, you see it in the blues here with African-American singers—not so much anymore. But in Mexico you still get it, and I think she's a pretty good mix of that, the blues aesthetic from here and the raw gutsy thing of the traditional Mexican female singing."

Blend in Estrada's splashy, almost surf-sounding guitar and the mix gets even more interesting.

"You know, it's funny, I mainly played on nylon strings for most of my life," she says. "It wasn't until I went to college and they forced me to go electric and explore sounds and effects. I think this band gave me the opportunity to just mess around a little more with that. But I was a purist for a really long time."

[No electricity allowed?]

"I couldn't afford an amplifier," Estrada admits. "I had an electric guitar. I had this, like, thousand-dollar guitar that my parents bought me for my *quinceañera* ...well, I didn't have a *quinceañera*. I said, 'Instead of a *quinceañera*, buy me an electric guitar.' So they did, but it was so expensive we couldn't afford an amp and I ended up resorting to my nylon string for a long time. But I had a thousand-dollar guitar!"

Ramirez has been listening to the story and jumps into the conversation to tease Estrada: "Like, hey man, can I plug into your amp so I can see how my guitar sounds?"



“It was almost like a museum piece,” Estrada says.

Now she has nine guitars and bucketload of pedal effects, the most popular of which is something she calls “the ringworm.”

“I get so much attention for that,” Estrada says. “It has a synthesizer effect and everyone trips out.”

[DIY Diva]

On stage, Marisoul is a glorious explosion of geek-chic costumes—oversized 1950s granny glasses and funky-out vintage dresses—that seem further amplified by her gregarious persona. She credits her wardrobe to her trusty glue gun.

“I don’t know how to sew, but I am the glue-gun queen,” Marisoul says. “I can glue gun anything.”

Her other resource comes in the form of her “fairy godmothers,” comprised of partners Carlos Aguas and Guido Mendoza, the man behind the *Día de los Muertos* altar that started it all.

“We just paint shoes and glue things to skirts and whatever we find,” Marisoul says. “Ugly dresses are so beautiful. I love ugly dresses. I look for dresses at thrift stores, wherever. Anything that looks weird, I guess. And we just make it cute.”

[The six secrets to success]

So far, the only album is the group’s eponymous six-song EP, recorded in 2008 at Lo-Fi Studios in San Bernardino and at Westlake

Recording Studio in Hollywood. They sell that EP at shows and on their website, and each hand-painted album is unique.

"It's been cool because we've been able to do a lot with those six songs, you know?" Ramirez says.

One song, "Chicle," has made the rounds of soundtracks, featured in the Emmy award-winning TV show, *Weeds*, as well as in the indie flick, *Dish*, and the documentary, *Re-Encounters*, about Oaxacan artist Alejandro Santiago. "Chicle" and another song off of the debut EP, "El Farol," were recently showcased—as was the entire band—in an episode of HBO's *Entourage*.

"We keep spreading that six-song EP thing, but it's been able to get us to do a lot of cool stuff and shows," Ramirez adds.

The band is coming off a two-week residence at the Hollywood Bowl, where they performed in conjunction with a children's play as part of the L.A. Philharmonic-sponsored kid's show "Summer Sounds."

"Now that was fun," Marisoul says.

"It's very different from our regular show," Estrada adds. "There's dialogue incorporated so there's no moment to catch your breath. You just have to be on it, which is very different because usually we go at our own pace and if we want to change anything, we can. This was very scripted."

The group said it was "gratifying" to teach children about the history of L.A., explain their instruments, and then get high fives from little kids at the end of the show.

"They soak everything up," Ramirez observes. "They're at the stage where the innocence is still there and they absorb it better. You feel really happy after a show because you get to pass on something so nice to kids."

[Guided by saints]

Next up are some shows at [La Cita Bar](#) in Downtown L.A. (Aug. 18 and Sept. 15) and (another) free show at Pasadena's [Levitt Pavilion](#) August 21. When asked how they manage to support themselves, there's a lot of throat clearing.

"None of us have day jobs," Estrada says. "We all, if anything, do music on the side, whether it's teaching or a side gig."

"Or singing on the street," Marisoul adds.

"But we get by," Ramirez says.

"Get by?" Marisoul says. "We scrounge for money to pay for stuff all the time. Or we get help sometimes from Santa Cecilia, our patron saint, but we don't have any money. And it sucks. But we have our little baby, which is La Santa Cecilia. If we get paid, we invest it back into the band. Everything goes to La Santa. It's our saying."

And does the patron saint of music provide?

"Always," Ramirez says. "Somehow it always works out."

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1. carlos aguas jr.
September 1, 2010

this article literally brought tears to my eyes! it is written so well, i can picture myself being a fly on the wall as everything is being explained with colorful descriptions. knowing LSC as friends, i can hear everything they are quoted in their own voice – it's quite amusing.

but the best part is the reflection. almost three years ago, my husband had a vision. my father built the bones (out of 2x4's) and out bohemian artist community family gave the altar a personality. LSC gave it a soul and la marisoul gave it a voice. it was one of the most extraordinary, surreal experiences of my life.

melissa, i wished i would have read this before i met you at the pasadena show. i would have hugged you and thanked you for writing such beautiful piece.

oh yeah, and the fact that my name is mentioned – icing on the already satisfying deliciousness!

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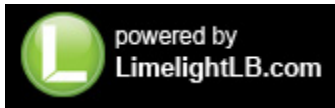
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- [Wishing for Books](#)
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 - [Antique & Collectible Outdoor Market](#)
Veterans Memorial Stadium - 5:30am
 - [Alamitos Bay Farmers Market](#)
Alamitos Bay Marina - 9:00am
 - [Big Fat Greek All You Can Eat Brunch!](#)
George's Greek Cafe in Lakewood - 9:00am
 - [Free Tanning Weekend at Exotic Tan](#)
Exotic Tan - 9:00am
 - [Patchwork Indie Arts & Crafts Festival](#)
Marine Stadium - 11:00am
 - [Siqueiros Paisajista / Siqueiros: Landscape Painter](#)
Museum of Latin American Art - 11:00am
 - [Descartes](#)
The Collaborative - 11:00am
 - [Perpetual Motion: Michael Goldberg](#)
University Art Museum - 12:00pm
 - [Bingo! With Tammie Brown](#)
The Center Long Beach - 12:30pm
 - [The Lion in Winter](#)
Long Beach Playhouse - 2:00pm

- [Justin Foutz "Thank You! Concert"](#)
EVO Lounge - 2:00pm
- [Our Lady of 121st Street](#)
CSULB Players Theatre - 2:00pm
- [CSULB Concert Jazz Orchestra - Big Band](#)
[Sounds of the '30s and '40s](#)
Carpenter Performing Arts Center - 2:00pm
- [Our Big Greek Happy Hour](#)
George's Greek Cafe on Pine - 3:00pm
- ["Atmosphere" Art Exhibition](#)
Les Jolis Tresors - 4:00pm
- [Food Finders Food/Hygiene drive](#)
FreeSpirit Yoga - 4:00pm
- [Happy Hour at the Sky Room](#)
The Sky Room Restaurant - 5:30pm
- [Beachgreens Harvest Dinner](#)
The Infinite Yoga - 6:30pm
- [Live Music in the Tapas Bar](#)
Sevilla Restaurant, Tapas Bar & Club - 7:00pm
- [Scary Poppins](#)
All American Melodrama Theater - 7:00pm
- [The Cellar Lounge](#)
The Cellar - 8:00pm
- [Centrevol Live Show](#)
Alex's Bar - 8:00pm
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