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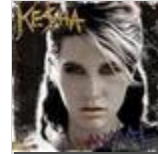
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# La Santa Cecilia Are LA's Next Big Genre-Bending Latino

By **GUSTAVO ARELLANO** Thursday, Dec 3 2009

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The **Patron Saints** of Genre-Bending

**La Santa Cecilia are LA's next big Latino band—and, man, can they play a mean klezmer!**

Every couple of years, a Latino band emerge from the Los Angeles area who match their emerging neighborhood and times perfectly, a band who transcend Latino LA to become a regional crossover hit. The 1990s closed with **Ozomatli**, whose post-riots combination of hip-hop and a multicultural rotating cast created a sound so ultimately soothing they're now musical ambassadors for the government. Earlier this decade, the group was **Quetzal**, proud Chicanos from East Los Angeles, proudly sticking to Afro-Mexican beats to the point where they downsized to two members committed to mastering son jarocho instead of pursuing further mainstreaming. Following them came **Los Abandoned**, Valley kids who stayed away from politics while crafting three-minute pop songs; they dissolved in 2007, just as our nation's hard times necessitated more sobriety.

The new It Group just might be the best of them all: **La Santa Cecilia**, six twentysomethings who synthesize the different strains of Latino life in Southern California into free-for-all tunes, firing off funk licks as easily as cumbia riffs. They really haven't done much professionally—just a

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self-titled, self-released, six-song EP last year, each individual case decorated by members and fans with glitter, ribbons, markers and original artwork. One of their songs, the melancholy *norteña* ballad “Chicle,” found its way into an episode of the show *Weeds*. But La Santa Cecilia are still underground enough that you can catch them at the most intimate locations.

The group—guitarist **Gloria Estrada**, accordion player **Jose Carlos**, bassist **Alex Bendana**, percussionist **Miguel Ramirez**, drummer **Hugo Vargas** and lead singer Marisoul—are all individually gifted, but depend on one another to transform their talents into La Santa Cecilia’s addictive charm. “We’ve all played in other bands and done other people’s music, and all of us got in a place two years ago where we just wanted to experiment,” says Marisoul, possessor of a husky voice that can switch from roaring to weeping within seconds à la **Janis Joplin**, but who delivers with the grace of **Ella Fitzgerald**.

The members of La Santa Cecilia—named after the patron saint of music—already knew one another, whether from playing in the same bands, attending the same schools, or showing up at one another’s events. “We talked; we jammed. Someone played jazz or mariachi; someone else brought in the Afro-Latino rhythms. Some rock,” Marisoul says. “It’s like being in the kitchen. If I put a little bit here, a little bit there, something good might come out. But if I put a lot over here and even more over there, *¿que chingado estamos haciendo* [what the hell are we doing]? Let’s see what comes out.”

What emerges is a dizzying, glorious spin that sonically captures Southern California life. Their signature song, “Klezmer,” starts with Bendana, Ramirez and Vargas unleashing the bone-rattling



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bass, drums and tambourines of the Jewish genre as Marisoul declares in Spanish, “From the streets of the grand city/Plays and booms/The six protegées of La Santa Cecilia!” In comes Carlos’ lazy accordion, out purrs Marisoul’s voice—and then about a minute into the song emerges Estrada’s guitar, seemingly stolen from **Django Reinhardt**, crystalline and twangy. A minute later, the sextet switch into a deft bossa nova as gently comforting as a Getz-Gilberto collaboration. Those three separate strains trade off leads, faster and faster, until climaxing in a chant that recalls the frantic enthusiasm of a Chabad telethon.

Live shows allow La Santa Cecilia to extend song length, the better to feed off the inevitable dancing they provoke from the old and the young of all ethnicities. And though their songs have yet to address politics, their commitment to community is legion—the few times they’ve played in Orange County have been at the behest of nonprofits looking to guarantee their financial salvation by asking the band to play at a fund-raiser. They’re being called to play the savior role again this Saturday, when the group perform for the second straight year at Breath of Fire Latina Theater’s “Noche de Milagros” benefit.

“It hasn’t been a plan to do them—it’s just happened,” Marisoul says of the fund-raisers. “We have all types of fans, but a lot of them are conscious who work at nonprofits and have their own causes. We are very aware of what we play for. It’s not just, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah’ to anything. We have to like it.” Some of them have included shows for Tia Chucha’s Cafe (the community space run by famed Chicano author **Luis Rodriguez**), a group that gathers indigenous grandmothers to document their culture’s traditions, and a documentary about women activists in **Boyle Heights**.

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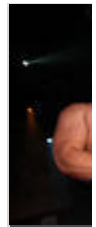
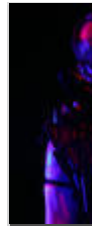
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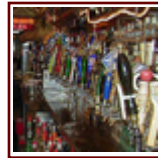
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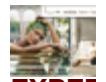


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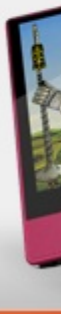
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