

"We try to take the music to different places, to challenge ourselves to come up with something we haven't done before. But at the same time, everything we do is rooted in American music or Latin American music."

by DON MCLEESE

ONCE A VETERAN band marks its 30th anniversary, it can be difficult to distinguish a milestone from a tombstone. A band that becomes an institution carries the weight of previous accomplishment and audience expectation. A groove can become a rut.

Thus, as remarkable as it is that Los Lobos has remained together for more than three decades — something that typically happens only with financial juggernauts and corporate institutions such as the Rolling Stones — it's even more amazing when its interplay sparks something as creatively vital as *The Town And The City*. The album, due out September 12 on Mammoth/Hollywood, is easily the band's most thematically ambitious and sonically audacious in more than a decade. It is also their darkest, a reflection of times in turmoil. And it didn't come without a struggle.

By contrast, Los Lobos' previous studio album, 2003's *The Ride*, was a snap. It was a joyous celebration of the band's 30th anniversary, featuring guest turns by an array of musical heroes and inspirations including Elvis Costello, Ruben Blades, Tom Waits, Richard Thompson, Willie G. and Mavis Staples. The mix of older material, covers and a few new tunes underscored the band's range and legacy. It was like the CD equivalent of a lifetime achievement award at the Oscars or Grammys, which typically honor artists ready to be embalmed.

Following that, the band released *Live At The Fillmore*, the first concert album ever from one of rock's greatest live bands. Even so, live albums are also stopgaps, marking time, looking back. And Lobos already had done an exhaustive job of retrospecting itself with the millennial release of its four-disc box set, *El Cancionero Mas Y Mas*.

"Man, that was spooky," admitted Louie Perez, collaborator with David Hidalgo on most of the band's material. "It seemed so final. There's something creepy about anthologies."

So, with the burden of all that history on its back, it was imperative that the band now release something that would not be perceived as just another Los Lobos album, that would be seen as a leap forward after so much looking back. Though looking back ultimately provided the key to pushing onward.

"Before we started, we had done a series of shows that were basically 'Kiko Live,' where we played the album sequentially," says saxophonist Steve Berlin, referring to the 1992 album that is universally acknowledged as the band's creative masterwork. "So that was in our heads profoundly.

"We got back to a place where we were excited by the idea of creating cinematic soundscapes, if you will, and playing with the idea of sound manipulation. Mind you, it wasn't like we were trying to micromanage what made *Kiko Kiko*, rewrite this song or redo that one. It was more that those shows were an awful lot of fun, and we wanted to see if there was anything we could take from that into this."

Because the band hadn't worked in such fashion for a long time, it was slow going at the start, stretching impressionistically, trying to pull something out of the air. "We found ourselves sitting around a lot going, 'You have anything?' 'No, what have you got?'" continues Berlin. "But eventually a little piece of a song would turn into something a whole lot bigger, and the record just kind of appeared to us."

"And as we went along, we realized we had this thematic thing going on. Not that we had gone in there with the idea of making a conceptual record at all. Anything but."

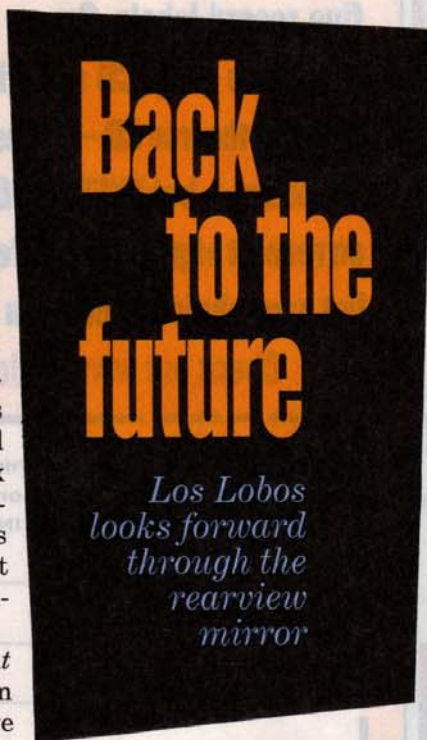
A song cycle that can be heard as an immigrant's journey, the dark night of an individual's soul, or maybe even a band in the midst of a midlife crisis, *The Town And The City* will inevitably draw comparisons with *Kiko*. Yet for all that the two albums share in terms of creative experimentation and impressionistic songwriting, they are like the reverse images of photographic negatives.

Where *Kiko* is airy and playful in its surrealism, *The Town And The City* broods with the bleak despair of existence. *Kiko* is childlike innocence; *The Town And The City* bears the onus of experience. In a manner that is elemental and almost mythical, the album's "Hold On" sounds like a metaphysical chain gang song — "Hold on to every breath/ And if I make it to the sunrise/Do it all over again" — shouldering the same existential weight as Albert Camus' *The Myth Of Sisyphus*.

"Killing myself just to keep alive," sings Hidalgo at his most world-weary. "Killing myself to survive."

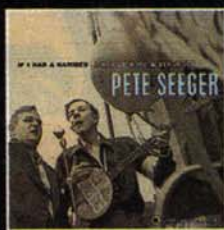
How did Los Lobos find itself in such a dark place?

"Not that we ever plan anything, but this darn record just wanted to make itself," says Perez. "I noticed after the first two or three songs that I was writing lyrically in the first person, which I never do. It's usually more narrative storytelling. And I talked to David [who sings all of their songwriting collaborations] about it, because of course 'I' becomes him, and he said, fine, cool. So I didn't resist and just kept going, and I started to notice an arc as in a story. And I go, do I steer it? If anything, I



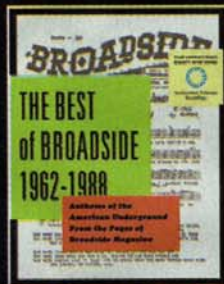
Los Lobos illustrated by Jon Straus, Chicago, IL

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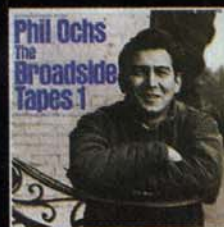


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just leaned into it a little bit."

"This album was different, all the way through," says guitarist Hidalgo, who typically supplies the musical framework that Perez then fills lyrically. (As always, guitarist Cesar Rosas also contributes a few songs to the album, providing a grounding for the more radical innovations of Hidalgo and Perez.) "The musical tempos were medium to slow, and it wasn't real obvious which way the album was headed.

"I'll write musical ideas and give them to Louie, and then it's his ball. It's like a surprise, because the ideas that he comes up with are often quite a bit different from what I might have done, or better than what I might have dreamed of. So with his impression of what the music is, it grows to another level."

More than most bands, Los Lobos functions as a working democracy, or at least a division of labor. Hidalgo relies not only on Perez to help shape the musical results, but on the other band members to help determine which of his musical ideas can work for Lobos. (Others that are set aside might end up in side projects such as the Latin Playboys and Hounddog.) Sometimes the ideas that get the band excited are ones Hidalgo considered throwaways. Perhaps the key to the band's creative dynamic is that it combines a profound respect for musical tradition with a restless spirit of aural adventure.

"I would say musically Dave is the most equal among equals," says Berlin. "Everyone looks up to him as the principal songwriter and the main genius of the operation. But I would say we're as democratic as any band I've ever been around, with a bunch of headstrong guys in it. And we try to listen to any idea, no matter who has it."

"We try to take the music to different places, to challenge ourselves to come up with something we haven't done before," says Hidalgo. "But at the same time, everything we do is rooted in American music or Latin American music. That's our language I guess. When I try to come up with ideas for music, I don't categorize anything. What happens happens. But then I see whether this is something that Lobos can get behind and perform. And everybody adds their own piece to it."

Asked about his major musical inspirations, Hidalgo responds with something of a surprise: Captain Beefheart. In retrospect it makes perfect sense: The brilliant Beefheart all but invented his own musical language based on forms steeped in blues and jazz, so the gap between Beefheart's Magic Band and Los Lobos isn't as great as it might initially appear.

"If I'm writing songs and have an idea

that's kind of stock in a way, I think, 'What would Beefheart do here? How would he approach it?' I've gotten to know him over the last ten years [since Beefheart, a.k.a. Don Van Vliet, has forsaken music for visual art]. I've never met him in person, but I've talked with him on the phone. He's just amazing, with his sense of humor and everything about him, his approach to music.

"And Bo Diddley's another one, 'cause he's always done things differently; there's always a twist to it. I think Tom Waits said you try to approach it like a child, like a little kid, playing with stuff. Pick something up, turn it over, blow into it, hit it with



Los Lobos, surviving nicely.

something. Try to be open to whatever might happen. Out of the mistakes, it might not be what you intended, but it could be something different, or even better."

Says Berlin, who coordinates the production and is perhaps the band member most interested in sonic experimentation, "I don't think Howlin' Wolf sat around and thought about whether what he was doing was the way Skip James would have done it. Not to put ourselves in that pantheon, but I think any song form grows best when it's messed around with. A lot of people are so reverential that they forget to improvise and create something new."

Though *The Town And The City* is recognizably the work of Los Lobos, both the textures and the themes push the music into uncharted territory. While the narrative arc transcends literal storytelling, it takes the listener on a pilgrimage that begins with the dawning of a civilization in "The Valley", proceeds through the existential despair of "Hold On" and the darkness of the soul in "If You Were Only Here Tonight", shows what's been lost along the way in "Little Things" (with a nod toward Procol Harum), and ultimately contrasts the Ellingtonian sophistication of "The City" with the dreams and indelible memories of "The Town" left behind.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES MINCHIN III

"The record is about us, but it's really kind of about our parents, and an experience of this journey we're all on, not to sound too philosophical," says Perez. "And along the way we find ourselves in unfamiliar places. You can't ignore the issues of immigration that are in the news, though the song 'The Road To Gila Bend' is the only song that's specifically about that. But as a whole this is a story about struggle. I think everybody experiences the feeling of being a foreigner, being a stranger in a strange land."

For Perez, it's also about being in a band that started as best friends and the tolls that both the years and the music industry have taken on those relationships. It's about how everything changes, and how the passage of time forces everyone to consider what's truly important.

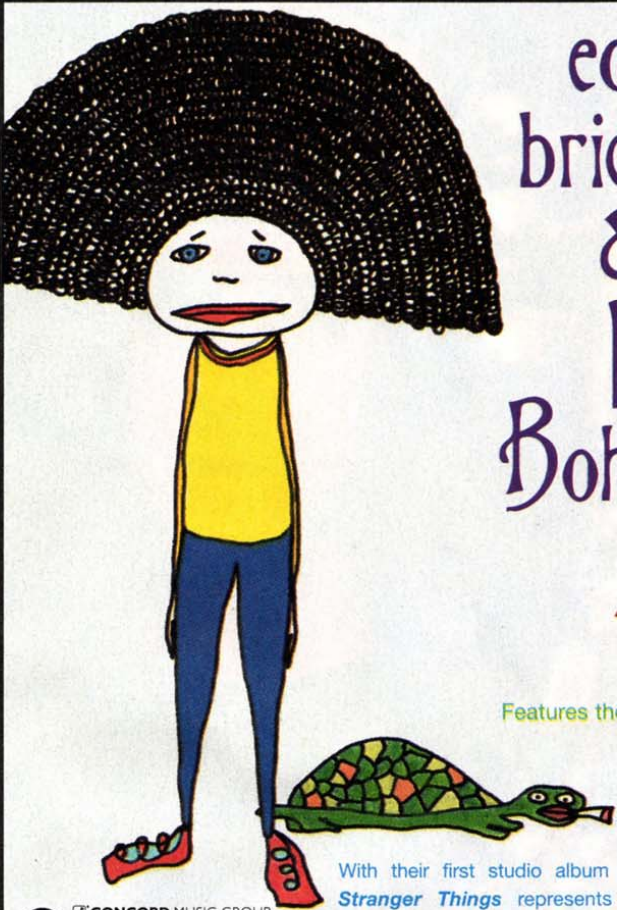
"I don't know if it's a midlife crisis or what it is, but we're all in our 50s now, and there's definitely a looking at what we've done and the time we have left," he says. "And that has something to do with this record. The song 'Little Things' is about the things we overlook, because we get so damn busy. And it could be about this band."

"The powers that be in this business will try to beat the shit out of you, so you try to live in the very small fraction where it's just about the music. Without going into detail, we've had some tough times and seen a lot of stuff happen — stuff around the world, stuff with us personally. These are difficult times for us as a band, and this record might be a reflection of that. We don't see as much of each other anymore. Our kids are all grown up now, and they get along better than we do. And I say that with a bit of jealousy, because we're not the friends we used to be. But I know that if you would strip everything away, you'd find these guys who grew up together and are still really best friends."

As the last to join and the one who didn't grow up with the rest, Berlin never imagined he'd still be making music with Los Lobos more than twenty years later. Now he finds it easier to imagine the band still together twenty years from now.

"Well, we're not really qualified to do much else, so our job options are pretty limited," he says with a laugh. "Seriously, all I can say is that basically the personalities seem to fit. We've got guys who have been married to their wives 20-23 years, and I guess when you're happy with what you've got there's little impetus to change. And we still feel we haven't made our best record yet, so we're always trying to push on for that as well."

ND senior editor Don McLeese has long believed that Los Lobos is the best band in America and David Hidalgo the most multi-talented musician this side of Prince.



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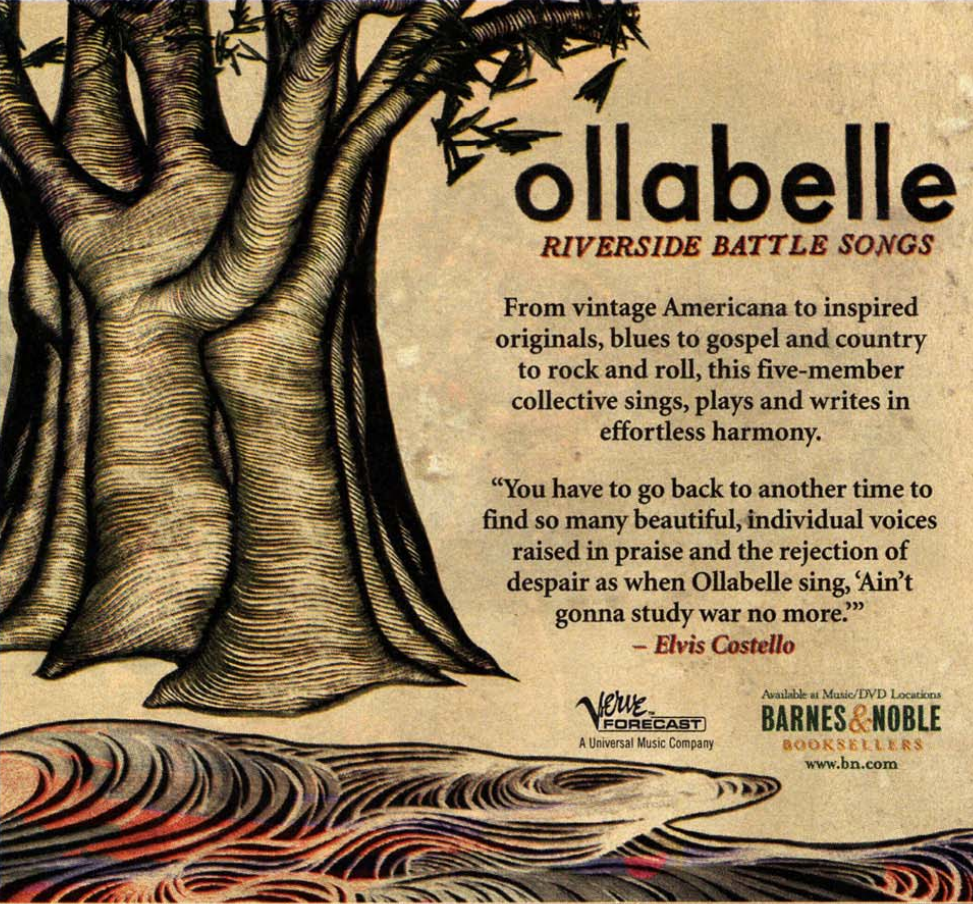
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