

Los Lobos, Jazz Cafe, London ☆☆☆☆☆

By Gavin Martin

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Heavy-set and stone-faced they sport shades, goatees and pork-pie hats. Los Lobos look like the Reservoir Dogs of Chicano rock. Thirty-three years since they began, Los Lobos' brief dalliance with mainstream success (their 1987 soundtrack to the Ritchie Valens biopic *La Bamba*) may be past, but, as tonight proves, their musical engagement is a lifelong affair.

On the opening "Hold On" Dave Hidalgo is a tender giant, his sweet cry of soulful resolve pivoting on a determined declaration to "do it all over again" while bass player Conrad Lozano provides a loping swamp groove. Then, swapping his frazzled blues guitar for a set of maracas, Cesar Rosas takes the first of several Spanish-language lead vocals, an intoxicating blend of high kicking cantina fiestas and slow waltzes. All the while the newest member, the excellently named, suitably lethal, drummer Cougar Estrada, maintains an agile and alert pulse.

"Chains" initially seems to be a generic bump'n'grind blues but soon explodes into one of the exultant jam-band lift-offs. The title track of the 1990 album "The Neighbourhood" is a reminder that the personal struggles of immigrant, communities have been a long-standing concern. That's the theme binding their current, excellent, *The Town And The City* album. "Road To Gila Bend" one of many new tracks featured from it, is transcendent, its classic pop chorus as instantly memorable as the shimmering "Kiko And The Lavender Moon".

Abandoning a tantalising blast of Van Morrison's "Moondance", Rosas cracks a grin and wryly defers to the venue by introducing a "jazz" song. But the smoking desert rock of "Whiskey Trail", like a cross-border ZZ Top, proves to be a long way from the textbook description of "jazz".

But then, as seasoned musicians versed in everything from the garage-punk ballistics of "Don't Worry Baby" to the nortenos and conjuntos of their family and musical forebears, Los Lobos are right to leave categorical quibbles to the radio playlist barons.

The finale was a world-shaking, jet-powered assault on "My Generation", with the guitars of Louie Perez, Rosas and Hidalgo in adrenalin-charged unison.