

PRODUCTION NOTES

MAPPING THE TOWN AND THE CITY: LOS LOBOS DO IT THE HARD WAY BY BUD SCOPPA

Almost without exception, a great album grows from great songs. And occasionally the songs almost write themselves, as Los Lobos discovered while working on their 1992 career milestone, *Kiko*, an experience they've described as "supernatural." But it isn't always so effortless. Sometimes—as in the case of the band's mesmerizing new long-player, *The Town and the City*—the process requires an ongoing, concentrated effort.

As always, the latest album began with the core tandem of guitarist/singer David Hidalgo and long-time writing partner Louie Pérez,

this record lives somewhere else." So Hidalgo went home and gave it one last try.

Finally, he hit upon a couple ideas, recorded them on his trusty old eight-track cassette deck and dropped off a CD containing the two works in progress at Pérez's house. Louie fired up his PowerBook, slipped in the CD and opened a Word document to note lyrical ideas. Out of the speakers came the musical beds for what would become "The Valley," a mesmerizing downtempo groove that went on for six or seven minutes, and "If You Were Only Here Tonight," which had a cool guitar part running

"Great—let's cut it." Pérez then tackled the second bed, which brought to mind a solitary figure during a long, sleepless night, and out came the lyric to "If You Were Only Here Tonight." Once again, Hidalgo gave the lyric the thumbs up.

A DIFFICULT BIRTH

Hidalgo and Pérez then assembled the rest of the band—bassist Conrad Lozano, horn player Steve Berlin and drummer Cougar Estrada, along with engineer Robert Carranza—in the home studio of guitarist César Rosas, whereupon they transferred Hidalgo's eight-track cassette demos to Pro

ture. So there was some kind of plot taking shape. I didn't resist—I just went there."

Still, it didn't come easy. "Some records take on their own lives," notes Pérez, "and this one sure took on a stubborn-ass life." After eight months of starts and stops, as the band straddled recording and touring, the struggle was over—*The Town and the City* was finally complete. After playing the mastered disc, Pérez recalls, "David and I sat back, scratched our heads and said to each other, 'What the heck was *that* all about?'"

And what *that* was all about, looking back, was the experience of the



Los Lobos [L-R]: David Hidalgo, César Rosas, Louis Pérez, Steve Berlin, Conrad Lozano

the band's lyricist and thematic renaissance man. They huddled up, only to discover that neither had anything. This record would have to be coaxed, poked and prodded into existence.

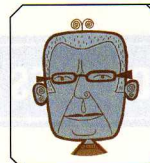
"We've gotta do it the hard way, to keep it exciting, I guess," Pérez jokes. "We had about a month before we were scheduled to go into the studio, so we spent the entire time attempting to write, and we were getting desperate. I went over to David's house, pulled out a lot of old stuff and picked out two or three ideas to get started with, because we were running out of time. And then David said, 'No, man,

all the way through it, eventually evolving into a solo.

"When I heard 'The Valley,' this atmospheric thing that was going on made it feel like this is the place where everything starts—literally and metaphorically—because all the swirling sounds gave it the feeling of a creation myth or something," says Pérez. "Then the idea for a lyric started to come—I imagined indigenous people or migrants coming over a hill and looking down into this valley, and they realize that they've finally arrived at a place they can call home. So I wrote it, gave it to David and he said,

Tools and built the tracks over them. The finished recordings of "The Valley" and "If You Were Only Here Tonight" provided the band with the hint of a direction in which to proceed. "At that point, it was still a mystery," Pérez admits. "But we kept at it, and about halfway into the project, we realized that 'The Valley' was the beginning of a journey or adven-

creative process at its most demanding, and its most rewarding. "I haven't felt this way about a record since *Kiko*—the feeling that this is really, truly something different," says Pérez with satisfaction. "But I daresay that this isn't the record we set out to make. It took a while to reveal itself. This time we sculpted in stone rather than clay."



BUD SCOPPA

Longtime rock critic Bud Scoppa writes Production Notes every other month in *Paste*. He also contributes regularly to Britain's *Uncut*, among other publications, co-authors the blog *MusicSnobs.com*, is the L.A. columnist for *Mix* and edits music trade mag *Hits* and *hitsdailydouble.com*.