

Los Straitjackets rock ... en Espanol

by *George_Varga*

SAN DIEGO - The inspired combination of Los Straitjackets, Big Sandy and Los Lobos mainstay Cesar Rojas may not be a musical match made in heaven. But it's close enough to inspire visions of angels, replete with bouncing halos, dancing the mashed potato alongside a wildly twisting St. Peter (or, in this case, San Pedro).

Los Straitjackets On their terrific new YepRoc Records album, "Rock en Espanol, Vol. 1," the Nashville-based Los Straitjackets - an all-instrumental surf-rock quartet now in its 13th year - teams up with Rosas, Big Sandy and singer Little Willie G. of the pioneering Southern California Chicano rock band Thee Midnighters. Rosas produced the album and is the lead vocalist on three cuts, the same number as G., while roots-music champion Big Sandy very ably sings on seven tracks.

Together, they create an ebullient tribute to vintage rock and R&B that is sung almost exclusively in Spanish and is expertly filtered through a Mexican and Mexican-American cultural prism. What results is a celebration of "rocanrol Mexicano" that shakes, rattles and rolls with enough passion and infectious verve to fuel several dance marathons. So expect lots of frenzied, if not quite holy, gyrations when Los Straitjackets, featuring guest vocalist Big Sandy, kick off a three-month national tour Wednesday at San Diego's famed alt-rock mecca, the Casbah.

You can also expect a fascinating cross-border musical gumbo - or should that be caldo de res? - which sounds both reverent and up-to-the-minute fresh. The incisive guitar riffs and head-shaking beats are instantly recognizable on the charged versions of such classics as Larry Williams' "Slow Down" ("Calor") and The Kinks' "All the Day and All of the Night" ("De Dia y de Noche"). Some of the translated song titles are another matter, but that's half the fun.

For example, The McCoys' 1965 hit "Hang On Sloopy" is transformed into "Hey Lupe" (by way of the 1966 cover version by Los Rockin' Devils). Williams' hard-rocking "Bony Maronie" is recast here - with a nod to the seminal Mexican band Los Teen Tops - as "Popotitos," while "Dizzy Miss Lizzy" is renamed (ahem!) "El Microscopio Bikini."

Best of all is The Troggs' "Wild Thing," which also pays homage to the 1967 version by Juan El Matematico (that's "John the Mathematician" for you non-Spanish speakers) and is retitled "Loco te Patina El Coco." (This literally translates as "Crazy Person Slides the Coco to You," not "Wild Thing," but why quibble?)

Not surprisingly, there are some fascinating backstories to this album. They range from the original translations into Spanish of these song titles and lyrics by Latin rock pioneer Armando Martinez, to the pivotal musical influence of "Rock Around the Clock" singer Bill Haley, who in 1961 relocated to Mexico to avoid

tax debts and a crumbling marriage. Los Lobos drummer Luis Perez provides additional info in the album's liner notes.

You need not know any of this to be captivated by "Rock en Espanol, Vol. 1." But few albums this fun also boast such an intriguing history. And if Los Straitjackets and Big Sandy sound even half as inspired on their joint tour as they do on this album, their tour promises to be muy caliente!

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