

The San Juan Star

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# VISTA

Focus on Hispanic Americans

Miami Sound Machine •  
Los Lobos • Rubén Blades

## LIVING THE CROSSOVER DREAM



Inside: Latina Tennis Stars • Controlling Cancer • Theater on Wheels



# LIVING THE *Crossover Dream*

Hispanics bring to U.S. pop culture  
new sounds, new images, new vitality



Rubén Blades, reigning symbol of a trend: dedicated to the premise of cross-cultural communication through song and film.

By **POLITA C. GORDON**

It was a rare opportunity for the South Florida audience. The hometown crowd was about to hear the musical group that carries the city's name around the world. Miami Sound Machine, which plays more often in Europe, Latin America and other parts of the United States than at home, emerged on stage to the enthusiastic roar of fans of all ages and ethnic backgrounds.

*Miami-based free-lance writer Polita C. Gordon specializes in the multicultural aspects of music and film.*

As the group broke into their hit single, "Conga," spectators leaped from their seats to dance. In Miami's Cuban community, Miami Sound Machine generates a special feeling, for here are Cuban American musicians who have achieved recognition in the pop music world with a Latin sound, no small feat in the reign of rock 'n' roll.

While Latin artists have been on the American cultural scene for decades, the growth of the United States' Hispanic population from 4 million to 17 million between 1950 and 1985 has ushered in a new era.

Young Hispanic performers such as MSM have

been exposed to Anglo pop culture from an early age. The result has been the emergence of bilingual and bicultural Hispanic American artists who are crossing over rapidly into the world of mainstream entertainment. Performers like Puerto Rico's Willie Colón, California's Los Lobos and Panamanian Rubén Blades—once heard only by Latino audiences—are beginning to draw capacity crowds of Anglos as well as Hispanics into concert halls across the country.

MSM has long been appreciated by Latin Americans and Hispanic Americans but only more recently by Anglo Americans. It took the catchy

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Miramax Films



strains of "Conga" to skyrocket them into the lofty heights of *Billboard Magazine's* Top 100.

Since 1980, MSM has been on the Discos CBS label, the Spanish-language division of CBS International. But recently the group began distributing its albums through Epic Records, a conscious effort to reach both the English and the Spanish-language markets.

Similarly, recordings of Los Lobos, marketed by Warner Bros. Records under the Slash label, appeal to a broad public. Their "How Will the Wolf Survive?" was placed among the top three albums of 1984 by *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *Rolling Stone* magazine.

"I grew up in the States so all my studies were in English," explains singer Gloria Estefan, who leads MSM with her husband Emilio. "I know Spanish perfectly but I think in English; it's my main language. I don't think we have to be just a Latin group; we are a bilingual group. We've had heavy influences from both the Cuban and the American sides, and when we write a song we don't say 'Let's make it sound Latin or American.' We say, 'What would make it sound best?'"

MSM's American success came via Latin

**One of the most powerful forces of popular American culture is the entertainment industry. Hispanic artists are making their mark as the industry recognizes their creativity in the blending of cultures.**

America and Europe with the song "Dr. Beat." Their seventh LP in Spanish included "Dr. Beat" and another English-lyric song. In Europe, the album rose to third spot on all pop charts. Its success allowed MSM to convince Discos CBS to record an entire English-language album around "Dr. Beat."

For Gloria Estefan, the success of "Conga" and the media exposure that has surrounded it—such as appearances on the CBS Morning News, *Solid Gold*, *American Bandstand* and a made-for-television movie—indicate a growing acceptance by the American market of music forms that don't fit traditional definitions. "I believe that the American public has grown a lot musically in these past few years," she says.

In many ways, "Conga" is more Latin in rhythm and style than much of MSM's other music, which has leaned more toward the bolero and samba sounds than the percussive, polyrhythmic elements of "Conga."

"I'm happy that the first song that made it in the American market was 'Conga,'" says Gloria, "because Latin people tell us that they're very proud of us, that we're representing them and that we didn't give up our Latin roots."

Many Hispanics in their 30's and 40's were either born in the U.S. or have spent more than half their lives here. They have grown to move comfortably in two worlds, that of their parents and that of the United States with its particular cultural trappings.

One of the most powerful forces of popular American culture is the entertainment industry with its music, television and film products. It is in this arena that Hispanic artists are making their



Seyoum Lelisa



**Los Lobos (from left at top, Conrad Lozano, César Rosas, Steve Berlin, Louie Pérez and David Hidalgo): Frustrated with the limitations of pop tunes, they explored the rich heritage of Mexican folk music. Miami Sound Machine (from left, Emilio Estefan, Marcos Avila, Gloria Estefan and Kiki Garcia): "Latin people tell us they're very proud of us, that we're representing them and didn't give up our Latin roots."**

mark, as the industry begins to recognize their creativity in the blending of two cultures.

This process has been dubbed "crossover," indicating that an artist from an ethnic minority has achieved recognition and success in the mainstream, Anglo-dominated market.

To achieve national awareness performers need a product that is liked by the public at large. The artists' challenge lies in creating what the market demands while sustaining a cultural identity.

However, crossover does not accurately describe the interaction between market trends, taste and the creative process. Artists do not conduct a market survey before they are moved to write a script or a song. Such creations are a merger of their particular talents with the influences and experiences in their lives.

Lisandro Pérez, a Cuban-born sociologist at Florida International University, sees MSM as pioneers of a trend.

"Miami Sound Machine is a product of a bicultural environment," he explains. "They can produce bicultural work because they grew up in this country and are in a position to create music that appeals to two cultural audiences."

Awareness of the buying power of the growing Hispanic market has led corporations and advertisers to support entertainment aimed at that market.

In turn, this support provides important exposure for the artists, whether it's Miller Beer sponsoring a five-city tour by Willie Colón and Rubén Blades or Budweiser Beer signing Los Lobos to record English and Spanish-language commer-



## The Crossover Sound: What Is It?

At times, the band evokes the Tito Puente sound, tropical and carefree; at others, Pink Floyd's dark chords roll from the deepest registers of synthesizers. The singers can shout with the brazenness of The Village People or croon Beatle-esque ballads against soft instrumental backgrounds.

With ease, the musicians switch from a thumping disco beat to a youthful rock tune redolent of the Bee-Gees, then leap into the "rap" music of Harlem in the 80's.

That is only a sampling of the versatility of Miami Sound Machine, the group that best represents the new East Coast sound. Versatility is their greatest asset and one that, in effect, typifies the "crossover" phenomenon.

Whether the tunes are played in the quirky, neurotic rhythms of Herbie Hancock or in the driving pulse of Quincy Jones, the underlying feeling is unmistakably Caribbean. The musicians acknowledge Anglo influences but do not mimic them. Their approach to the music is Hispanic.

Los Lobos—West Coast exponents of "crossover"—carry their exploration even further into the recesses of time, but their music should not be dismissed as simple nostalgia. Musicianship is the key, as the quintet superimposes the strident guitar twanging of Chuck Berry on a Southern Baptist revival

tune. Another rock tune bounces breezily on the rhythm and harmonies of "La Bamba."

Though rock music is clearly Los Lobos' favorite—they give the Chubby Checker style a new lease on life—their intelligent handling of instruments extends their musical range to unexpected regions. David Hidalgo revives the art of accordion playing, cleverly camouflaging an Irish reel inside a country-Western stomper.

And electric guitars are unleashed in a cascade of notes that matches, in style and virtuosity, the Les Paul sound of the 50's.

When it comes to their roots Los Lobos are, in a word, authentic. Their voices pitched high in the manner of mariachis, they strum their way through Mexican corridos (their own, not the old standards) with irrepressible cheer.

It would be unfair to say that "crossover" groups like Miami Sound Machine and Los Lobos are imitators of earlier, established musicians. They do not copy. They build on others' styles and, by evoking the past in the context of the present, they appeal to listeners of all ages.

So it is with the ethnic content of their music. The blending of jazz harmonies with Caribbean rhythms creates a sound that is neither Anglo nor Latino, yet it's both. Their skilled technique and sensitive musicianship merges the best of both cultures.

—Renato Pérez

cials (a first in the company's history).

Los Lobos—Mexican Americans David Hidalgo, Conrad Lozano, César Rosas, Louie Pérez and a Philadelphian, Steve Berlin—offer a special blend of rock'n'roll, rhythm-and-blues and traditional Chicano rancheras. Their musical formula has won them the distinction of being the only Hispanic group to have an album in *Billboard's* Top 100 in the pop music category for 1985.

Original band members Hidalgo, Lozano, Rosas and Pérez shared an East Los Angeles childhood. In the early 1970's, they played Top 40 tunes for local clubs, weddings and community gatherings.

Frustrated by the limitations of that music, they began to explore the rich cultural heritage of Mexican folk music, researching and learning traditional styles and instruments. Continuing to evolve, the group then integrated elements of rock, blues and soul into their sound.

The rest is history. After producing an album independently in 1978, they were signed by Slash Records in 1983 and their album "How Will the Wolf Survive?" became the biggest seller in Slash's operation. Its success brought the group three tours through Europe, as well as trips to Japan and Australia.

Los Lobos acknowledge the cultural influences that make up their music and feel they are carrying on a tradition of musical fusion started in the early days of rock'n'roll. As individuals, they appreciate the rewards of success but choose to live modestly in an East Los Angeles neighborhood near their parents and families.

"The band is made up of real people, not just life in the fast lane," says Linda Clark, the group's manager and a 16-year veteran of the music business. "There is something in Los Lobos' music that touches a responsive chord in people's hearts. It is honest, real American music and at

the same time universal."

Groups like Los Lobos and Miami Sound Machine help to create a cycle of success by inspiring other Hispanic artists to "make it" in the entertainment industry.

According to NBC Television executive Jay Rodriguez, "There are more Hispanic artists attempting to do what needs to be done, to become professionals and dedicate themselves to their chosen field, whether it be film, theater, television or music. They see the success of others and are encouraged to try."

Working to fuel that cycle, the Hispanic Academy of Media Arts and Sciences (HAMAS) was formed in Los Angeles last year. At present, it has a membership of over 350, with two new chapters being formed in New York and Washington, D.C. HAMAS' goal is to increase the participation of

Hispanics in the artistic mainstream through training and the creation of a talent bank.

Film director and producer Frank Zúñiga of Los Angeles, a founding member of HAMAS, sees the organization as creating the same bridges that groups like Miami Sound Machine, Los Lobos and others have built.

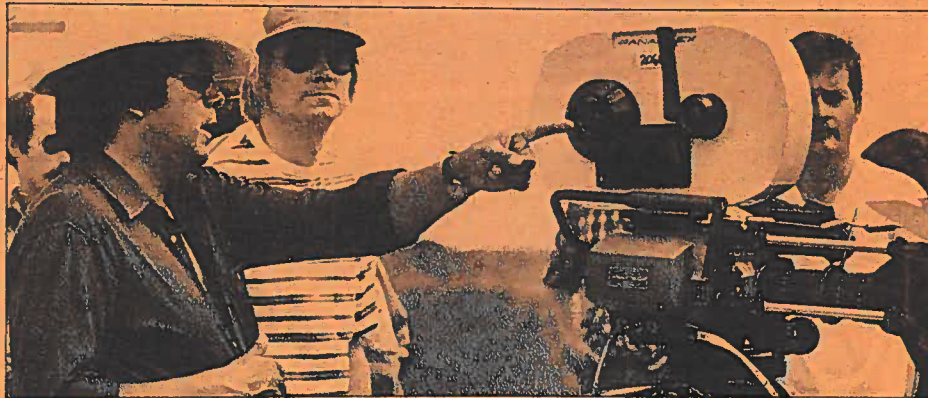
"I really applaud these groups. Los Lobos is a wonderful phenomenon because its music is very much a collage of the Chicano heritage. It takes ranchera and then mixes in rock'n'roll, which is the American part of it. They have managed to blend the styles in a way that both cultures are clearly identified. HAMAS is trying to do just the same."

As advertisers have recognized the need for Hispanic talent, Zúñiga believes that "soon the entertainment industry is going to wake up to the same realities and begin to make a product that reflects our community while being intended for mainstream consumption."

Walking the tightrope between succeeding in the powerful American mainstream and keeping a sense of cultural identity is an art form in itself. The writing, producing and directing team of Manuel Arce and León Ichasso work hard to maintain that balance.

Their feature film efforts began in 1979 with *El Super*, a highly acclaimed Spanish-language film that provided a bittersweet glimpse into the acculturation trauma of a Cuban immigrant surviving in New York City as a building superintendent.

**Frank Zúñiga, film director and producer: The entertainment industry must make a product that reflects our community.**



After 10 years of producing commercials, Arce and Ichasso made *El Super*, which was distributed with English subtitles in small art cinemas. It was one of the first films that play like a foreign movie yet actually describe a Hispanic American experience.

More recently, their production of *Crossover Dreams* with salsa singer Rubén Blades has drawn the attention of the Anglo media from *The New York Times* to Johnny Carson.

Crossover not only represents cinematic growth for the filmmakers but its production in English exposed their work to new and broader audiences. Through the story of a Latin singer willing to abandon his culture, friends and barrio roots for fast success in the American pop music world, the film dramatically communicates the delicacy needed in balancing two worlds.



Arce and Ichasso feel that artists like themselves are very much a part of the American culture: "We are Cuban Americans but we have been here for 25 years and we've worked in an Anglo world. We do have a Hispanic background but when we produce we don't just think of audience or the market...we try for quality," says Arce.

Crossover has provided the opportunity for new areas of artistic exploration. Because of the film, Ichasso was invited to direct an episode of the popular "Miami Vice". As Arce explains, "Crossover was itself a crossover in that it was seen by everyone in the film industry. It got a great reception and it has opened many doors."

Certainly the reigning symbol of the crossover trend is Rubén Blades. A talented songwriter and musician, Blades is also recognized for his academic achievements—which include a Master's degree in Law from Harvard University—and his political vision.


Pioneering the fusion of dance music and social change, his use of salsa lyrics to communicate a perspective on the state of human affairs has brought a new dimension to the art form.

In "Padre Antonio," he sings about Salvadoran death squads; in "Searching for America," of Latin American dictators. "News changes constantly," he says, "but the issues remain forever on the album. The songs themselves are not going to change the world, but they tend to educate." Issue-oriented songs, he says, "make an impact that TV and newspapers can't really make."

Although Blades has not yet recorded in English, his records are produced on the Elektra Asylum label, advertised in and reviewed by English-language publications and listened to by audiences who only understand the words by reading the translations on the album jacket.

This is not by chance. The Panamanian artist is dedicated to the premise of cross-cultural communication through his music and prefers to think in terms of the convergence of cultures rather than the one-way crossover.

The evolving popularity of Blades' music rose spectacularly after the release of *Crossover Dreams*. Now, like his film character, Rudy Veloz, Blades treads the line between two cultures.

Entertainers and artists have always been the first to cross the cultural gap created by language, ethnicity and race. While "crossover" means that Hispanic talent will be recognized for its ability to create a special blend of Hispanic and American art, cross-fertilization will ensure the survival and growth of both cultures. 



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