
Around the World in L.A.: The Anomalies of Ozomatli

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Ozo Anomaly #1: How To Succeed in Multiculturalism Without Really Trying

Actual multicultural bands are a rare thing in contemporary pop. I'm not talking about the sitar-armed global fusionists or the post-world beat ethno poppers or the neo-shaman suburban tribalists. And I'm not talking about so-called "buffet" multiculturalism of the left, or the corporate-sponsored, "diversity management" multiculturalism of the right. I'm talking about what Wahneema Lubiano has called "radical" or "transformative" multiculturalism one that links culture to politics in the context of an organic, frenzied musical performance not because it can or should, but because it has to.

I first saw Ozomatli play two years ago at a small Latino cultural center in Oakland. Here were eleven musicians of all backgrounds -- a Jewish bass player, a Japanese-American tabla player, a Cuban-American percussionist, an African-American rapper, and a handful of Chicanos blowing big, brassy horns, soloing on guitars, and tearing up drum kits -- flying through a sweaty, two-hour set of salsa, hip hop, funk, reggae, samba, and cumbia.

There was also a legit battle of the hands between tabla and turntable and an impromptu breakdancing circle that pitted band members against a local Filipino b-boy crew. Then, without blinking, they wheeled out a good, old-fashioned Mexican ranchera, laced it with a few turntable scratches and breakbeats, and had the tiny crowd dancing like it was a rice-and-beans block party on a scorching summer night.

The stylistic comparisons came quickly -- mostly '60s and '70s Afro-Latino creations like War, El Chicano, Azteca, Sapo. But it was clear to me that, even back then, Ozomatli were their own urban groove monster: an unmistakable product of post-riot Los Angeles who take party-rocking so seriously that it becomes new school musical activism.

Ozo Anomaly #2: When's The Last Time a Red Diaper Baby Landed a Major Label Deal?

Before the contract with the Herb Alpert-owned Almo Sounds, before becoming the most talked-about conjunto on the L.A. club circuit, before selling out 1,000-seat venues in Colorado with only their tremendous rep for throwing live carnivals and their self-distributed, four-song ep under their belts, Ozomatli was just an accident caused by the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade (RCYB). Let me explain.

Will "Wil-Dog" Abers, the aforementioned Jewish kid who came up on the streets of Little Central America in Los Angeles' Pico-Union district, had been working in an emergency response unit of the federally funded Conservation Corps doing earthquake prep "hip hop ghetto plays" at inner-city L.A. elementary schools.

Wil-Dog was raised by active members of the Revolutionary Communist Party and he knew a labor sham when he saw one. The Conservation Corps' upper-level management positions had benefits and a healthy wage; the entrylevel positions that he and a host of other 18-23 year old inner-city kids held provided no benefits and barely paid minimum. As tension mounted, Wil-Dog's boss, Carmelo Alvarez, the Corps' only Latino site director, was placed under citizen's arrest and the Corps locked the doors to the building. Wil-Dog's unit took the building over, and staged a two-month sit-in. All but two lost their jobs.

However, their negotiations with the Corps did produce one victory: the kids were awarded rights to the building for one year, which they promptly christened the Peace & Justice Center, dedicating the space to the creative needs of L.A. teens. The first benefit concert was for the RCYB. Wil-Dog made a few calls to old friends, and Ozomatli (then called Somos Marcos) was born. The band quickly grew into a musical map of L.A. ghettos, its members coming from `hoods and barrios East and West, North and South.

"Everyone else in the band says, `we take you around the world,'" Wil-Dog explains. "But for me it's like we just take you around L.A." Ulises Bella, the band's tenor saxman and a student of L.A. jazz veteran Bobby Bradford, agrees. "This could possibly happen somewhere else, but L.A., man, the tension of it, the multiculturalism of it. L.A. is like, we're bonded by bridges."

Of course, both Wil-Dog and Bella know that bridges don't just connect people; they separate them. They need to be crossed to do their job. And sometimes they get burned. Which is why, from where Ozo sits, they're not some GAP-ad ready, world-wrapped, united colors of groove marketing fantasy. Even hint at this, and Bella will remind you that there's a photo of Wil-Dog overturning a car during the April 29 uprisings. And Bella will remind you that he's half-Mexican, half-Basque, and that his dad's family was involved in the anarchist movement in

Spain. "I'm the product of anarchism, Will's the product of communism," he laughs, "So we hear how fucked up everything is constantly!"

But there are no guarantees that once Ozo's magnificent, self-titled debut creeps out (or more likely, explodes), they won't be Ben & Jerryed into Blues Travelerville, rubber-stamped as everybody's favorite kids of color who help keep hope alive in a post-Jerry Garcia world of summer concert fests. "Sometimes when we're writing a song and it might seem a little too multi-culti, a little too touchy-feely, then yeah, of course we'll try and stay away from being corny," admits Wil-dog. "I just don't know how long we'll be able to stay away from that."

Ozo Anomaly #3: How To Be Political and Still Move The Crowd, or, If We Free Your Ass, Will Your Mind Follow?

When you first hear Ozomatli's debut, it's not their politics that stops you in your tracks. It's how seamlessly they turn their songs into extended, groove-baked riffs on culture-clashing. No purity postures. No authenticity bids. No easy-to-museumize folkloric displays. When Ozomatli play cumbias ("Cumbia") or merengues ("Chango"), they riddle them with dubwise meltdowns and hip hop interludes. When Asdrú Sierra leads an Afro-Cuban santería ritual ("O Le Le"), baritone verse wizard Chali 2na steps in right beside him "spittin' scripture." And when they settle into a horn-medicated funk hangover ("Superbowl Sundae"), they get things going with a classical Indian raga.

Beneath these polyglot collisions in Spanish and English are snippets of the band's political leanings -- visions of pan-American social justice, prophecies of a coming race war, and diatribes against innercity neglect. While they stop short of identifying as a straight-up "political" band -- "Every song is not political," Bella says, "That's not how life is" -- Ozomatli recognize that their very existence constitutes a political act in a state that, thanks to Propositions 187, 209, and 227, has become synonymous with legislative terror against minorities.

"Just being who we are and just doing what we're doing with music at this time is very political," argues Wil-Dog. "The youth see us up there and recognize themselves. So in a playful, party-type of way, I think it's real easy for this band to get dangerous. We are starting to realize just how big of a voice we actually have as a band and how important it is for us to use it."

They use it a lot. Ozomatli are a benefit band, the closest thing we've got to a '90s version of people's music, and they've played benefits for everyone from the United Farm Workers to the Zapatistas. Wil-Dog doesn't discriminate: "I support any uprising by the underdog."

Ozo Anomaly #4: Egyptian Lover En El Rancho Grande

"La Misma Cancion," the last song on their debut, is the only place where you can actually catch Ozo explaining themselves. Smack in the middle of the same ranchera ho-down I heard them do in Oakland two years ago, they posed a question only they could actually imagine answering: "What is a DJ if he can't scratch -- to a ranchera?"

When your band represents a city constantly on the brink of self-destruction, the answer to that question is simple. The DJ who can't scratch to a ranchera will be obsolete; the same will be true for any musician who can't re-shape a ranchera around a flipped breakbeat, or any salsero or alto sax player who can't freak the funk around berimbaus and shekeres. Because it's more than a question that Ozo poses: it's a culturally pressing, end-of-the-century urban challenge. You can almost hear them crossing their fingers that everybody gets it.