

RECORDS

Los Lobos By the Light of the Moon Slash

Early each morning in East LA, Mexican immigrants wait on street corners hoping to be picked up for a day's work at exploitative rates. Such was the lifestyle that beckoned the wetback about to head north in Los Lobos' last album, *How Will the Wolf Survive?* The heartbreaking lines "Speak softly, don't wake the baby..." And I'll send for you baby, it's just a matter of time" expressed the forlorn faith of centuries of immigrants looking for a better world. *By the Light of the Moon* is part three of Los Lobos' epic novel on the plight of the Mexican in the 20th Century; it's the best album I've heard this year.

The first thing that strikes you is that Los Lobos have played down the rootsy aspects of their sound, wanting to hone their own voice and avoid being a "cartoon of Mexican-Americans" destined to flavour-of-the-month longevity. The accordion player takes a back seat — the emphasis is on songs rather than a style.

So T-Bone Burnett's presence is more overt than before and there is only one traditional Mexican song, 'Prenda del Alma.' But David Hidalgo's aching high tenor and Louis Perez's lyrics remain the key elements in Los Lobos' identity, and they have gone from strength to strength.

Hidalgo's wonderful weary but unbeaten voice relates tough tales home in the superb opener 'One Time, One Night' and 'Is This All There Is?' The news is bad. "All searching for the promised land / Where twisted hands don't mean a thing / Asking to themselves, is this all there is?" In 'The Hardest Time,' surely the finest song ever written about motherhood by a male, a young mother writes, "Life is better, not like long ago," but she pines for her girlhood and tears up her letter. 'River of Fools' is another Hidalgo weepie, with torn photos and tear-streaked faces at the border.

It's not all despair however, Los Lobos have hope and faith that life will improve; meanwhile they party to forget. Though the stompers are driven by bar-band guitars rather than an accordion, and the Tex-Mex feel is subdued for R&B, Los Lobos remain the most authentic and eclectic group since the Band (and



Los Lobos

sometimes they make the Band seem like sincere dabblers *a la* Ry Cooder). On the Cesar Rosas rockers however, Burnett's production dominates so that it could be his Marshall Crenshaw record we're listening to. It's a shame he brought in two drummers (including the over-rated Golden Palomino Anton Fier) to assist Louis Perez — he was the driving force of *Wolf*.

This is a great album, one you can dance and shout to, laugh and cry to.

Like *The Band*, I'll be listening to it in 10 years.

Chris Bourke

Sly & Robbie Rhythm Kings Island

In the beginning was the "big bang," life and rhythm formed as one. Man emerged with the proverbial ants in his pants, ready to scratch that itch and get on the good

foot. Get the picture: man was born to rock the house, shake that money maker, slap them cakes, to move to the groove. Baby, born to raise hell and get funky.

Sly and Robbie know this essential truth and reveal all on *Rhythm Killers*, an album of such murderous funk it's downright frightening.

It's interesting that this is funk of the old school, 70s flavoured grooves that James Brown cut and a virtual homage to George Clinton. The whole first side is a version, in three parts, of the Ohio Players' 'Fire.' The first, a straight edge attack, with great vocals from Bootsy Collins and Gary "Mudbone" Cooper, ex-Parliament singer. This sets the tone, with the steady rhythmic flow of Sly and Robbie, and producer Bill Laswell building up the banks of Philly strings — adding counterpoint to the pulse of the song. This merges with the great 'Boops (Here to Go),' raps by Shinehead and Ramme-lzee, a very severe kick drum from Sly and the strings linking everything up. Then a real surprise with 'Let's Rock,' a nice Nile Rodgers stroke on guitar. P-funk vocals and Sly playing drum patterns like Led Zeppelin's John Bonham — this one's real wild.

The second side opens with Allen Toussaint's 'Yes, We Can,' with Grandmixer D S T on turntables and a sense of musical space that's a delight. Boom boom drums send the message, just like in the *Phantom* comics, that funk is its own reward. The title track is perhaps the only reggae track, with toasting from Shinehead in the speed MC style, but once again Laswell unleashes those melodic strings and the "prepared" piano of Bernie Worrell, a clashing of opposites in fine dialectical style. Closing with the almost romantic 'Bank Job' with a bassline that's a bone shaker.

Like last year's *Language Barrier*, a move away from reggae — except for the toasting, the input is all funk, not the B-Boy cutups I expected, but a revolutionary return to the roots of modern rhythm.

Sly and Robbie — in the place to be, and here to go — and that's a fact, Jack.

Kerry Buchanan

LL Cool J Bad Def Jam

Various Artists The New Style Def Jam

"Even when I'm braggin' I'm being sincere." LL Cool J is a B-Boy prodigy, rap's gifted child. He's fast, cocky, and probably Def Jam's wittiest and most articulate artist.

On *Bad*, the follow-up to *Radio*, though, LL seems to be doing it all himself. Rick Rubin has nothing to do with this effort, and his freshness and humour are sadly lacking here. Where Run DMC's *Raising Hell* drew on heavy metal, LL Cool J uses old rock 'n' roll quotes like 'Johnny B Goode' (in the opening track 'Go, Cut Creator, Go'). And although six months ago I'd have been thrilled by

another clever twist in hip hop sources, today I see the rock 'n' roll extracts as a schoolbook exercise.

Nevertheless, this album is definitely as listenable and danceable as *Radio*, and a must buy for those reasons alone. I particularly like 'The Do-Wop's doo-wop, and 'I Need Love,' the first rap ballad of any note. 'I'm Bad' uses a gratuitous *Shaft* backing, but it's strong and sensational. There's also the self-effacing parody which I enjoy in most Def Jam records, and the almost traditional brouhaha on the end of side one, where LL Cool J tells us the "Joke's on you, Jack!" for buying yet another one of his records.

It's the New Style is a compilation CBS New Zealand have put together to meet the interest in Def Jam here. It's a very good compilation of both the hip hop and pop ballad sides of their output. Although the work only dates from the CBS deal with Def Jam, the Beastie Boys' 'She's On It,' LL Cool J's 'I Can't Live Without My Radio' and Juice's 'The Rain' are all included. Plus there's LL's original version of 'Rock the Bells,' which is magnificent, and the less commercially successful Junkyard Band, Chuck Stanley, Tashan, Original Concept and Public Enemy.

Of these Public Enemy and Original Concept are the best, and it's vibrant hip hop, rich in the history of the music, and the intelligence of these Long Island university graduates marks, for me, the future of hip hop and Def Jam, hits or no hits.

Peter Grace

General Kane In Full Chill Motown

What happened to big mean mindless boring *funk*? One place you sure as hell wouldn't look for it would be on the Motown label, where music don't get that heavy. Yet here's a record to break the black yuppie mould from funk veteran Mitch "General Kane" McDowell, who has previously recorded as General Kane on the Tabu label, and as Booty People on 70s label Far Out (wow!).

Rap has got its due recognition this decade but it's time for funk to get its reward. Sure, founder James Brown and chief freak George Clinton get a bit of attention, but black music's most progressive genre is being ignored. Here this fine man is facing the crucial questions, like "How can I roller skate, through a herd of buffalo?" Meaty stuff and the funky riddums are even tuffer!

Some may label these fine things as "sub-Clinton" — so what? What's wrong with being sub-Clinton if he's the foremost funk adventurer? George would sure be proud of having written 'Buffalos,' 'All the Way Up' or 'Wrassle.' Plus you get last year's rapper 'Crack Killed Applejack,' the weeny-bit trite 'Hairdooz' and the beautiful slow number 'Can't Let Go.'

So much fun and it's not an import. Mitch McDowell only has to follow this one up and he's gonna be one of the main men of funk.

Murray Cammick

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