

Howlin' Wolves Lost and Found in America

By Kerry Doole

The journey Los Lobos have made from the east LA barrio to the top of the world charts has been tortuous and hard-fought. As tough a struggle as that of any "wet-back" to cross the Rio Grande from Mexico to the allegedly Promised Land.

A more deserving success story in contemporary music is damned difficult to imagine. This is a saga full of ironies and pathos, but one with a very happy ending, or at least present. Los Lobos (Spanish for "the wolves") are a band deeply rooted, musically and socially, in the Chicano, or Latin-American experience. Over the past five years they've made a concerted, determined effort to broaden their appeal to a white American (and global) audience while remaining true to their own people and culture.

They succeeded to the extent of becoming darlings of the rock critics and the "hipper than thou" university crowd, but their records only ever nuzzled the bottom of the charts. With large families to support, the resulting revenue certainly didn't mean they

could move to Malibu; not that they'd ever give that much thought.

Irony

But what delicious irony for Los Lobos to now be No 1 on world charts with 'La Bamba,' a song sung totally in Spanish, just months after they've been criticised for sounding too mainstream American on their recent album *By the Light of the Moon*.

"I don't think we've lost any identity, even if some people feel that way," says vocalist/guitarist/accordionist David Hidalgo. "We're growing as a band and as songwriters. We're trying to stretch out."

I talked to Hidalgo and Los Lobos on the eve of the release of *La Bamba*, the movie based on the life and tragically premature death of Richie Valens, a 50s popstar of



Los Lobos (L-R): Louie Perez, Cesar Rosas, Conrad Lozano, Steve Berlin, David Hidalgo.

Mexican-American descent. Los Lobos performed most of the songs on the film's score and accompanying soundtrack album, including, of course, the hit title song. But Hidalgo clearly had little idea then just what hits the movie, album, and 'La Bamba,' the single would be.

'La Bamba' has become the first Spanish-language song ever to reach No 1 in the US. It's also given the writer, Valens, his first chart-topper ever, almost 20 years after he died alongside Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper in a plane crash, aged just 17. A No 2 chart placing for 'Donna' just weeks after his death was Valens' previous biggest hit.

History

Before we explore *La Bamba* and Los Lobos' involvement in the film, let's backtrack with a little band history. And what a history it has been. Los Lobos have already been around as a band longer than Richie Valens lived!

Born in the barrio (ghetto) of east Los Angeles, they worked the Hispanic club circuit of Southern California for more than a dozen years before signing with feisty local indie label Slash (X, Dream Syndicate, the Blasters) in 1983.

Hell, even back in the heady, tension-filled days of summer 1970, Los Lobos were, as bassist Conrad Lazano explains, "the most visible act in the barrio. We were put in the position of spokesmen for the community, even though we wanted no part of that."

In 1970 east LA resembled a war zone, with police violence being met by strong Chicano resistance. "That was a weird time; the police were sending helicopters with searchlights over the barrio every night [similar to scenes depicted in David Bowie's recent video for 'Day In, Day Out'] and there were rumours of undercover cops and informers everywhere. We played benefits for some groups though we didn't necessarily feel or believe what they did, but it was a genuine cause and we were Chicanos. They were expressing Chicano consciousness, which was a good thing then, but refused to get involved in politics. When we said no, we began to get some badmouthing on the street. It got even weirder, bomb threats and stuff like that!

"Then there was this tremendous hatred coming out of the movement: you've got to hate white people. After a while I started thinking, 'Why do I hate whites? We had always gotten along with everybody, sometimes playing to white audiences. We felt, and still feel, that playing the music we do, keeping those traditions alive, is political enough.'"

Positive

"There's a more positive attitude in the barrio now, and we like to think our music helped to change that attitude. People from east LA aren't afraid to go up to Hollywood anymore. They used to be, felt as if they didn't fit. I felt like that myself at times. Now people from west LA come to the barrio and there's no problem."

Back then, Los Lobos basically just played rock 'n' roll and Top 40 covers, there wasn't any great ethnic consciousness apparent in their songs. But as the 70s progressed, the group began to survey sound rooted south of the border.

"We went looking for musical satisfaction in traditional music and old instruments — the mandolin, the accordion, the guitarron [a Mexican acoustic bass guitar]," recalls drummer Louie Perez. This search turned up the norteno sound, as Conrad Lozano explains:

"Mexican folk music takes all kinds of directions. The music from each region differs in instrumentation and application. In the beginning we sought out the instruments of each region and learned how to play them. Now the norteno strain dominates; it is the

most familiar to the North American ear and blends C&W with Mexican guitar-based music. Also, in norteno the accordion is very important, in some areas more so than the guitar.

Norteno

"At the time we were first developing our sound, a friend of Dave's lent him an accordion to learn how to play a few songs. Then the man passed away and his wife wanted Dave to keep the accordion. So we started learning more norteno songs. Traditional norteno played with amplified guitars, bajo sexto and drums, and it can become real loud drinking music. At this time we were playing lots of restaurant jobs, four sets nightly, six times a week, a real grind. It was totally acoustic and we got bored, so we snuck in electric instruments little by little. We threw in bits of rock 'n' roll as we went on, getting louder and louder until we got fired from all those gigs. Then it was back to the garage!

"This time, we had a whole different sound to work with. It had just developed, then Dave wrote a song called 'How Much Can I Do?' that started it all for us. It was the first combination of norteno with rock, and we realized we'd come up with something different, a new direction. The first show we did with the new sound was opening up for the Blasters at the Whiskey. We were well received, so we felt we had something to work with."

Attention

This new sonic stew soon spiced up LA's alternative new music scene and attracted the attention of local luminaries T-Bone Burnett and Steve Berlin, then saxophonist for the Blasters. These two co-produced *And a Time to Dance*, Los Lobos' debut mini-album (seven songs) for Slash in 1983. Interestingly, it included their version of another Richie Valens' song, 'Come On Let's Go,' now reprised on the *La Bamba* soundtrack. Another song, 'Anselma,' won Los Lobos a Grammy for best Latin recording and marked them as a band to watch.

Teamed with Burnett again, and with Berlin as a permanent member, Los Lobos came out with their first full album, *How Will the Wolf Survive*, in October 1984. By this time, labels to describe the Los Lobos sound had become as elusive as a rattle on speed. Blues, R&B, soul, Mexican folk, even country, were incorporated seamlessly. Hell, even white, allegedly red-necked country star Waylon Jennings recorded the title tune, and it remains a highlight of his concerts.

That song and the evocative accompanying video proved that Los Lobos could do more than just play a fun, slightly ethnic dance music for white kids. This writer can testify what a superb band they are to drink and dance to in a crowded, sweaty bar, but they'd also begun writing songs on very serious topics.

"We see the wolf as a symbol of things facing extinction," says Lozano, "all kinds of things like the American cowboy, folk music, cultural traditions. All the marginal lifestyles are under pressure. The lyrics to *How Will the Wolf Survive* are straightforward. They say what we feel about the disappearance of these things and their right to survive."

By this time, Los Lobos had ventured over to England and Europe and found the reception there very warm. "Europeans are the most dedicated fans of American music. At home they take us for granted," said Perez at the time. Now, of course, the inevitable critical backlash has struck there, and obnoxious British critics have dismissed them as a "pot-bellied bar band." Cretins!

Pressure

Eighteen months after the release of *Wolf*, Los Lobos were back in the studio. "We star-

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