

By Antonino D'Ambrosio
Illustration by Andrea Wicklund

Ozomatli's Musical Journey



OZOMATLI IS A GROUP OF MUSICIANS HAILING FROM THE CITY OF Angels. Named after the Aztec word meaning monkey—an archetype representing those that are clever, charming and dramatic, possessing the innate

ability to connect with people—Ozomatli merges a deeply felt social awareness with a spirit of celebration.

This approach has guided the band throughout its fifteen-year career and serves as a blueprint for the band's newest album, *Fire Away*. "We want to find a point of connection," guitarist/vocalist Raúl Pacheco

says. "I don't think the world is filled with evil people—truly evil people. I think it's filled with good humans and that there is a lot of disconnect and not recognizing our similarities."

Ozomatli's new album moves with the hum of history, inspiring those who listen to seek liberty and shake free of fear. To help realize its ambitions, the group brought in Tony Berg, a producer acclaimed for working with an eclectic range of musicians, including Public Image Limited, X, Squeeze, and Aimee Mann. "Working with Berg

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gave us a lot of freedom to just set up a mic, play, explore our ideas, and find out what we wanted to do,” Pacheco says.

The album is an enchanting musical journey propelled by songs like, “Nadas Por Free,” “Elysian Persuasion,” “Caballito,” and the anthem-like “Gay Vatos in Love,” which is the album’s fulcrum. “It’s another issue for us about the underdog that we can connect with as individuals to the rights of people across all spectrums,” Pacheco explains.

With Pacheco on vocals, each verse presents a different scenario, including the pain of coming out:

Javi and Kike with their girlfriends in the car

Fronting on Crenshaw, knowing who they are

It also addresses the hatred and violence gay/lesbian/transgender people persistently face:

Gabriel says amor es amor

But Angie Zapata is lying on the dance floor

(Zapata was an eighteen-year-old transgender woman in Colorado, killed in 2008 by a sexual partner who discovered she was male.)

Among some fans and people in the Chicano and Latino community, there has been a backlash against the tune. But Pacheco dismisses it. “We can be fighting for our own issues and not see how the gay and lesbian rights movement is connected to our quest for a better humanity all across the board,” Pacheco says. Being from California where the 2008 ban on gay marriage (Proposition 8) passed provided more weight to the matter. “When we were making this record we felt that there has got to be a way to challenge ourselves and our fans,” Pacheco says. “We’re not going to do the same old thing for safety’s sake.”

Celebration. Creativity. Community. Connection. These are the bedrock principles of Ozomatli. “It’s never been our style to hammer people over the head,” Pacheco explains. “When we are talking about political

and social issues, we are talking about the recognition of the other as a good thing.”

Looking back at Ozomatli’s rise in the mid-’90s, one feels the natural rhythm of like-minded people—at once citizens and artists—coming together. The band formed out of a need to provide cultural support to striking youth educators, who lost their jobs but ended up with a city building that they wanted to transform into a community arts center. As the divergent musicians gathered to entertain those on strike and their supporters in the neighborhood, a band began to form. “All these musicians showed up with interest in different types of music,” Pacheco says. “We weren’t trying to make a band or a sound. The basic connection was to move people, get people dancing.” The musicians became Ozomatli, and soon they were performing at marches, rallies, and benefits.

When they released their 1998 self-titled album, Ozomatli presented a mixture of musical styles—salsa, hip-hop, rock, R&B, ska, jazz, funk, Tejano, world beat—that was entertaining and conscience stirring. Early on, the group included one of the most imaginative DJs, Cut Chemist, and the lyrically skillful MC, Chali 2na, as well as horn players, a guitarist, and a rhythm section. The current lineup includes Pacheco, saxophonist/clarinetist Ulises Bella, tabla/cajon player Jiro Yamaguchi, bassist Wil-Dog Abers, drummer Mairo Calire, percussionist Justin “El Niño” Porée, and trumpeter Asdrubal Sierra.

In “Coming War,” a tune I first saw them perform in the middle of a crowd in 1998 at Central Park’s SummerStage, the band was rousing:

Can you imagine this world with no oppression?

And no need to dabble in greed and transgression

The solution for murder and prostitution

Never glorify this pollution on television

Corrupt an entire nation.

This energy has never wavered, helping to form a resilient foundation for a career that continues to flourish.

Ozomatli crafts music that entertains but also is an eloquent expression of a blossoming humanism. This approach burns bright with such songs as “La Temperatura.” Found on *Don’t Mess with the Dragon* (2007), the song was inspired by the immigrant marches a few years ago. The song has even more relevance in light of the recently passed Arizona anti-immigration laws. The band urgently asks us to raise the temperature of our consciousness, to stoke the fire of our humanity and let it burn away politically manufactured barriers:

Listen we share

more than we divide

strength of FIRE

Burn the frontiers

and also the obstacles

burn it now!

now!

Ozomatli has joined a musicians’ boycott of Arizona. The list of musicians is long and diverse, including Willie Nelson, actor Jack Black’s group Tenacious D, Carlos Santana, Sonic Youth, and Kanye West. Ozomatli and the other musicians on the list continue to call for more artists and citizens of all stripes to join the boycott. “The situation in Arizona forces you to take a stand, politicizes you,” Pacheco explains. “We are declaring that this planet is for all of us to share.”

Ozomatli remains tied to the belief that to simply denounce is not enough and that art should inspire. “We are always looking for a way to connect as humans and create our own stories,” Pacheco says. “A song, art, can shed light on an ideal and give us something to strive for. It encourages us to act on a daily basis.” ♦