



foto:photo: M.P.R. Howard

(Izq. a Der.) Elena Rodrigo de Aztlan Records y Doug Carlson de Studio Works Equipment

Discos Aztlan estimulan al "Rock en Español"

Por M. Garcia

El sonido es nuevo y el mensaje es de respeto. Grupos nuevos de "Rock en español", y músicos como Maria Fatal se encuentran muy lejos de ser los latinos miembros de pandillas y vendedores de drogas como son presentados por los medios de comunicación.

Así como discos Aztlán, estos músicos tienen un propósito. Es "hacer su música bajos sus propios términos, lo cual les ha dado una dirección y confianza a sí mismos", dice el vocalista Fernando Ramirez. "Si tú no crees en nada, entonces no sabes a donde vas".

La banda trabaja muy duro tocando cada dos días en la escuela o la universidad, o algún club como el Roxy en Los Angeles.

En una dura competencia que es la música, Maria Fatal se prepara para sobresalir — sin olvidarse de donde viene. El espíritu del grupo es igual al de la compañía de discos, cuyo moto es "Rock en tu propia idioma".

Elena Rodrigo, quien fué una de las socias fundadoras de Discos Aztlán en febrero de 1975, nos dice que Rock en tu propia idioma no solamente significa que se canta en Español, si no que también son cosas con las que podemos identificarnos, cosas que nos ocurrieron cuando crecimos en latinoamerica y Mexico.

Jon Melrod, co-fundador, dice que ellos están para repaldar a los artistas creen en la música y el mensaje.

Base en la Mission

Discos Aztlán se encuentra en una bodega en el Distrito de la Mission, rodeada por una barda de malla sarrosa al final del boulevard César Chávez. En el pasillo gris que conduce a las oficinas, se encuentran puertas llenas de candados y paredes cubiertas de posters florescentes de grupos musicales de Rock, y algunos banderines que se ven que son del gobierno.

Las pequeñas oficinas de Aztlán se encuentran llenas de posters de "Rock en Español" y funcionan como base para los cinco empleados y un aprendiz, el aprendiz a traves de un programa escolar que se llama Pioneros Urbanos. Hasta hoy, Aztlán ya produce discos para tres grupos, Maria Fatal, Ley de Hielo (de Los Angeles), y Orixá que es del area de la bahia, de acuerdo con el carismatico y pelo verde Rodrigo, Orixá ya produjados CD y el tercero se lanzara en abril 1996.

Jenny Rhodes nos dice que Aztlán tiene promotores de las dos costas, además bases amplias en estaciones de radio y tiendas. Ella conduce extensas campañas de correo y fax para informar y promover los grupos.

El trabajo

Rodrigo ve a la frágil compañía como un puente entre los artistas y el medio de comunicaciones. Los artistas reciben regalías y firman contratos exclusivos con Aztlán por tres discos. La compañía ayuda a los artistas ha presentar primicias con radio y television, como también conciertos de giras.

La meta lago plazo de Aztlán es grabar seis a diez bandas por año.

Lo que llama la atención de esta compañía es el mensaje. Aztlán fue co-fundada por Gregg McKee, dueño de Secret Studios que se encuentra en el boulevard César Chávez en San Francisco. El se crió en el área de la Mission, generalmente considerada el corazón de la comunidad latina. El tiene buen presentimiento por la música y el mensaje de "Rock en Español".

De acuerdo con Melrod, las canciones de los roqueros hablan de los trabajadores que son traídos a travez de la frontera y de los trabajos miserables que tienen que desempeñar, acusados de ser vendedores de drogas, o como el juez que dictaminó que la mama que tenía que hablar a su hija

Aztlan Records Gives "Rock en Español" a Big Boost

By M. Garcia

The sound is fresh and the message is about respect. Up-and-coming "Rock en Español" musicians Maria Fatal are a far cry from mainstream media stereotypes of Latinos as gang members and drug dealers.

Like their label, Aztlan Records, they have a purpose. "Creating music on our own terms has given us direction and self-confidence," says vocalist Fernando Ramirez. "If you don't believe in anything, then you don't know where you are going."

The hardworking band plays every other day at a college, a high school, or a club like the Roxy in Los Angeles.

Maria Fatal prepares for world-class competition without losing sight of where they came from. In many ways the band exemplifies the spirit of their record company, whose slogan is, "This is rock in your own language — rock en tu propio idioma."

According to Elena Rodrigo, one of the four partners who founded Aztlan Records in February 1995, "That doesn't mean it's just in Spanish. It's also about things we can identify with, things that people grew up with in Latin American or Mexican society."

Co-founder Jon Melrod says, "We're here to support the artists. We believe in the music and in the message."

Mission-based

Aztlan Records is housed in the back of a long warehouse circled by a rusty cyclone fence at the east end of César Chávez Boulevard. The grey hallways that lead to their office are full of padlocked doors covered with various memorabilia from fluorescent rock band stickers to official-looking logos from government offices.

The tiny Aztlan office, plastered with "Rock en Español" posters, serves as a base for its five employees and one intern, participating through a high school program called Urban Pioneers. So far there

are three bands on the label, Maria Fatal and Ley De Hielo (Law of Ice) from Los Angeles and Orixá from the San Francisco Bay Area. Aztlan has produced two CDs and the third, from Orixá, is due out in April 1996, according to the charismatic and green-haired Rodrigo.

Aztlan has independent promoters on both the East and West coasts, plus extensive data bases of Spanish radio stations and retail stores, says distribution manager Jenny Rhodes. She conducts massive fax and mailing campaigns with the Aztlan "one-sheet," a single page promo piece containing band and distribution information for retailers "to get the stores pumped up," she says.

The work

Rodrigo sees her fledgling company as a bridge between the artists and the media. Artists get royalties and sign exclusive contracts with Aztlan for three records. Their label helps them out by arranging radio and TV promos and concert tours, says Rodrigo.

Currently in the process of licensing several Mexican and Puerto Rican bands to renew lease CDs during the first half of 1996, Aztlan's long-term goal is to record six to ten bands per year, according to Rodrigo.

What's exciting about this new label is its strong message. Aztlan was co-founded by Greg McKee, owner of Secret Studios on Cesar Chavez Boulevard in San Francisco. McKee grew up in SF's Mission District, generally considered the heart of the Latino community and the different cultures that comprise it. He has a gut feeling for the sound and the message of "Rock en Español."

Melrod continues, "The recurring themes are that immigrants and newcomers — actually, the indigenous nations — have the inalienable right to be treated with respect."

According to Melrod, "Roqueros" write songs about workers who are brought across the border in trucks to do

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Studio owner/engineer Doug Carlson directs musicians

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dirty jobs, then accused of being drug dealers; or about the Southern judge who recently ruled that a mother couldn't speak Spanish to her daughter. They sing about the inescapable inequities in our society that must be addressed.

Why they do it

The founders of Aztlan saw that Latino rock artists, like Latinos in general, were basically disenfranchised. "We wanted to allow artists to express themselves and to popularize their music," says Melrod.

Named for the homeland which Mexico's indigenous tribes searched for in legends, Aztlan strives to create a musical homeland where Latino musicians can express themselves without censorship.

The independent label protects its artists from political pressures, like dictating song content, which would be difficult to escape on most major labels. Indies offer opportunities that majors can't, since big label releases cost so much more — about \$250,000. Compare that, says Melrod, to "about \$30,000 for an Aztlan release."

Since the company has its own record-

ing studio, artists don't have to pay the big labels' \$500-per-hour studio fees. Still, Melrod reports, at this point it's challenging for Aztlan to sell enough CDs to recoup the money invested.

Another challenge remains convincing large distributors that the kids will buy the records. An enthusiastic Melrod, talking about successful CD sales through Tower Records listening booths, says, "When it's put in front of people, they buy it."

Challenge

One of the biggest challenges is that no radio stations regularly play "Rock en Español." Aztlan has identified 40 across the country that have specialty shows on Saturday nights, for example, but "roqueros" are not yet put into regular daily formats. "Our understanding is that banda is dying, 'Rock en Español' is growing. Sooner or later we'll break through," says Melrod.

Rodrigo sees local rock stations and Spanish stations as "very stubborn" about refusing to play rock en español. She has received a much better response from print media, but she is optimistic that the radio programmers will eventually come

around.

"Rock is a way of life, a way of expressing yourself, a way of relating to people. I listen to Live 105," Rodrigo says. "I'm more identified with rock, maybe because I grew up in the city. Once they realize how many Latino members of their audience would love to hear 'Rock en Español'... I can see it happening."

It all started one Sunday when Jon Melrod was listening to local "roqueros" Orixá at La Rockola in Berkeley Square. The band asked him to sell their tape to a major label, and he began to think about starting a label like Aztlan.

Members of Orixá suggested he call Rodrigo. "My partner Greg and I drove to Fresno to talk to her. The next week she packed up her belongings and moved to San Francisco. That was February 95."

Looking out for talent

Rodrigo is the one who turned her partners on to the whole "roquero" scene. She's just returned from touring Mexico with Ley de Hielo, one of Aztlan's other bands. Both of the label's bands have personal and musical roots in Mexico. "To bring the music back there would be a tremendous victory. It's our goal," says Melrod.

"What I find musically exciting about 'Rock en Español' bands, and Maria Fatal in particular, is how they blend different influences and combine musical elements that have nothing to do with one another," says Rob Beaton, who produced the band's self-titled debut disc for Aztlan Records. Because it comes from the heart, within the context of each song, it works."

Rodrigo adds: "I like it because when I listen to the bands it seems like they're singing my own thoughts. It's not just about love, but about the streets, growing up, the anxiety of being young. It's social commentary. In a way it's warrior music."

The need for a label like Aztlan that promotes "Rock en Español" as its primary purpose is self-evident. The bands are playing it, people are listening to it. It speaks to youth the way techno or disco can't. One of Aztlan's biggest L.A. distributors told Melrod, "My nephews & nieces are always talking about 'Rock en Español.'"

Melrod jokes, "We're doing our part to corrupt their children." "Rock en Español" is not just party music, it's a call to action. This music has the power to reach hearts and minds.

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en Inglés. Ellos cantan de las inescapables realidades de esta sociedad.

Los fundadores de Aztlan dicen los artistas latinos roqueros en general eran privados de derechos civiles y "como artistas queríamos expresarnos y popularizar nuestra música", dice Melrod.

Aztlan siendo independiente, les da a los artistas el medio de expresarse sin tener que ser censurados. También los protege de presiones políticas que puedan dictar el contenido de las canciones, cosa que sería muy difícil con otras compañías de discos.

Otra ventaja de grabar con Aztlan es el costo de producir un disco, como \$250,000 con otras compañías y unos \$30,000 con Aztlan, ya que las grabaciones se hacen ahí mismo sin tener que pagar las sumas desorbitantes a otros lugares. Melrod dice que es algo desafiante para Aztlan poder vender suficientes discos compactos para recuperar el dinero invertido.

Otro desafío es convencer a los distribuidores de que la juventud compra la música, Melrod dice con entusiasmo que "cuando se les pone al frente, la gente compra".

Desafío

El desafío más grande es que no hay estaciones de radio que toquen en forma regular "Rock en Español". Aztlan a identificado a 40 emisoras que tienen horas en la noche los fines de semana, pero los roqueros todavía no son puestos en programaciones diurnas en forma regular. "Entendemos que el estilo banda esta muriendo, 'Rock en Español' esta creciendo y tarde o temprano saldremos al frente", dice Melrod.

Rodrigo vé a las emisoras de "Rock en Español" como "muy cabeza dura" para aceptar tocar "Rock en Español". "Rock es una forma de vivir, de expresarse uno mismo y una manera de relacionarse con la gente. Yo escucho a una emisora de rock, live 105, y me identifico con ella, quizás porque crecí en la ciudad. Pero una vez se den cuenta de la cantidad de gente latina que escucha rock, entonces...ya veo lo que pasara".

Todo empezó un domingo cuando Melrod estaba escuchando a un grupo local de roqueros — Orixá — en la Rockola de Berkeley Square. La banda le preguntó si podían vender su grabación a una firma grande, y él empezó a pensar de empezar su propia compañía con el nombre Aztlan. Miembros de Orixá le sugirieron que llamara a Rodrigo. "Mi socio Gregg y yo fuimos a Fresno para hablar con él. La siguiente semana ella empaqué sus cosas y se movió a San Francisco, eso fué febrero de 1995".

Rodrigo fué la que hizo que sus socios se inclinaran por los roqueros. Ella acaba de regresar de una gira por Mexico con el grupo La Ley de Hielo, un grupo que Aztlan graba. Tanto como os grupos de música, Aztlan también tiene sus raíces musicales en Mexico. reresar la música sería una tremenda victoria, y es nuestra meta, dice Melrod.

"Lo que encontramos fascinante de grupos de 'Rock en Español' y en especial de maria Fatal, es como hacen posible combinan elementos musicales que nada tienen que ver el uno con el otro. Quizás porque viene del corazón dentro del contexto de cada canción es proque trabaja".

Rodrigo añade que "me gusta cuando oigo a los grupos cantar. Siento que andan cantando mis pensamientos, y no solo son de amor, pero acerca de las calles, de crecer en un lugar, las ansiedades de ser joven. Es un comentario social, es música de guerreros".

Traducido por Oscar Zuniga

Gallery Watch

Mexican Museum — "Nahum B. Zenil: Witness to the Self/ Testigo del Ser," first solo exhibition in the U.S. of this major Mexican artist, consists of 80 pieces which span the artist's career and explore his use of the body as a means to analyze society, March 16-September 1, 1996, Wednesday-Sunday, noon-5 p.m., Bldg. D, Ft. Mason, S.F., (415) 441-0404.

Mission Cultural Center — "HIV/AIDS Art Exhibit: Art From the Heart Heals," February 27-March 23, Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., reception March 10, 3 p.m.-6 p.m., 2868 Mission St., S.F., (415) 647-2005.

De Saisset Museum — "First Californians as Seen by Edward S. Curtis: From the Permanent Collection," photos taken from his pictorial study "The North American Indian," thru March, Tuesday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Santa Clara University, (408) 554-4528.

Galería de La Raza — "Andando Lejos: Art Work from Tamonchan," art by Latino political refugees, organized by Claudia Bernardi, political exile from Argentina, March 12-April 27, reception March 12, 3-5 p.m., Artist Talk Workshop, March 23, 3-5 p.m., Tuesday-Saturday, noon-6 p.m., 2857-24th St., S.F., (415) 826-8009.