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STYLE

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Dr. Loco has a prescription for smarts [B-1]

What films will be a hit this fall? Anyone's guess [B-1]

Self-enclosed Virtual Boy is a new way to play [B-1]



Dr. Loco (José Cuellar) is a musician and a professor at S.F. State.

Dr. Loco's prescription for smarts

As professor or rock musician, he tries to turn on light bulbs

"In class I'm known as Professor Cuellar. On stage ... I'm Dr. Loco."

— José Cuellar, chairman, La Raza Studies, San Francisco State University, leader of Dr. Loco's Rockin' Jalapeño Band

By Monica Valencia
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

RUSHING DOWN the hallway in a flannel, dark shades and braided beard, José Cuellar doesn't look like your average instructor. He's hip. He's cool. He's colorful. Arriving at Room 145 of the campus psychology building, Cuellar looks like he'd be more comfortable cruising in a low-rider.

Cuellar gives a quick handshake just before opening his office door.

"I hope you haven't been waiting long. We just finished our department meeting ... preparing the academic calendar, you know, getting ready for the new semester," Cuellar says, flashing a wide smile.

Cuellar rests his tattooed hand on a desk engulfed by research papers and history texts. He is chair of La Raza Studies at San Francisco State University. As department chair and professor, Cuellar is a lecturer in the history of Chicano music and a principal researcher of a multi-year project on U.S. Mexican communities.

"Professor Cuellar" is the analyst in me. He's the one who likes to think, synthesize information and communicate that to students," Cuellar explains at his campus office. "It's exciting to see the light bulbs go on in the classroom."

During the day, Cuellar is a professor on campus. But when the moon rises, a new persona takes over. "All of a sudden my alter ego kicks in. 'Dr. Loco' kind of emerges out of the classroom and reconnects with the artist part of me," Cuellar says. "We'll be cookin' on stage and the audience moves to the same groove. There's a sort of electricity there that's really cool." Cuellar leads Dr. Loco's Rockin'



José Cuellar of S.F. State is perhaps better known as the leader of Dr. Loco's Rockin' Jalapeño Band.

Jalapeño Band, the San Francisco-based group that fuses rock, salsa and blues with progressive politics. The band will churn out "movimiento music" at three Bay Area spots this month. Performing since 1989 when the band formed at Stanford University, Dr. Loco's Rockin' Jalapeño Band may very well be the smartest set around. Cuellar and his eight compadres all hold college degrees and many teach at Bay Area universities.

"We work day and night. It's part of the same discipline from

school when you pull all-nighters," he says.

Cuellar knows both history and R & B. The San Antonio native, who earned his doctorate in anthropology from UCLA, combines his careers as both educator and musician to deliver a significant message.

"It not only takes dedication to play well, you need to understand the world from a multidimensional foundation that an education provides," he explains.

The loco prof structures his per-

formances as he does his academic plan book. "Just like I plan my lecture notes, I plan my sets so that my performances have a kind of shape to them, a connection with the listeners," Cuellar says. On stage, Dr. Loco dips back in preparation for the fiery grooves that will blast from his sax. After the band heats up the dance club, Dr. Loco introduces the Jalapeños by name, instrument and degree. Impressed by the band members' credentials, fans approach him after the show.

"People talk to me after the

show and tell me they've dropped out of school. I tell them it's not enough to just have a career in music, that an education is just as important. It gives you choices," Cuellar explains. Cuellar laid down his tenor saxophone during the late '70s and early '80s to pursue academic endeavors. After earning a Ph.D. from UCLA in 1977, Cuellar started lecturing at numerous campuses and racking up a number of teaching and community service awards. The "Dr. Loco" buzz kicked in when he ran into his old friends in Los Lobos in the mid-'80s.

"They asked me how I was doing and I told them I was teaching at Stanford," Cuellar says. "Dave (Hidalgo) said, 'No, how's your horn going?' which made me think about playing again. I carried my horn home with me but it was in the closet."

At the time, Cuellar had been teaching a course called "The History of Chicano Music" at Stanford University. He gathered the musical talents of students and faculty to form "Dr. Loco's Original Corrido Boogie Band" in 1988. After band members left following graduation, the lineup changed and the band was revived as "Dr. Loco's Rockin' Jalapeño Band."

"I wasn't looking for players with degrees. It just sort of happened that way," Cuellar says. "You've got to always be learning, growing and exploring. Those patterns that come out of an education can be applied to life. In part this stems from the history of the band."

The band released its third album, "¡Puro Party!" in May, a spicy fusion of mestizo and mulatto styles celebrating the band's Mexican American heritage.

"You find the same themes in the music that you find in literature: love and hate relationships, issues of humor, of irony, of history ... immigrant concerns, the exploitation of migrant workers, racial tension."

"We've been able to identify with a diverse group in different ways. Children are interested in the music because it's lively and sometimes silly. Parents approach us from the academic angle, so we're seen as educational role mod-

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◆ *LOCO from B-1*

Dr. Loco's Rx for smarts

els. At La Peña (in Berkeley), we identify with a college crowd that likes to dance. One time, someone came up to me after a show and said, 'If you can do it, I can do it, because you guys are a bunch of

street guys and yet you've gone to school,'” Cuellar says. “We've had this positive influence wherever we go and that's very important to us.

“Education is part of our lives forever and that's what we represent.”

Dr. Loco's Rockin' Jalapeño Band will perform at the Great American Music Hall Saturday and at Justin Herman Plaza on Aug. 30.

