



No Ordinary Men

Hot duo Sin Bandera brings Spanish R&B to the masses

It seems that elves are causing mayhem. Or perhaps it is just human folly. Whatever the reason, when some of the biggest names in the Latin music industry -- seventeen stars in all, from Cristian Castro to Alexandre Pires, Gloria Estefan to Bacilos -- begin arriving shortly before 7:00 p.m. in golf carts with their record label publicists, stopping briefly in a dark spot near the press tent, everybody appears to be at a loss as to where they should go.

The artists are supposed to head up a ramp and enter the tent, where they are to meet several members of the media invited by Emilio Estefan Enterprises for the Latin music giant's latest venture: the taping of *Nuestra Navidad*, a Christmas special scheduled to air December 21 on the nation's main Hispanic television network, Univision (WLV-23 in Miami), at 9:00 p.m. But before they can disembark from their carts, reporters surround them with TV cameras and tape recorders, asking them over and over again how and where they are going to spend the holidays.

Finally, after much wrangling among various publicists, the artists are pulled away from the reporters. The hope is that the latter will follow the artists into the tent and stay in the area designated for them. It works.

Once there, a rather unassuming pair of singers walks in, one heavysset and tall, the other short and blond, neither of them hunks. One of their publicists later reveals that Leonel García, the big one, and Noel Schajris, the small one, do not care for makeup or hairstyling when they pose for the cameras, as if not being a metrosexual were to confer some degree of musical authenticity. But no one seems to mind that these two are so ordinary-looking in an image-conscious business. The duo, better known as Sin Bandera (Without a Flag), recently enjoyed their first number-one single on Billboard's hot Latin tracks chart with "Mientes Tan Bien" ("You Lie So Well"), a song from their second album for Sony Music Norte, *De Viaje* (Traveling); the album peaked at number six on the top Latin albums chart.

García and his partner briefly enter the makeshift pressroom before the media ambushes them. Everyone wants an interview, but because the white background of the walls isn't interesting enough for photo ops, reporters ask them to move outside, where the 120-foot Christmas tree (reportedly the tallest of its kind in the U.S.) and its 30,000 lights, the rides, and the Holiday Village amenities serve as a more colorful backdrop.

After several minutes of politely answering questions, the duo is called to perform. An Estefan publicist informs Sin Bandera's road manager, Billy Illanez from WestWood Entertainment, who relays the message to his artists that they have to hop on the cart again.

Fear, if not consternation, must've gripped Sony record label executives when they first realized that the music García and Schajris were writing and singing was not going to be bubblegum pop or Latin rock or rancheras. Instead it was that most American of music sounds, rhythm & blues. Inespañol.

"It was quite risky, especially in Mexico where most people are not used to that kind of sound," concedes Illanez. "Things started out slowly, but they seem to be working out."



It was surprising that the duo found acceptance by singing music that relatively few acts in Spanish tend to pursue. Before Son By Four imploded and its lead singer, Angel López, went solo, the Puerto Rican band was considered the premier R&B group singing in Spanish, at least until Sin Bandera.

"Our influences definitely stem from American R&B," explains García, whose father played in a rock band back in his native Tampico, Mexico, that was led by a charro (cowboy) from Texas. "So my dad's influences became the Doors, Cream, Chuck Berry, Diana Ross, Barbra Streisand, Jimi Hendrix," he says. "Plus my mother lived three years in Anaheim, California, so she also absorbed all this American music that I grew up listening to."

Schajris, meanwhile, grew up in Argentina with the sounds of Nat "King" Cole, Ray Charles, and Janis Joplin. When he discovered Miles Davis, he fell in love with jazz and dreamt of carrying some of that music's feeling into pop. "The answer was to do it with R&B," he explains.

As an adolescent, the 29-year-old Schajris studied music and singing at his country's Conservatorio Nacional de Música. Then, some seven years ago, he moved to Mexico to replace the lead singer of a band called Buenos Aires Funk. "But four months later, the group dissolved," says the singer, "and I had to give singing lessons to survive." An accomplished pianist as well, he recorded a solo album for Sony, *Cita En las Nubes* (Appointment In the Sky). The album had a distinct R&B influence, a sign of the direction Sin Bandera would eventually take.

For his part, the 28-year-old García began joining rock bands at the age of 14. When he was seventeen he decided to make music his career. "What was then a hobby became something much more serious," he says. He would also record a solo album, but it was never released.

When the two future partners finally met through their respective session work for other Sony artists like Mercurio, they discovered that their songs and singing styles were quite similar. "I heard his music and I suggested that we join forces," García remembers. And that's what happened at the end of 2000, when they took on the name Sin Bandera to show that music is international, without a flag. "Because music makes us forget that we are different, that we all lead such fragmented lives," he notes without sounding corny or cynical. "We do believe it has the power to bring people together."

Of course that's what any artist would probably say about his or her music. But there is something real about listening to Sin Bandera's ballads. Rather than the ubiquitous, coldly calculated songwriting that marks so much of today's mainstream pop, there's soul in their lyrics and harmonies. For example, "Entra En Mi Vida" ("Come Into My Life") from the duo's self-titled debut is a bluesy track, its words all about love. It could be criticized for veering dangerously close to melodrama, yet it faithfully captures the euphoria one experiences when it comes to matters of the heart. The more rhythmic "Sirena" ("Mermaid") is no less intense or beautiful, with words such as "Si e voy del planeta eres estrella Fugaz/Si en las noches yo duermo en mis sueños tú estás" ("If I leave the planet a shooting star you are/If at night I sleep in my dreams you are").

When Sin Bandera was released on March 26, 2002, in Mexico, it received a welcome push from the inclusion of "Entra En Mi Vida" in a popular Mexican soap opera, *Cuando Seas Mía* (When You Are Mine). "No doubt that was one of the reasons our album became well-known," remembers Schajris. "It gave us this window for people to get to know us, and what could've taken us perhaps a year and a half, we accomplished in months."



The duo believes, however, that when the album was finally released on July 23, 2002, in some momentum had been lost. (That album did win a 2002 Latin Grammy for best pop album by a duo or group with vocal.) As a result, they released their latest album, *De Viaje*, in both countries this past October 14. The different marketing strategy they've employed, though, is not the only element that accounts for its early success. "We have a lot of confidence in the songs. We like them a lot," says Schajris. "When we create new songs, we try to beat the expectations out there and evolve musically. We strive to become better songwriters and singers."

They also know that if the music ain't broke, don't fix it. While the group stuck closer to a more commercial R&B-infused-with-Latin-pop sound (think Babyface, Boyz II Men, or Brian McKnight in Spanish) on their debut, the new album weaves in some bossa nova, vallenato, jazz, and even hip-hop. But it is by no means a departure from the style that has brought them success. "De Viaje still has the feeling people have come to expect from us," guarantees García.

It's the same feeling the Holiday Village audience has been eagerly waiting to experience. Finally Sin Bandera hits the stage. While other artists have performed with DAT tapes, the duo sings "Mientes Tan Bien" live while backed by two musicians. A jembé, a type of African drum that didn't appear on the recording, is used to great effect. Like everyone else, they only get to sing one song. Unlike some of their colleagues, however, they are showered with requests for an encore from an audience that is hungry for more.