



Black Pearl

Perú Negro tells the history of its country through music and dance

For too many years, it seemed as if the only references to Peruvian music in this country were Andean sounds (like Simon & Garfunkel's rendition of "El Condor Pasa" and New Age musicians' love affair with the pan flute) or Inca kitsch queen Yma Sumac (a whole genre unto herself) and her out-of-this-world songs.

In 1995, however, former Talking Headsmastermind David Byrne released an album called *The Soul of Black Peru* on his Luaka Bop label, introducing the musical legacy of that South American nation to many Americans. Among the artists featured was Perú Negro, a group that in spite of having enjoyed, by then, an almost 30-year career and having received accolades worldwide, had yet to be discovered here. That is, until May 2002, when the troupe briefly visited California and wowed audiences and critics alike. This year Perú Negro embarks on a more ambitious one-month tour of North America to promote a new album, *Jolgorio*.

"When my father was alive, there were several proposals for us to come to the States," says Rony Campos, son of group founder Ronaldo Campos de la Colina, from the capital city of Lima. "But it was a very costly enterprise to take the whole group. We are usually about 30, but for this tour 22 are traveling. And also, because of the political and economic situation in Peru not being the best, Dad was afraid some of the musicians and dancers would opt to stay there. So he didn't pursue this actively."

The Eighties were particularly rough on Peru. The country trembled under the terrorist acts of groups such as Shining Path, while the economy spiraled out of control and government leaders proved to be ineffective at controlling the chaos. Many Peruvians sought refuge by leaving their land behind. Perú Negro stayed, playing in small clubs and restaurants whenever it could. Its music remained mostly folkloric, without assuming a political or compromising stance. Today Peru is a democracy struggling with economic problems and social unrest.

An accomplished musician in his own right, the younger Campos was working with another singer who'd managed to break out internationally with Afro-Peruvian music, Eva Ayllón, when he met promoter Juan Morillo. The Peruvian-born, L.A.-based Morillo knew of Perú Negro and expressed an interest in bringing the troupe to America. "We agreed to visit Los Angeles and San Francisco, kind of like a test to see if it would be worth it to come back on a more extensive tour," says Campos. When the band passed the audition, so to speak, plans were set in motion for a full-fledged trek this year.

"This is something new and different for audiences here," says Morillo, who is now Perú Negro's international manager. "One of my goals here is to make Afro-Peruvian music obtain the respect that Cuban and Brazilian music have, to reach a level of internationalization that most Peruvian artists never attain."

The music and dance that enrich Perú Negro's repertoire are steeped in tradition, reaching all the way back to the time when Peru was a Spanish colony and Africans were victims of a slave trade that flourished in the Sixteenth Century. While Africans enslaved in other parts of the Americas, such as Cuba, Brazil, and the Caribbean, were able to forge a powerful collective identity, the Spanish conquistadors who brought them to Peru mixed together members of different tribes, undermining their strength.



They were more isolated, scattered mostly around the country's coastal areas, and unable to form cohesive communities. But the slave masters and church leaders' ban on cultural and musical traditions only fired up their ingenuity and creativity; they would make instruments, for example, out of a wooden crate (cajón) and a donkey jaw (quijada).

In the Fifties, Peruvians of all ethnic backgrounds began to discover and appreciate Afro-Peruvian music. Three families -- Vázquez, Santa Cruz, and Campos -- were responsible for keeping the traditions alive. In the late Fifties a play called Pancho Fierro brought all of them together onstage. "The play was a huge success, with lots of white Peruvians attending. That prompted an interest by the country's white and Creole populations in Afro-Peruvian music," explains Morillo, who adds that the music "was just not very well known outside the black families. Some whites knew of it, but most didn't."

In 1969 Ronaldo Campos, Lalo Izquierdo, Víctor Padilla, and Rodolfo Arteaga, all of whom belonged to a cultural organization called Teatro y Danzas Negras del Perú, founded Perú Negro, rescuing oral traditions and reconstructing long-forgotten dances. The songs, relying heavily on Latin percussion, guitars, and box drums (cajones), among other instruments, are accompanied by dances (like festejo and zamacueca). The performances illustrate stories of black pride, the struggle for equality, and life under the colonial rulers.

Shortly after, the group exploded on the international scene when legendary white Peruvian singer Chabuca Granda invited it to perform at the 1969 Ibero-American Festival of Song and Dance in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This, says Morillo, cemented the relationship between Peru's black performers and its white audiences.

"For aristocratic Peruvians, what Chabuca did was a sort of stamp of approval," he explains. "By the time Chabuca invites the group to Argentina, black music has already been accepted in Peru. Of course, it took almost 300 years for this to happen."

Rony Campos, who is married to the group's white vocalist, Mónica Dueñas, says that attitudes have changed since Perú Negro was first discovered. "Black music in Peru has been accepted by whites and by all groups in our country," he says. "That's just the way it is."

"They are the biggest thing Peru has going," says Carlos Postigo, a Miami-based Peruvian musician, singer, and arranger who is married to a cousin of Rony Campos. "And I am not saying this just because I am related to them. Perú Negro is something all Peruvians should be proud of."