



## Chubby Charm

### With a voice prettier than a picture, Angel Lopez lends artistic cred to Latin pop

The world's unlikeliest sex symbol is taking a break. It is a scorching Saturday afternoon on a Biscayne Boulevard side street, and Angel Lopez cools off in a trailer, waiting to be called to shoot more scenes for a music video. Meanwhile his wife Elizabeth and their three small children --Angel Luis, Sean Michael, and John Nicholas -- watch movies on Daddy's laptop. Crew members and folks from Sony Discos come in and out. A makeup artist retouches the model who will be sharing screen time with Lopez. Pizzas are delivered. Everybody digs in.

Venezuelan director J.C. Barros is in charge of the video for "Elegiste Perder" ("You Chose To Lose"), the second single of Lopez's brand-new album with Sony Discos' Dance Division, En Mi Soledad (In My Loneliness). The thirteen-track production, with many of the songs penned by Lopez himself, is expected to carry the Puerto Rican singer into the big leagues as a solo artist.

Lopez, the star vocalist who led Latin R&B/tropical quartet Son by Four to stratospheric success with the song "A Puro Dolor" and its English version, "Purest of Pain," only to depart at the height of fame to make it on his own, is indeed an anomaly in what has become an increasingly looks-driven industry. He is not 20 (he's 31). He is not chiseled (at over 200 pounds, short and stocky, he's been battling the bulge for over a decade). And he is not soap opera-hunk beautiful (think more villain or tough guy).

But he alone may be the man who puts credence back into the overhyped, undertalented, lacking-in-originality Latin music industry.

"He is a performer who emits a lot of feeling, and that is what matters here," says director Barros, who just finished a video for newcomers Area 305, on shooting Lopez. "Angel projects this feeling, this soul, like no one else."

And that soul materializes in what is considered one of the most versatile and nuanced voices in singing today, in any language.

"He's got this unique talent, and that is his voice," says David Maldonado who, along with partner Edwin Medina, represents Lopez. "Angel has the soul of the black people and the passion of the Latins."

But where does a Latin man get soul?

"I was raised in Chicago, in the South Side," says Lopez, laughing late one afternoon, his good humor intact despite a long day doing interviews. "The Motown era, Quincy Jones, the Commodores, the Temptations, the Supremes, Luther Vandross, New Edition, Brian McKnight, James Ingram, Michael Jackson. Those are my influences. R&B is a discipline that takes years to apply. It is a culture you have to absorb, make yours."

The voice that has so awed many a critic and the public, Lopez simply calls "a gift you're born with."



A gift Sony Discos is happy to share.

"Angel has what we call in the industry a 'signature sound,' and that is a true asset, because he is a real singer, not a manufactured artist," says Carlos J. Perez, vice president of promotion for Sony Discos' Dance Division. "We know that, not only can Angel be at the top again, but he has what it takes to become one of the most important singers today. So we are reintroducing him in markets where he was already well known because of Son by Four. Except that now they'll know him as Angel Lopez."

Renowned Panamanian record producer/composer Omar Alfanno, who brought Son by Four to Sony and turned them into a stellar act, recalls that it was precisely Lopez's "gift" that enticed him to change the group from a trio to a quartet (hence the name), with Lopez in lead vocals.

"When the time came to develop Son by Four, I realized I needed the vocal coaching of someone with real knowledge of R&B. And [there's] no one better than Angel for that," remembers Alfanno, who is currently holding auditions for his latest boy-band concept, Boyce, and developing a new Mexican singer by the name of Teresso. "So I called him. We worked all day and that night. I asked him to record a song, so I could use it as an example for the band members. When we played it, it was as if the sun had come out. We all heard that voice and we knew that he had to be a part of the group. He accepted, and that's how Son by Four became a quartet."

Alfanno and his partners, lawyer Roberto Sueiro and radio personality José ("Funky Joe") Vallenilla, toiled with the foursome until they hit the jackpot in 2000 with "A Puro Dolor," the smash single from their self-titled album.

The song spent twenty weeks at number one in the Billboard Hot Latin Tracks chart, becoming the first Spanish song to be included in the Billboard Hot 100 list. Lopez and his Son by Four colleagues (brothers Jorge and Javier Montes, and their cousin Pedro Quiles) would sweep the Billboard Latin Music Awards in 2001 with seven trophies, and earn plenty of other awards and nominations.

Son by Four's momentum continued with the release of "Purest of Pain," which catapulted them into English-language radio, and a collection of their hits salsa-style. They seemed unstoppable.

But then the music did stop.

The Montes brothers and Quiles filed a lawsuit in federal court in San Juan against Sueiro and Funky Joe over rights to the band's name (the brothers argued they had originated it) and accused the pair of conspiring to deprive them of millions of dollars. Lopez, meanwhile, decided it was time to split.

Today veteran Puerto Rican producer Rafo Muñoz manages Son by Four. The group is a quartet once more, with salsa singer Luis Damon as frontman. And producer Angel "Cucco" Peña has worked with the members on a new album.

Lopez emphasizes that he never had any problems with Alfanno, whom he calls his "mentor" and "friend."

"Many people were stunned when I left the group. They thought I had had some problem with Omar,



and that is not the case," reflects Lopez. "As a matter of fact, we have talked of working together again. He could not be with me this time because he had his other projects, but for my next album, I do not doubt it. And even the possibility of one day singing again with Son by Four is not remote. Now that they are going to be heard in the way they should be heard, they will grow and shine, while I do my own thing."

Alfanno says he cannot comment on the present state of Son by Four, but he attributes the problems to growing too fast, too soon.

"When success hit, it was like being caught up inside Hurricane Andrew," says Alfanno, who has worked with stars such as Marc Anthony, Gilberto Santa Rosa, and Olga Tañón. "We all lacked the experience to manage an unexpected situation called worldwide fame. And if you do not know how to control fame, it can devour you. By the time we realized what was going on, it was too late to fix things up."

And although Lopez's first single from En Mi Soledad, titled "Entre El Amor Y El Odio" ("Between Love And Hate," also the theme song of a Mexican telenovela), barely caused a ripple compared with his previous success, Alfanno has no doubt his former protégé will rise to the occasion.

"His biggest responsibility now is to show that he can carry an album as a soloist to the levels he once reached with Son by Four," notes Alfanno. "And he can do it. The tears that he can bring to one's eyes when he sings, the romanticism in his voice, you don't see those every day."

No stranger to receiving accolades for her voice is Nuyorican club diva turned salsa princess La India (Linda Caballero), who recorded a duet with Lopez, a cover of a classic called "Para Decir Adiós" ("To Say Goodbye") for En Mi Soledad.

"We met earlier this year at an event where I was performing. Once I knew he was in the crowd, I asked him to join me onstage, and the chemistry just blew everybody away," recalls La India, who is also working on a new album for Sony Discos. "I hope our duet opens doors for Angel in the same way mine with Marc [Anthony] opened them for him when we sang 'Vivir Lo Nuestro' ('To Live Our Own'). When people hear 'Para Decir Adiós,' they are not going to believe it."

Lopez is well aware that expectations are high, and that many eyes are set on him.

"My music comes first, but image is also important to me, and so is losing weight. The problem is I have no willpower when it comes to working on that. Since I was 21, I have been 30 pounds overweight. The change won't happen overnight," says a candid Lopez. "I tell you, I need a person to help me with this."

Ironically Lopez did not become a gym maniac or try to slim down for En Mi Soledad precisely because of how people remember him.

"My fans know me fat, so I wasn't going to come back skinny all of a sudden," he reasons. "I will lose the weight gradually and, the way I see it, it's a win-win situation. If I lose the weight I want, people will see my perseverance. And if I don't, people will still like me for being who I was."

And what if his voice changes with the weight loss?

"Oh no, I've been up and I've been down, and I've never lost my voice," he says, chuckling. "I just hope that, if I get skinny, I don't lose my chubby charm."