

**"THE TRICK IS TO POUR THE BEER DOWN THE BACK OF THE TV SET."**

This is David Hidalgo's alternative to the TV set-out-the-window trick of the bored band on the road. Not that Los Lobos would have done much of either since their emergence from East Los Angeles nearly twenty years ago. Their music and family environment don't exactly conjure up visions of Led Zep excess.

This phone call does strike the band in the midst of a Stateside tour somewhere in Mississippi, a tour that began in Europe in May so small wonder that Hidalgo sounded somewhere between taciturn and exhausted but buoyant enough to talk enthusiastically about the band's minor masterpiece, *Kiko*.

"Everything we've done in the past has been leading up to *Kiko* and we pulled off what we set out to do, although hope-



Steve Berlin, David Hidalgo, Louis Perez, Conrad Lozano, Cesar Rosas

# LOS LOBOS

fully we can go even further."

Why has it taken the band seven albums and nearly twenty years to reach this creative peak?

"I don't know. Over the years we started with an EP and little by little with each record our audience built up, our songwriting developed and we were heading in a certain direction when *La Bamba* happened and we were thrown off course

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for a minute. Not that the band changed at all, just the perception of the band. Once we became a commercial success we weren't this hip little secret any more.

"We wanted to be a part of getting the Richie Valens story across but when it became such a big thing it took us by surprise and we didn't know how to deal

with it. It seemed that we lost all of our audience that we had at the beginning. They seemed to think that we sold out or something. *La Bamba* was a household word, everyone knew that but no-one knew who we were although we were the same band as we'd always been.

"So when we put out *The Neighbourhood* it didn't really get over for a lot of reasons — and we didn't really have a plan on how to deal with the album. It took a while to get back on track and with *Kiko* that's where we're at now. This batch of songs and the approach we took just happened right."

Was there pressure to follow up *La Bamba* with something similar?

"It was there but nobody had the nerve to apply that pressure or say anything. They were hoping we'd follow suit and do something similar but we didn't want to as we knew it would be the wrong thing to do."

Although *The Neighbourhood* was a respectable collection of songs illustrating Los Lobos's customary command of the traditional aspects of rock n'roll, it revealed no indication of the masterful body of work that was to become *Kiko*. In fact the signs were that Los Lobos would merely descend into an honourable but dull ride to retirement. This album has shaken the tree.

"This one was about stepping out and taking chances," continues Hidalgo with his laconic understatement, "and as it developed we wondered how people would react but we knew it was good so we felt we had to go with it."

"We just tried to complement the bare bones of the songs with the instrumentation and arrangements and the way the lyrics came together seemed to suggest that it needed some atmosphere and, not to sound corny, it needed to take the listener somewhere. The songs seemed to live in another world and the arrangements had to go that way too."

*Kiko* is a triumph on many levels. Its sixteen song expanse

has no weaknesses, each song being independently catered for with Mitchell Froom's production intensity providing the feeling of continuity. The songs have a compassion and understanding of the human condition few fledgling bands could imagine, never mind re-create. Slow, gritty ballads like 'Angels With Dirty Faces', confessions like 'Just A Man' and observations like 'That Train Don't Stop Here Anymore' are, like great blues songs, the result of experience and pain. And writers Hidalgo (in his mid-thirties) and Louie Perez have seen their share of hard times which results in easy, natural songs.

"It was effortless the way it fell together. We would come in with a song and it flowered from there and it happened very quickly, it wasn't as if we laboured over the songs, a lot of them were done in the first couple of takes."

"Mitchell was tuned into what we wanted to do and he pushed us and Louie and I put ourselves in the mode where we received ideas."

Perhaps the best song on the album is 'Wake Up Dolores', a

mid-tempo lurch that utilises a Mexican chant in the background that makes the skin crawl.

"It's an indigenous tongue from Mexico. It's a couple of lines from a poem written in the 1600s when the Spanish conquests came. I forget the direct translation but it's something like the 'walls are red'. It's about when Cortez came to Mexico and they thought they were deities and there was a big gathering and the Spanish slaughtered everyone. But the song is about going home either spiritually or physically."

And what of 'Two Janes'? It reads too biographical to be fiction.

"That was taken from an incident in the mid-west where a couple of younger girls had a suicide pact and they sat on the tracks waiting for the train to come. It was a true story that touched us."

And *Kiko*?

"It seemed that this record or piece of work had a life of its own and so we just wanted to name it like a child or something instead of *Los Lobos 7*."

In *Kiko* Los Lobos have recaptured the timeless spread of the Band but where Robertson celebrated a rural lifestyle, Hidalgo and Perez reflect a suburban and urban America. "I appreciate the comparison with the Band, that's flattering as the Band has always been really important to all of us. The whole idea of having this band is to have this in-house kind of thing so if we need a mandolin somebody goes and buys a mandolin and plays it. We've always taken that approach, we're not virtuosos in everything we play but if we manage to get a part of an instrument we'll use it. And that's kinda the way the Band worked, although they were great musicians in everything they did."

And the future?

"We're still alive recording and doing records so we're still a living thing. It's not over yet."

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