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MUSIC: FEATURE

Cafe Tacuba



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¿Comprende?

By [Omar Perez](#)

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Humans by nature tend to be open to other cultures -- until they don't understand them. While rock fans in non-English-speaking countries have accepted listening to music with English lyrics, Americans can be less accommodating of music sung in a non-native tongue. It's part of the reason why Café Tacuba guitarist Joselo Rangel thinks the advancement of Spanish rock on our soil has been a slow one.

"The language has been a barrier -- a wall that doesn't allow people to cross over," says Rangel, speaking on the phone from Mexico while embarking on a tour in their home country. "But there's a growing Hispanic population [in America] and that has allowed us to get signed to an American label [MCA] and play in the United States. Hopefully in the process there will be Anglos that will approach our music."

While relatively unknown in the States, Café Tacuba (Rangel, vocalist Rubén Albarrán -- who changes his name for every album -- bassist Enrique "Quique" Rangel, keyboardist Emanuel DeReal and drummer Victor Indrizzo) are among Mexico's biggest exports since Corona. Now, with their latest, "Cuatro Caminos" (four paths), the band's fourth studio album in its 14-year history, the stage is set for the band to earn the respect of American audiences who are willing to ignore the language difference.

The band's hybrid of rock, ska, melodic rock and pop -- along with traditional Mexican music -- results in textured, melodic hues on songs such as "Camino y Veredad," while digging through layers of roots rock on "Cero y Uno" and adapting a Fab Four formula with "Recuerdo Prestado." Tracks "Encantamiento Inutil" and "Hola Adios" impart waves of synthesizers and Radiohead Kid A-era sequencing. On "Eres," vocalist Elfego Buendia (Albarrán's chosen name this time around) offers Latin crooner depth to the power-pop ballad and snarls his way through the ska-tinged "Eo."

Production-wise, the album (recorded in the frozen tundra of Buffalo, N.Y.) marks several firsts for the band: the first time they hired the talents of producers outside of the Spanish-rock arena -- Dave Fridmann and Andrew Weiss, whose combined works include Ween, Flaming Lips and Mercury Rev; and the first time they recorded with a live drummer as opposed to their years-long utilization of a drum machine. "We liked to be seen differently as opposed to being just a rock band," he says of the sans-drum lineup, noting the band also found it difficult to find a skin basher who could alternate through the myriad styles the band embraces.

While Café Tacuba doesn't limit itself to one genre today, there was a time when their songwriting was more restricted. Before the band formed in 1989 in Mexico City, the members (art-design college students, at the time) formed another band under a different name. However, that group split after realizing that it was trying too hard to re-create the "*rock en Ingles*" sound of its American counterparts. After some sound-searching, the group reunited under the Café Tacuba moniker and played music the way they knew best.

"We figured out what we wanted to do," Rangel remembers. "We said, 'We're Mexican and we have this musical culture. Let's do something with it.'"

Signing to Warner Music in 1992, the band released their self-titled debut. The album, hailed by both Latin and American press (*The New York Times* called it the Spanish-rock equivalent of "The White Album"), sold at least 40,000 copies and was certified double gold in Mexico. The band followed the growing success with worldwide tours and 1994's *Re* and 1996's "Avalancha de Exitos." The band's 1999 "Reves/Yosoy" double album was both critically acclaimed by critics and dismissed by fans who didn't appreciate its experimental nature. Warner subsequently dropped the band and released its contract-fulfilling "Tiempo Transcurrido" greatest-hits compilation in 2001.

After its release, the band took a yearlong sabbatical to further explore other avenues, whether side or solo projects, or to just get some rest. When they rejoined the following year to begin writing "Cuatro Caminos," "it was like a new cycle, like a breath of fresh air," Rangel remembers. While the label sharks circled Café Tacuba, the band took its time signing, ultimately choosing Universal (for Mexico) and the conglomerate's MCA imprint for the U.S.; "Cuatro Caminos" is MCA's first Spanish-language offering.

Signing to an American label and working their way into the United States may forecast a band that's going to Americanize itself, record songs in English and perhaps exchange heavenly Mexican cuisine for Taco Bell. But Café Tacuba has no plans to run from the border or its culture.

"We have no intention to record an English-language album," Rangel says. "We'll keep writing music using the language to which we were born and the one we use to express ourselves. It's our intention, being a Mexican-Latin group, to sing in Spanish. It's how we communicate."