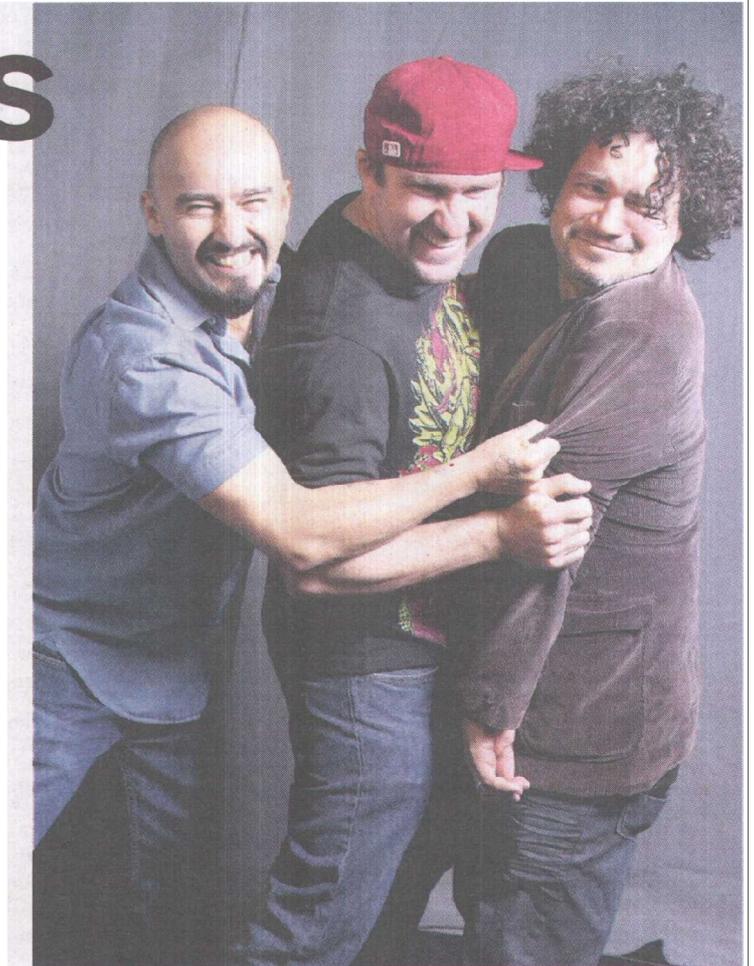


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Ozo layers



Cultural envoys of Ozomatli – (from left) Raul Pacheco, Will 'Wil-Dog' Abers and Asdrú Sierra – have been together for 15 years. – AP

On its latest album, Ozomatli fires away with a mix of pain and party.

By **RYAN PEARSON**

FOR their fifth studio album, the globe-hopping band Ozomatli found inspiration in Africa. It was both unexpected and unwanted.

Percussion on the opening track *Are You Ready?* is provided by gun-boot dancers the band recorded at a South African orphanage for HIV-positive children. And the near-fatal onstage electric shock of singer-guitarist Raul Pacheco in Madagascar prompted his happy-to-be-alive tune, *Malagasy Shock*.

Still, the 15-year-old group's sound remains distinctly Los Angeles, a mash-up of Latin rhythms with hip-hop, funk, rock and ska, plus whatever they hap-

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pen across in their travels through the US State Department's "cultural ambassadors" programme.

Financed by taxpayers, the band has travelled since 2007 to Nepal, Jordan, Vietnam and other countries to represent the United States and connect with people who rarely see Americans in person. This month, as part of the programme, they're playing the World Expo in Shanghai and travelling to Mongolia.

"We're fairly open-minded musicians," says Wil-Dog (real name: Will Abers). "With our travels comes picking up CDs on the street. And we get to hear all kinds of sounds from all over the world. We've always been a band that emulates different sounds. There's always somebody saying 'Oh, I have an idea. Why don't we make it sound like ...' whatever, it could be James Brown, or salsa, or whatever, or some hip-hop beat."

Using Spanish and English, the 11-song *Fire Away* covers topics ranging from capitalism and money (the Jack Johnson-assisted *It's Only Paper*) to sexuality and equal rights (*Gay Vatos in Love*). Their performances are relentlessly upbeat, with Ozo band members bearing whistles and drums entering and exiting through the audience in a conga line. But there's pain in the lyrics.

The mournful *It's Only Time* notes: "Open wounds need some time alone to dry. Closed hearts need security to cry." Asdrú Sierra,

who co-wrote the track, says he "went through a lot of growing pains" with his wife and two children while recording the new album.

The brooding singer-trumpeter said he had trouble trying to cheer up his son who was heartbroken over rejection by a girl. Two songs he wrote were cut out, deemed too dark by other band members.

"We're usually all really 'Jazz hands! Ozomatli! Party!' and that always cheered me up personally," Sierra said. "But what goes on onstage and what goes on offstage are two different things."

And sometimes the pain comes onstage. Pacheco was shocked in front of some 4,000 people at the group's 2008 Madajazzcar festival performance. A microphone's electrical current was not properly grounded, and it surged through his body as soon as he touched the mic. His arm contorted and the shock sent him flying 15 feet (4.6m) through music equipment.

"Uli (Bella), the sax player, thinks that I'm just rocking out," Pacheco recalls. But "Wil-Dog could tell right away that I'm not having a good time."

He recovered, and Pacheco says the resulting tune is about shifting his approach to life, "almost like be aggressive in pursuing what you want."

So what does Ozo want? They don't record much: just five albums in 15 years. They've shrunk

to seven band members from a high of 10 at one point. Their two most high-profile members, DJ Cut Chemist and MC Chali 2na, left the group years ago (though 2na still drops in on performances). And their eclectic, try-anything approach has not led to commercial success or much radio airplay outside Southern California.

But Wil-Dog says Ozo would still be happy to go pop: "Why not? Why shouldn't everybody have a chance to hear Ozomatli's music? It just gives us more choices."

In the late 1990s, Ozo was on the rise in Los Angeles at the same time the Black Eyed Peas released their first album. The two groups remain friendly.

"They were really deep into their debt at their record label," Sierra said. "Being a musician you kind of realise, yeah, you might be on TV all the time, but you're not really having the success that people foresee. I remember hearing them going into restaurants - 'Oh, the Black Eyed Peas! Awesome! Cool!' And then they would split before the bill came."

"Which is stuff that I've done ... do ... done," he continued, smiling.

"I'm happy that now they can pay for their meals. That's hot. More power to them. Especially if they've got families, man. Because once you've got families and kids and stuff, it's a whole other ball game." - AP