

## Spinning Existence By A Thread

The intrepid members of Grupo Fantasma have been doing things their own way for over a decade now. I first bumped into them a few years ago and it was a life-changing experience. I felt like they were speaking directly to my *mestizo* existence of being a half-Latino in America. And unlike some of my other discoveries in the intriguing world of an alternate Latin music universe that seemed to be one hit wonders or have gone all disappointingly commercial on me, Fantasma has NEVER disappointed. These dudes don't know how to repeat themselves, they have too much talent and love for exploration. Yet at the same time they have always been firmly rooted in the deep traditions of their peoples and have never compromised for a corporate sponsored "crossover" – hell, they are all already crossed over, *mijo!* Crisscrossed, matter of fact.

GF have been a lot of things over the years, but they've never been boring. Quite the contrary, *carnal*. When a new project is born, it's like: "*¡Coño!* How're they gonna top themselves now?!" But I am not so in awe of them that they are untouchable. For though the citadel of their music is a formidable maroon stockade of musicianship strong enough to keep out the slavers and bounty hunters, the guys themselves are down to earth, fun to hang with, approachable; a people's band if you will.

Like another great Latin start-up/up-start, New York's Fania Records, these homeboys from Texas take the bull by the horns and do it with a vision as striking as Frida Khalo's art, as full of "a-ha!" moments as a John Leguizamo stand-up routine. GF, like Fania in its day, has been on the *esquina* (corner) long enough to not only be tough, resilient and self-assured, but also be mature enough to turn out reliably top quality product repeatedly on its own terms. Indeed their latest effort, the Spanglish-ly titled "El Existential", can be safely deemed the apex of their work to date, the ultimate in a long list of achievements. To put it succinctly, it's easily my favorite album of the year, perhaps the decade, and deserves multiple Grammys. It is the work of a fabulously bright, overstuffed muscular organism that seems to swagger down the street with macho metallic edges and the tightly controlled hydraulics of a well-oiled lowrider, yet all the while managing to sway with dripping sensuality to slinky orchestral island beats like a Tropicana chorus girl - all interwoven with lyrical poetry from the heart that actually has *something to say*.

But how to describe this record's magnetic magic-realism and its endearingly multi-lingual charms? "El Existential" is a unique Fantasma-gorical brew that inspires pan-Latin diasporic visions like some baroque Mexican cathedral carved by ancestors of sacred Mayan architects. In fact, the band installed a custom studio in a three bedroom rental house just to record this album. Their goal: to situate and self immerse in a collectively occupied homestead so they could create communally in a non-corporate, domestic atmosphere engineered to foster collaboration and experimentation.

Thematically, there seems to be a lot about web-spinning spiders. The spider in African and Afro-Diasporic folkore is a trickster, a story-weaving teacher, and above all, a symbol of resourceful survival, contrary to its more sinister associations in Western mythology. GF

play with this metaphoric duality (positive and negative interpretations of the spider) to great effect on several compositions. Lyrics also touch on sinners, seductresses, and self-searching, with a bit of spiritual advice, revenge, and reconciliation added for good measure. Taken together they spin like a dream narrative full of fantasies and nightmares you can't seem to wake up from.

Musically, clouds of ritual smoke reveal unraveling spools of salsa, cumbia, mambo, son montuno, funk, Afro, psych, bolero, dub, reggae, boogaloo, jazz, folkloric, soundtrack, even startling hints of new wave and metal. But it's all biologically integrated like a huge extended second-generation immigrant family. What strikes me most is how every cut is animated with this rare analog spark that makes the whole thing warm and hand-made, when so much Latin music these days seems created in a Teflon laboratory by robots pretending to be *de la calle* (from the street).

While the band's thrilling sound can come on like a full grown bull in the ring, it can also be delicate like Spanish lace at times, full of spine-tingling Gothic bewitchment. Unlike most tropical dance inspired artists, these guys can often be moody, the sound seeming to emanate from some kind of dark and spooky ebony forest – more Funkadelic than Kool & The Gang. No wonder the band call themselves phantasms: like some mythic group of ghost musicians, they are the house band at a Dia De Los Muertos celebration.

In so many ways their music is a bundle of contrasts and contradictions. It is art made on the hyphen, a hybrid Latin-American beast of many dancing legs, hearts and minds. One of the most thrilling things about GF's craft is the simultaneous feeling of multi-directionalism the listener gets while experiencing the pleasures of the album. You are propelled forward into a post-Colonial future, while at the same time hurtling backward into the entangled roots of the pre-Conquest past. This is a tantalizingly disorienting sensation that gives the music the dynamic push-pull pulse of life with its highs and lows, making it as real as your own existence. Nostalgic sounds recombine and morph in novel ways, lyrics touch on subjects seldom broached in today's commercial salsa or cumbia, traditions are revealed like forgotten treasure only to be refashioned into a New World gerrymander, a skill that seems unique to the resourceful children of Neo-Colonialism. Fantasma knits together the rural with the urban, melds Anglo, Afro, and Latino with such expert carefree abandon you barely notice it - it's so natural seeming. It's not until you try to describe all the song genres (futile) or unravel the strands (too intertwined) that you realize the music is actually quite a complex web of artifice, with the ultimate revelation that you have been witnessing a sublime collective consciousness at work and a group that finishes with something that sounds both intentional and whole.

The collective power of this orchestra, a grouping of disparate souls with a common goal, is what makes GF such a treat live. But this bundle of differences, that is itself an apt metaphor for the Latino/a experience in the USA, coheres quite well on "El Existential". It's like you are standing right there on stage with them as they spin out shimmering thread after thread before your very ears, enmeshing you in a web of sound vibrations impossible to escape. There are so many treats on this record, from incredible vocals to insane brass cavalcades, propulsive guitar and smoking percussion workouts, that to enumerate all their

individual charms would almost kill the collective thrill of first hearing the songs in sequence. But as you might have guessed by now, "El Existential" is so good that it's hard to keep quiet about it.

The album starts with "Realizando" - the most perfect synthesis of funk and salsa you will ever hear - it's like GF channeled the often separate musical worlds of East and West coast Latin cultures - Mandrill meets El Chicano, Los Tigres Del Norte mash it up with Willie Colón. But it's way better than some retro homage made by mere students, and this is what is so often unforgettable about Fantasma. They manage not to sound derivative while making wholly pleasurable references to past glories like cinematic strings, Blaxploitation soundtracks, psychedelic pop, Nuyorican attitude, and block-rockin' breakbeats. Rest assured, despite its semi-old-school feeling, "Realizando" is for today, made of whole cloth. It's original, dramatic, struttingly powerful. The strings and horns on this number point to GF's evolution to another level all together. Lyrically, it's about becoming aware that the way you've been acting was wrong, and having the *cojones* not to shrink from it, so you'll take responsibility and make some changes for the better. Again, it's another sign of the band's maturity that they can take a "message" track and make it danceable and at the same time high art.

No one Stateside really writes original sounding cumbias any more, but GF does. "La Conozco" is simply the most real, rewarding, infectious song in the genre today. The lyrics are deceptively dreamlike and simple: seeing an exquisitely sexy girl standing on a corner, thinking you recognize her from somewhere, you wave hello, she waves back like she knows you too, but then she disappears into a taxi before you can get her name. But it's the SOUND that draws you in with its intense feeling, driving rhythm and infectious chorus. Crank this thundering party monster on your "sonidero" sound system and you'll be moving the crowd like in the old days of Discos Fuentes!

As previously mentioned, this is a people's band without pretensions, and a proletarian solidarity vibe is most strongly felt with "Sacatelo Bailando", a fabulous *salsa dura* romp that exhorts you to dance away all the pain and stress from your working life, the sweat you raise on the dance floor being like the exorcism of a workweek fever, a cleansing bath or "*despojo*" in Santeria terms. Here music is dispensed as medicine; dance is the doctor's prescription.

One of GF's best jams on the last album was their searing rendition of Irakere's Latin funk power cut "Bacalao Con Pan." Now on this new outing, they take that inspiration (as well as a few crib notes from alter-ego project Brownout) one step further with "El Consejo", a bristling tour de force that spars like a well balanced boxer. This cut is filled with a funky joy and expressiveness missing from most contemporary Latin recordings. The haunting lyrics tell of a suicidal narrator who has his faith in life restored by the visitation of Santiago, a kindly old man with sad eyes who advises him to "never give up faith or hope, God will take care of you and very soon your life will turn around." When he doesn't see Santiago in the *barrio* in the coming months, the narrator discovers that the *viejito* had died several years before.

Up next, the skanking cumbia of “Hijo” has a very intense rock section and metallic guitar solo that cuts through the otherwise spongy reggae sound like the slash in Mexican/American, like if you put some hot *chiles* on your plate of jiggling *flan* for a spicy dessert pick-me-up. The song proves that the record is full of welcome surprises!

Shifting down a bit, “Juan Tenorio” seems to travel back to a sultry Buenavista island idyll. It’s a bluesy bolero buoyed by snake rattle maracas, big band brass, shimmering guitars, and the slow-grind electric piano *montunos* and solo of the inimitable Fania legend Larry Harlow. The words, dripping with menace, paint a tawdry picture of romantic treachery and a wronged *macho*’s bloody revenge.

“Montañozo” bumps along like a crazy mountain bus ride over some South American terrain of the mind. Psychedelic wah-wah surf guitar, Asian trumpet fanfares and Farfisa organ stir an ayahuascan brew that reminds me of the best Peruvian jungle cumbia if it were cut to accompany a messed-up spaghetti western or “El Topo”. But then there’s also jazzy vibraphone, bright blaring ‘bones, pumping disco cymbals, and surprise - a *vallenato* accordion plus merengue *cinquillo* beats thrown in for good measure. The lyrics urge the title character Montañozo to run, run, because “they” want to catch him and kill him. As the song fades out across the landscape, I shake my head and wonder if we’ll ever catch up to Grupo Fantasma.

From the mountainous heights we jump right into the Tex-Mex border sound of “Calor”, a hot little number that delves into romance again, only this time it’s all positive, about the animal heat and obsession of a heavy infatuation.

After a brief 6/8 interlude (“25”) that flits along like a dainty spider spinning her web, “Reconciliar” comes on like a lecherous encounter in some darkened cantina, combining cumbia and salsa in an alluring way, like salt and tequila. Just as the musicians set up a delicious tension between the slower, simpler cumbia and the more up-tempo, syncopated *guaguancó* rhythms, the lyrics tell of conflicting emotions in a relationship. Sometimes we want to fight, sometimes to make up and reconcile. In fact, one makes the other all the more sweet; it’s a constant back and forth. The dynamic of romance ranging from fire and heat on one end, to calming breezes on the other is what makes a relationship worth having.

Suddenly switching into a rock vibe, “Telaraña” (spider web) puts you in an inexplicably happy mood, despite its undeniably darkly seductive lyrical messages of spiders and skulls. Maybe it’s the suave David Bowie funk/New Wave references or the delectable guitar screams courtesy of Curt Kirkwood from the Meat Puppets. Or perhaps it’s the stabbing brass, bouncy beat, or infectious chorus. Whatever the case, the song emerges like a wild Gothic Rock En Español episode in an otherwise Caribbean-inspired workout.

“Cumbianchera” is full of sex and slither, carrying along in a minor key, giving its tropical warmth a somewhat carnivalesque aspect, which leads into the album closer, the spooky mood piece “Araña Cuña” (which translates as ‘spider’s cradle’, the last of many spider/entrapment references). The cut reads like a primer in Afro-Cuban Kongo Palo fusion funk, and caps the musical mayhem experienced previously on the last dozen tracks.

The band sings: “Fantasma has arrived to teach you...”, bringing to mind again the trickster/teacher spider Anansi from Caribbean folklore. If you haven’t learned something about yourself by the end of this journey, perhaps you deserve to die from the spider’s bite! Even if this is the last we’ll hear from Grupo Fantasma for a while, it’s quite a way to go - spinning existence by a thread.

—Pablo E. Yglesias, a.k.a. DJ Bongohead