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East L.A. band Quetzal's latest evolution includes Smithsonian

'Imaginaries,' Quetzal's first studio release in six years, is being released on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings label. It includes the band's usual genre melting pot.

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Members of the restlessly inventive East L.A. band Quetzal admit there's something humorous about their new album being released on a label called Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

As Martha González, the group's bilingual diva, recently observed, the record company, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution, normally focuses on groups that are "considered maybe on the verge of going extinct."

One spin through "Imaginaries" should convince listeners that Quetzal is anything but a museum piece. The group's first studio release since "Die Cowboy Die" in 2006, it's a typically genre-agnostic *mezcla* of rock, cumbia, neo-'80s-style R&B, Cuban *charanga*, Brazilian *pandeiro* and the lilting *son jarocho* of Mexico's Veracruz state, wrapped in lyrics that are both poetic and infused with political passion.

"We're not the youngest of bands, obviously, we're not in our 20s," González said of the group she founded with her husband, Quetzal Flores. "But we're in our late 30s, kicking well into the next phase."

Two decades after emerging from the cultural crucible of L.A.'s 1992 riots, along with other Chicano fusionists like Ozomatli, Lysa Flores and Aztlan Underground, Quetzal sees itself as part of a continuum of Eastside culture in which the folksy and the funky, musical daring and progressive politics, can coexist.

As its instrumental mastery and punchy, sophisticated lyrics attest, Quetzal is also one of the brainiest bands around, collectively armed with enough higher-learning degrees to stock a small-college faculty. (González is finishing her doctorate on how Chicano artist-activists have resisted the way capital markets segregate music from its community of origin.)

That unusual synthesis has made Quetzal's music hard to categorize and therefore tough to slot into commercial marketing categories and sales-driven radio formats, even as it emerged as a favorite with critics and Spanish-language crossover cognoscenti. But it makes the band a good fit for its new label.

Dan Sheehy, curator and director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, said that Quetzal's music represents a living tradition that continually adapts and draws sustenance from the evolving Eastside community from which it emerged.

"Music is not traditional unless it changes with the society that it's part of," said Sheehy, an executive producer of "Imaginaries." Quetzal's music, he continued, "expresses a sense of community, a sense of identity and maybe a sense of worldview....There's a message about a certain lot in life, a certain world position, which is very important in the context of the United States."

"Imaginaries" reflects the band's career-long commitment to taking uncompromising and often surprisingly dance-able stands on issues like immigration, the environment, the Zapatista uprising, the predatory 1-percenters and even, on "Imaginaries," the Palestinian intifada.

Yet for Quetzal, the ideal of music-making as a form of politically engaged community-building begins with the band itself. Although Flores and González are the only constants remaining from the group's original lineup, Quetzal endures as an extended clan of spouses, relatives, friends, former and current lovers, and repeat collaborators, several of whom reunited on "Imaginaries" for the first time in years.

The communal bonds were evident a few weeks ago when several band members gathered at *casa Flores-González* in Pasadena.

"This band functions as a core unit but it also functions as a family. And everybody in the band past and present is still a part of our family," said Flores, the son of farmworker-organizer social activists.

As its new album's title suggests, Quetzal insists that it's possible to look back and think forward at the same time — to create a space of possibilities outside normal music conventions. Over two decades, that stance has helped the group evolve from a sound that was predominantly "sweet and folkloric" to one that's equally "bluesy and biting," as former Times music writer Agustin Gurza put it.

The band has continued to spotlight traditional *jarocho* instruments such as the small *requinto* guitar, and the *tarima*, the small wooden platform that's used as a percussive instrument in *fandango* dancing, *son jarocho*'s rhythmic paramour.

But it also has added new textures through collaborative mainstays such as keyboardist-vocalist Quincy McCrary, formerly of the hip-hop collective Burning Star; and bass player Juan Pérez, who studied with Louis Johnson of the Brothers Johnson and has brought a funky urban vibe to his work with the Veracruz *jarocho* outfit Son de Madera.

Band members agree that Quetzal has been shaped as much by the utopian African American pop-R&B of Stevie Wonder, Rufus, and Earth, Wind and Fire as it has by ranchera and salsa. In the past, such elements rarely were allowed to mingle in the ethnically stratified music landscape dominated by the big labels. But as the Internet has opened up a vast sonic cosmos to performers and listeners alike, Quetzal's music increasingly seems like the sound of things to come.

"They already set the precedent of being this giant organism that absorbs all genres, and it's already kind of expected that [Quetzal's music] is going to be kind of like L.A., just a big melting pot of sound," said cellist Peter Jacobson, a relative newcomer to the band who performs with Southwest Chamber Orchestra and the San Diego Symphony and has a repertoire that includes avant-gardist John Cage and sitar master Rahul Sariputra.

González believes that "it's to the Smithsonian's credit" to recognize that a group with a strong connection to its roots needn't ever be stuck in the past.

"I think it's a huge dare, and it's also a testament to how they are beginning to articulate what tradition is, right?" she said. "Are we an East L.A. tradition? Yes, I think we are."

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