Ozomatli Speak Out Against Injustice with a Beat You Can Dance To

Renowned record executive/producer Tony Berg, who has recorded with a wide range of artists including Beck, Michael Penn, Peter Gabriel and Aimee Mann, was recently quoted as saying that working with Ozomatli was "like visiting seven continents simultaneously."

Of course this may have something to do with the fact that these seven musicians are native born Los Angelenos whose roots lay in the musical melting pot that makes the City of Angels one of the most culturally diverse places on the globe. Or the fact that Ozo's membership is a virtual United Nations, whose members' origins are Mexican, Japanese, Jewish, African-American Creole and Italian. But it's this kind of diversity and open-minded approach towards music and life that's enabled this multi-ethnic outfit to end up performing alongside everyone from Santana, Rage Against the Machine, Dilated Peoples and Herb Alpert to recently wrapping up a two-night stint with the Boston Pops. With their fifth studio album, the Berg-produced Fire Away, Ozomatli has continued trafficking a mish-mash of styles that embraces aspects of salsa, dancehall, hip-hop, funk, merengue, reggae and New Orleans R&B and jazz. There's the bouncy funk of "Elysian Persuasion" whose basslines and call-and-response chants would have Bootsy Collins proud to claim ownership. Elsewhere, the crisp riffs and cool crooning of "45" will have lovers of snappy soul fawning while the brassy polka-meets-cumbia infectiousness of "Caballito" will prompt plenty of impromptu hip shaking and toe-tapping. Best of all, is Ozo's most controversial cut, "Gay Vatos in Love," a catchy amalgam of doo-wop, early rock & roll and Latin soul that proposes love for all regardless of sexual orientation. Stirring the pot is part of the Ozomatli stew, given the group's continual outspokenness on a myriad of social topics. It's all the more remarkable given that this is one of the most divisive times in our country when any kind of outcry from a left-wing/progressive point of view, at worst, gets you banned on the airwaves or at the very least, branded anti-American. But with Ozomatli already having 15 years in the books, it's something founding member/saxophonist/clarinetist Ulises Bella, says the band has become accustomed to.

"We see that from the right and the left. There'll be people who lean to the right who say they really like our music but they think the politics stink cause it's liberal, hippie bullshit. Then there are people from the left who think because we're doing the State Department Cultural Ambassador program that we're sellouts," Bella explains, laughing. "But for the most part, any fans we may have lost because of ideology are very few and far between. People know what we've been about and we're no Johnny-come-lately to any scene or vibe."

The aforementioned State Department Cultural Ambassador Program is a cause that Ozomatli has been involved with since the mid-point of the second Bush Administration. After a Nepalese diplomatic worker heard the band discuss its socially conscious philosophies on NPR, the State Department spent a year trying to bring the band onboard to a program of cultural diplomacy, whose earliest participants included the likes of Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong. With the band having such strong anti-war beliefs, suffice it to say that any entreaties from the Bush Administration were initially viewed with a skeptical eye. "It caught us a little bit off guard for them to ask us," Bella admits. "But after a little negotiation on their part and our part in terms of what it all entailed and what the trips were about, we decided to start doing them. Then we realized the golden opportunity of playing in a lot of different places and getting exposed to a lot of different kinds of music which for the most part we'd never heard."

After undertaking the initial trip that took them to Nepal and India, Ozomatli has since brought its polyrhythmic grooves to Indonesia, Burma, Vietnam, Chile, Brazil, Madagascar and South Africa. Most recently, after their gig with the Boston Pops, the next stop on the band's Cultural Ambassador itinerary was a quick jaunt to China and Mongolia.

Domestic affairs are also on Ozomatli's radar. Not only did the band shoot PSAs about the current census geared towards the Latino community alongside Rosario Dawson, but also they've been vocal in commenting SB 1070, the harsh Arizona immigration law set to launch in July. "Do I think there should be immigration reform? Yes. Do I think a certain kind of fairness involved with his immigration? Yes," he explains. "I think the way it's going about now is really unfair whether it's simple things like if an immigrant wants to get his paperwork done and how long it takes compared to a ballplayer from the Dominican Republic, that Major League Baseball may want to bring to its league. Believe me that paperwork is going to fly through. Or if a Cuban guy sits on American soil, all of a sudden he's in exile. It's these weird little things that people don't see. What I feel ultimately, it has to be reform from a focus on humanity and how we define ourselves as a country."

Given all the activism Ozomatli participates in from being cultural ambassadors for the State Department to signing on to the Zach de la Rocha-led Sound Strike, (a grassroots initiative in which artists pledge to boycott playing the state of Arizona until SB 1070 is repealed), its easy to deduce that being socially conscious is as important to Ozomatli as making music. "The band was founded around the concept of using the music and our own physical bodies to help different [causes]," Bella says. "When the band started getting popular and getting what we considered, 'big gigs,' we just never let go of that aspect of us."

Top 5 Ozomatli Protests

- 2000 Democratic National Convention @ The Staples Center – "Rage Against the Machine played earlier then we played. We ended up getting shut down and taken in to custody from the protest. It was the ugliest of what the authorities were trained to do post-Seattle [after 1999's WTO Protests). There was a lot of rubber bullets, [tear gas and pepper spray].
- Watsonville Strawberry Pickers Strike (1997) – "I remember we played in Pomona which is all the way down south of L.A. and we had to be in Watsonville, which is south of San Francisco the very next morning. Right after the gig, we ended up driving all night just to make it to this thing. It was a huge, huge demonstration/concert with around ten thousand people to help the striking strawberry workers."
- Annual Coalition to Stop Police Brutality Protests – "For a long time, Ozomatli was involved with the October 22nd Anti-Police Brutality Days, so we'd do a lot of those marches."

- ArtSpeaks! Not in Our Name – "I believe we were one of the first bands to play an anti-war show in the United States post-9/11 in Los Angeles, which was at the Palace Theater."
- Missing Women Protest – "We did a benefit concert down in El Paso around 2001 or 2002 to help focus attention on the women who had been disappearing in Juares.