

# Nearly 20 years in, Ozomatli still charging forward

By Siddhartha Mitter | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 02, 2014



MATTHEW WHITTINGTON

**Ozomatli is touring to promote its seventh album, the newly released “Place in the Sun.”**

You know you’re arrived in your town when they name a day for you.

Since four years ago, April 23 in Los Angeles has been Ozomatli Day — an honor bestowed on the local band with the multiethnic background whose raucous fusion of rock, rap, reggae, and assorted Latin sounds stakes as good a claim as any to be the new soundtrack of America’s second-largest city.

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And in keeping with its roots, the band, which came together 19 years ago at a labor rally, likes to mark the occasion by calling on its city — and American society — to do better. The first time around, in 2010, it took on school cuts to music education.

“We got 10 groups from different schools in the city — a ska band, a children’s choir, a jazz band — and they all played Ozomatli covers,” says saxophonist Ulises Bella. “And at the end we all played together. We were trying to give support to the schools.”

Work, education, politics, and fun — the most crucial ingredient — mix as easily in Ozomatli’s practice as do the disparate musical styles it assembles into typically short, high-energy, songs equally suited for hyping the dance floor or the political rally.

And with its seventh album, the newly released “Place in the Sun,” adding to its abundant catalog of film and TV scores, children’s music, TED-talk appearances and sundry other projects, the band is showing as much momentum in middle age as its members did in their impetuous 20s.

The seven-member Ozomatli visits Royale on May 8, after a quick pivot at home base following a tour in Australia, where they marked 2014 Ozomatli Day far from home. By way of advance celebration, however, they had visited UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center for a performance and discussion with students.

“It was an opportunity to have a dialogue about music and message, but also about living a socially committed life,” says UCLA professor Chon Noriega, the center’s director. “The fit with Ozomatli made a lot of sense: Chicano students here are pursuing higher education to advance themselves and give something back to the community.”

Part of Ozomatli’s endurance, of course, is that as teachers go, its members are far from didactic. The jump-up energy of their songs, with performance roots in punk and ska, is all about putting the “move” in the movement. And they’re curious thinkers in their own right, picking up sounds and ideas on their extensive travels, which have included forays as State Department cultural ambassadors to Nepal, Myanmar, and Mongolia.

The latter role began in 2006, during the Bush administration, whose policies were rather

## Ozomatli

Royale, 617-338-7699.

<http://www.boweryboston.com>

**Date of concert:** May 8, 8 p.m.

**Ticket price:** \$25 advance, \$27 day of show

different from their own views. Bella says the proposal gave them pause at first but they decided to embrace the opportunity.

“There was always that little bit of schism in the group as to whether we should do it, and what we were representing,” Bella says. “But we realized we could create our own story, and represent the beautiful and positive things that the United States is about.”

“When we played in Nepal, maybe 20 people in the whole country knew who we were. People heard there was a band from LA coming and maybe they were expecting the Beach Boys, or something that looked like that. And here comes this ragtag group of people from all over the place!”

With its short, snappy tracks and lyrics that bounce around from English to Spanish, “Place in the Sun” upholds the Ozomatli spirit and channels the energy of its live shows. It also draws, on several songs, on the new adaptations of cumbia and other Latin folk music that are bubbling up from Mexico to Colombia.

“In Mexico, electro-cumbia is big, with these traditional sounds injected onto the club floor,” says Bella. For one song in that spirit, “Paleta,” the group teamed up with norteño band Los Voces del Rancho. In a totally different vein, the reggae-oriented “Brighter” was co-written with Dave Stewart of Eurythmics.

And Ozomatli even consulted its fan base, Bella says. “We went on Facebook and asked our fans what they wanted to hear. They asked for cumbia, reggae, and hip-hop and we took that all into consideration. We wanted to create a body of work that represents where we are, and have fun with it.”

Like any band that has lasted this long, Ozomatli has had to figure out ways to navigate the rough economics of the music industry, while retaining its principles. “The artist and musician are a little more disposable now,” says Bella. “Very few bands last two years, let alone 20. I’m definitely counting my blessings.”

In today’s Los Angeles, Ozomatli maintains its commitments with an open mind as to the city’s future. “Whether it’s neighborhoods being gentrified or anything else, cities are always going to be changing,” Bella says. “It’s a constant state of influx of different people, and we thrive on that as a band.”

The band’s social and musical attitudes mirror each other, says UCLA’s Noriega.

“Their own music blends them together in ways that range from a dialogue, where you can hear different styles working it out, to a seamless new sound,” Noriega says. “Like all great

artists, their work exemplifies their beliefs.”

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