



BY MICHAEL MALONEY/THE CHRONICLE

Aztlan Records' Jon Melrod: 'We don't want to be a major corporate power, but we expect to grow'

ROCK EN ESPANOL NURTURED ON FERTILE AMERICAN SOIL

S.F.'s Aztlan Records gives voice to the genre

BY AIDIN VAZIRI

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Jon Melrod thinks that thunderous Latino rock acts like Orixia, Maria Fatal, Pastilla and Ley de Hielo will someday be household names in the United States. As co-founder and head of the San Francisco-based independent label Aztlan Records, he has made it his personal mission to see this vision through.

"I think any of those bands has the potential to reach a national audience," he said. "It's just going to take a little luck, a little hard work and some breaks."

Aztlan is the only American label dedicated exclusively to Latin rock, but it is not alone in its enthusiasm for this flourishing genre.

"A year ago there were barely 22 radio stations playing rock en espanol; today there are over 75," Melrod said. "Some of them program it five days a week, some of them two days a week and some of them only one day a week. But the point is, there is significant airplay, and it's obvious that Spanish-speaking radio stations and college

stations are recognizing it as a growing trend."

Located in an ordinary industrial building off Cesar Chavez Street, Aztlan's fluorescent-lighted office is overrun with paperwork and a small but loyal staff. Since February 1995, Melrod and his colleagues have worked out of this space, watching the prospect of rock en Espanol as a viable business venture go from fantasy to reality.

"A year and a half ago when we formed the record label, we knew about music but we didn't know about the music business," Melrod said. "In that time we've learned to run a record label. Secondly, it went from being a concept to becoming synonymous with rock en espanol in the United States."

Aztlan's first two releases — Ley de Hielo's "Senor Cementerio" and Maria Fatal's self-titled debut — did well last year. The label expects similar success for its two current projects, a release from East Bay rockers Orixia and one from Los Angeles' Pastilla.

"In some ways, the model for us is Island Records," Melrod said.

"(Island founder) Chris Blackwell started out selling reggae out of the trunk of his car, and then Island became identified with this new genre. In a lot of ways, we'd like to think Aztlan will become identified with this new style of music. When you think of rock en espanol, you'll think Aztlan Records.

"We don't want to be a major corporate power — we have an indie identity and an indie feel. But we expect to grow to where we have quite a few artists on the label," he added. "We'd like to release six or more artists a year and be a real player in the business."

Elena Rodrigo, executive director at Aztlan, reflects Melrod's ambition. "It's a challenge for us to capture the music and try to make it bigger," she said. "We know there are people who are looking for some kind of identity and a lot of them will find it in this music."

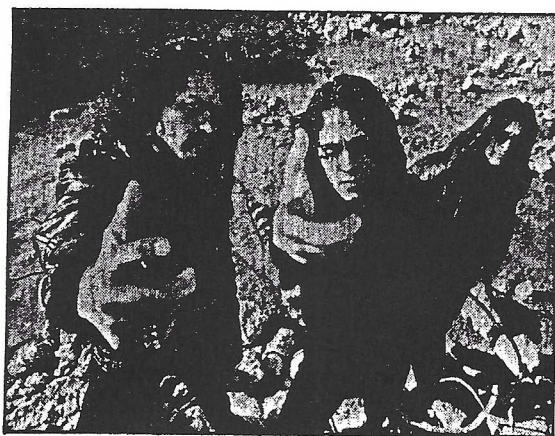
"For me, the most satisfying thing is now I'm part of all that effort and all that growth. I look at it like a baby. When I came to America eight years ago it wasn't even born, and now it's growing

and learning how to walk and finding places to play. It's not that anyone is opening doors for us, but we're opening doors."

Melrod credits much of the label's success to his employees. Most of the Aztlan staff is made up of people who work directly with the music, including artists and radio disc jockeys.

"We picked up people who were the lifeblood of the rock en espanol movement in this country," Melrod said. "This is a grassroots genre; you couldn't run it as a major label. I met with the president of a major label, which I won't name, and he said, 'You have sold more units in the last year than we could if we even tried, because you know what the market is, you know what the fanzines are, you know what the kids want to hear and you're in touch with the grass roots.' That's how this label has been built, as a grassroots label. The ability to gather under the Aztlan roof such a wealth of Latino talent has been key."

Aztlan has already secured national distribution for its releases and extended its sales to Guatemala, Mexico and Puerto Rico. The



Aztlan's first two releases were 'Senor Cementerio' by Ley de Hielo (left) and the self-titled debut by Maria Fatal (right)

label's artists have become so well-known that they are now attracting the attention of their more established peers abroad.

"When the big names in the business come to this country, a lot of times they ask our bands to open for them," Melrod said. "That's a very important part of the relationship — that our bands

have reached a certain level of prestige and recognition because they got CDs out and because they get radio play. They've become part of the rock en espanol movement around the world."

On August 8, the label hosted a Los Angeles event called Rock Aztlan showcasing the acts on the label alongside other bands from



around the country. According to Melrod, it was the first prominent gathering of top American rock en espanol bands on one stage, and also marked an important turning point for the movement.

"(The music arm of) Blockbuster is doing a big Latin rock promotion right now (in the Southeast)," Melrod said. "Blockbuster has des-

igned 91 stores in their chain with displays devoted to rock en espanol releases. That's a significant development, that a major chain like Blockbuster is embracing the genre. It means that the retail chains are beginning to see it as a viable commercial enterprise. The majors are all watching. We're pioneering with the genre." ■

San Francisco Examiner

CALIFORNIA

[BAY AREA AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA]

Aztlan Records
in the Mission is
the first U.S. label
to focus exclusively
on the growing trend

Latino rock — hot like a 'volcano'

Mission District label 1st to focus on trend

By Susan Ferriss
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

A pink-haired Elena Rodrigo rushes in, fresh from a promotional bash at the trendy Whisky a GoGo in Los Angeles.

Jon Melrod is already sitting behind an ornate desk deep inside a San Francisco warehouse — frantically juggling phone calls about the debut compact disc and a tight production schedule for more up-and-coming rockers.

Or should that read: *roqueros*?

This is Aztlan Records, the nation's first record label formed expressly to record rock music in Spanish — by Latinos living in the United States.

Founded in February by four San Francisco partners, Aztlan is riding the crest of a cultural wave — rock in Spanish — sweeping California and other pockets of the country where young Spanish speakers are concentrated.

"The Latino rock scene is a volcano waiting to explode," said an excited Melrod, 45, a former immigration attorney. "We're like pioneers, man. We're here every day

slugging it out."

Rodrigo, 28, moved to San Francisco from Morelia, Mexico, seven years ago, and is considered the heart and soul of Aztlan — as well as the best judge of who's hot enough on the Spanish-language scene to lure into the studio.

"One of the slogans we have is 'This is rock in your own language' — *rock en tu propio idioma*," said Rodrigo. "And that doesn't mean it's just in Spanish. It's also about things we can identify with, things that people grew up with in Latin American or Mexican society."

Rodrigo, whose wire-rimmed glasses, cropped hair and work

boots reflect her rocker tastes, as she loved salsa, cumbias and other rhythms that dominate Latin music. But she's been hooked on rock ever since hearing her first Pi Floyd album at age 14.

She went on to direct rock video and radio programs in Mexico at Berkeley; after three years in Fresno at a Spanish-language television station, she returned to the Bay Area to join Aztlan. The company chose its name because it refers to the mythological northern homeland of the Aztecs — and because it symbolizes Chicano pride.

Other Aztlan partners are: Gr



EXAMNER/CRIS HARDY

Elena Rodrigo and Jon Melred, who run Aztlan Records: "We're like pioneers, man," says Melred. "We're here every day slugging it out."

◆ AZTLAN from C-1

Latino rock looks ready to take off

McKee, a Chicano musician who runs Secret Studios on Cesar Chavez Boulevard, where Aztlan is based; Andy Stern, a San Francisco musician; and Nathan James, an entertainment lawyer.

They pooled life savings totaling more than six figures to get Aztlan going — fast. This month, the company released its first CD, a slick hard-rock package called "Señor Cementerio" by the Los Angeles band Ley de Hielo (Law of Ice).

Advance CDs of the songs "Siénteme" (Feel Me) and "Los Angeles en LLamas" (Los Angeles in Flames) have been sent to more than 100 stations nationwide that play Spanish-language music. Among other tunes on the CD is "El Gobernador" (The Governor), a heavy-metal protest about so-called immigrant-bashing.

This month, the Los Angeles-based band Maria Fatal is in the

studio recording Aztlan's second CD, which the company hopes to release by Sept. 16 as a tribute to Mexican Independence Day. The six-member band is also playing Sunday night in the East Bay at Berkeley Square, which features Spanish-language rock every Sunday.

Maria Fatal coalesced four years ago when a college music class brought together Cesar Hernandez, 26, a Chicano classical keyboard aficionado, and Ernesto Ramirez, 27, a guitar player who grew up in Mexico City and California.

During a recent recording session at Secret Studios, Ramirez experimented repeatedly with a guitar harmony, impressing engineer Rob Beaton — who didn't let his lack of Spanish dampen his enthusiasm for the music.

"You're going to be a guitar hero, dude," Beaton cried.

Maria Fatal's members speak English, yet at this point they perform only in Spanish, the language in which they feel more comfortable making music.

The band started out translating T-Rex and Jimi Hendrix songs

into Spanish, and gradually built their own repertoire — songs about love, death, drugs, immigration and other "underground themes," as Fernando Ramirez, the 29-year-old singer, put it.

Musically, said Ernesto Ramirez, "we like to fuse in all our influences. We can do a straight rumba, or we can do straight blues."

The band's name is a combination of a common Latin American name and the adjective *fatal*, which can mean deadly or, in slang, glamorous.

Maria Fatal had two tempting offers to sign with other companies, but chose Aztlan because it seemed the most professional and artist-friendly.

But Aztlan is aware it has to do more than be nice to sell records. In the company's office, a large map of the United States reveals a carefully researched marketing strategy.

The map is pierced by 160 blue pins identifying U.S. cities with more than 50,000 people and at least 15,000 Spanish speakers. Record stores and radio stations in

those areas have been contacted by phone, fax and mail.

Additional targets are college radio stations where Latin rock is becoming hotter, alternative stations that feature Spanish-language shows — and most of Latin America and Spain.

California alone is a monster potential market: the state has at least 5.5 million Spanish speakers, and 40 percent of the population under 18 is Hispanic, according to census figures.

Meanwhile, a couple of major record labels have called Aztlan and indicated they might like to help distribute its products. And demo tapes from bands all over the country are stacking up.

"We're getting tapes from California, Chicago, the East Coast and New Orleans," Melrod said. "All from groups that have sprung up in the last three to four years. It's not just music now, it's a cause."

Aztlan Records spreads the sound of rock en espanol by distributing the records of bands like Ley de Hielo.

Latino rock

■ A new musical voice for young Latinos is gaining in popularity — rock en espanol — and it's a sound rockin' in the Inland Empire, too.

Stories by **JASON FOSTER**
and **MARIE VASARI**
Sun Staff Writers

Viva la revolucion! Rock en espanol — a breed of rock and roll in which bands fuse American and British rock styles with Latin and world rhythms and sing in Spanish — is infiltrating many parts of the United States and becoming a strong force in the Inland Empire.

Using punk, ska and alternative sounds to frame their portraits of Latino life in this country, these groups are gaining a legion of followers, establishing a new voice for young Latinos and becoming the branch of rock music to watch in the future.

"There are many people right now who are into rock en espanol," 29-year-old Alex Laguna of San Bernardino says in Spanish. "It's very strong right now."

But this country has been slow to catch on.

Variations of the genre have been thriving in Latin America and Spain for more than 20 years. But just a few years ago up-and-coming U.S. groups like West Covina's Los Olvidados (for whom Laguna plays drums) and San Bernardino's Mala Vida could only perform at house parties and other gatherings out of the public's eye. Radio airplay and record deals were out of the question.

"No one would let (the bands) play," Laguna says.

Elena Rodrigo says that's no longer the case, thanks to a strong grass-roots movement that slowly generated demand for the music

ROCK EN ESPANOL

Where to see it

■ **Copasetic Cafe**, 471 W. Fourth St., San Bernardino. Rock en espanol every Saturday night. Call (909) 889-1908.

■ **Showcase Theatre**, 683 S. Main St., Corona. Occasional rock en espanol concerts. Call (909) 276-7770.

■ **The Roxy**, 9009 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood. Occasional rock en espanol concerts. Call (310) 276-2222.

Where to read about it

■ **La Banda Elastica**. Call or fax (310) 423-3942.

Where to order it

■ **Aztlan Records**, P.O. Box 347376, San Francisco, Calif., 941134. (415) 821-7559.

in Latino communities.

"A lot of this (growth) has to do with fan initiative," says Rodrigo, executive director for the first U.S. rock en espanol label, Aztlan Records in San Francisco.

A lot of it also has to do with the factors that led to the original rise of rock and roll and later surges of styles like grunge — youthful energy, frustration, anger, rebellion. Rock en espanol tapped these feelings in many young Latinos, says Aztlan Records President Jon Melrod.

"The young people who are into rock en espanol (called rockeros) are getting in touch with themselves and the issues that affect them, like Proposition 187," Melrod says. "They're growing in

self-awareness, saying, 'We live here in this country. We don't want to be pushed around.' They're embracing the music that's about them."

Now the rock en espanol scene has bands that sell out trendy clubs such as the Roxy and the Whisky in Los Angeles. It has magazines like *La Banda Elastica*, a Los Angeles-based monthly that covers the music here and abroad. It has companies like Aztlan Records which are willing to sign bands and promote them. It has dozens of radio stations playing its music on a regular basis across the country.

It also has an unofficial capital in the U.S. — Los Angeles.

"Los Angeles is clearly the center of the movement (in the United States)," Melrod says. "But there's a corridor that runs from San Francisco to San Diego that's also where rock en espanol is thriving."

That corridor includes San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

Gilbert Hernandez, owner of the Copasetic Cafe in San Bernardino, recently devoted Saturday nights at his all-ages nightclub to rock en espanol.

"We've been doing really well," he says. "We're seeing a lot of new faces. We're getting a lot of people from Moreno Valley, Riverside."

In addition, other venues such as the Showcase Theatre in Corona host rock en espanol bands when they can schedule them.

Fernando Arellano, manager for Mala Vida and co-promoter of the rock en espanol shows at the Copasetic Cafe, says that these places and this music give Latino youths a sense of belonging, of being part of something good.

"It's hard to find a (comfortable) social group," he says. "They can get together here and feel at home."

ArtBeat

Rock en español in the USA

A YEAR AFTER releasing its first album, San Francisco-based *rock en español* indie label **Aztlan Records** is smiling with satisfaction. Once limited to a predominantly West Coast market, Aztlan now has national distribution (including Puerto Rico) and has penetrated a growing number of major music-store chains. "*Rock en español* is finally being recognized on the national level, and we've taken our place in it as a legitimate, recognized name," says label head and cofounder **Jon Melrod**.

Though overall *rock en español* record sales in the United States are still not nearly as high as they are in Latin America, 75 radio stations nationwide have made room for *rock en español* programming, and attendance at multiartist live shows in cities such as Miami and Los Angeles is estimated to be higher than ever before. New and forthcoming releases from enormously popular Mexico City bands like **Maldita Vecindad** and **Cafe Tacuba** will also help keep domestic ears tuned to new *rock en español* developments.

Aztlan is still the only U.S.-bred label devoted exclusively to *rock en español*. With the overwhelming response and financial success of its first two albums as incentive — **Ley de Hielo's** *Señor Cementerio* and **Maria Fatal's** self-titled debut — Aztlan has just released the debut from East Bay favorites **Orixa** (see Grooves, page 56) and signed young Los Angeles newcomers **Pastilla**. "We know what we're doing for the next six months and it's exciting," Melrod affirms. "We're going from Orixa to Pastilla to a live recording of Rock Aztlan."

A sort of mini *rock en español* Lollapalooza, Rock Aztlan is scheduled for Aug. 8 at Leonardo's in Los Angeles and will feature performances by Ley de Hielo, Maria Fatal, Pastilla, Orixa, **Lodo y Asfalto**, and **Motita**. According to Melrod, "It will be the first gathering of major U.S. *rock en español* bands on the same stage. It's a very historic event."

In the meantime, Aztlan is looking to expand its roster (especially to include bands from outside of California), and the major labels continue to sit back and watch to see what develops. "Our sales now can justify and support a continuing growth of the label," Melrod says with a confidence he lacked this time last year. "The number of people that support the genre is sufficient to support the survival of an indie label."

DATEBOOK

LIVELY ARTS/NIGHTLIFE

Aztlan's Aiming For the Gold

Nestled behind San Francisco's Bayshore Car Wash, overlooking the Balazito Taco Stand, are the tiny offices of the rock en espanol label Aztlan Records. Started in 1995 by former immigration attorney **Jon Melrod**, the company has amassed an impressive catalog of Latino compilations and U.S.-based Spanish-language rock bands.

"It's a labor of love," says Melrod. "It's been a slow, steady process of building — a grassroots effort. It's been tough, but rewarding."

While there are no gold records on the walls yet, Aztlan is certainly headed in the right direction. That was obvious at a recent Fillmore Auditorium show by Argentina's **Los Fabulosos Cadillacs**, where Aztlan's latest discovery, Los Angeles' **Yeska**, played a great set as the opening act.

The group will launch its label debut, "Skafr Cuban jazz," Saturday at Slim's, along with Northern California Latino ska bands **Monkey**, **Caradura** and **Firme**. For Melrod, Yeska has the magic, potential and spark he wants to expose.

"They're young guys who are tremendous players, polished musicians who believe 100 percent in their music and talent. They are steering away from the retro ideas and the ska-core that everybody is talking about. They've taken unique world music — ska, Cuban, jazz — and fused it into something different. And that's what we're all about."

— Chuy Varela