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Nosotros, from left: Manuel Ramirez, Dennis Jasso, Carlos Fontana, Randy Sanchez, Felipe Ruibal, Shane Derk, and Gilbert Uribe.

The Power of We

Nosotros celebrates 20 years of making NM dance, through good times and bad.

FAMILIA, AMOR, LA LUCHA.

That's what Nosotros is about, band members and their community of fans agree: *family, love, the good fight*. The themes are woven into the Spanish lyrics of the band's songs, riding the driving horn sections and imbuing the intoxicating dance-step rhythms with meaning. They reflect *la vida* of the band itself, a 20-year saga that spans five studio albums and nearly a thousand gigs along their way to becoming one of the most prominent musical acts in the state.

Although their story contains enough *lucha* to compel most bands to give up, Nosotros' devotion to their music, one another, and their audience has seen them through—a fitting show of unity for a band whose name, in Spanish, means “we” or “us.”

In an age when music careers are

launched from laptops, the band's origin story has a vintage vibe: In 1994, just out of college, Randy Sanchez started jamming with a guy he knew from a local music store in Las Cruces, Jeff Watkins. The duo became a trio, with John Lucero, and came out with their first album, *Palomo* (1996). It received good reviews and sold well.

Just as the band began to earn recognition, however, Watkins passed away. (It was a “Robin Williams thing,” Sanchez says, a shadow settling over his features.) In the days after Watkins' demise, Sanchez had a decision to make: let the tragedy pull the band under, or keep his friend's musical legacy alive. He chose to persevere.

“I didn't want life to hold us back,” he says.

The group added Shane Derk on guitar and Felipe Ruibal, whose lead vocals

marked the band's first large sonic shift. The sound grew again when Nosotros joined forces with another Las Cruces band, folding in David Diaz on vocals and sax, and Dennis Jasso on drums.

It was a winning combination: For their third, self-titled album, the group took home album of the year from the New Mexico Music Awards. It was the first of seven NMMA awards they've received to date, in a field crowded with acts like Son Como Son, Manzanares, and Sol Fire.

“Nosotros has been the leader in Latin music over the last 20 years,” says Jose Antonio Ponce, producer of the NMMA's. That the band has been able to establish itself globally, he says, “speaks highly of their artistic ability and technical talent.”

Nosotros draws from nearly every realm of Latin music—and, beyond, from rock

and jazz—but Ponce hears in their music the distinctly regional undertones of plaintive *cantos* and boisterous *norteño*, genres popular in New Mexico and northern Mexico.

Sanchez agrees. “Norteño and cantos were blaring out of car stereos and at parties we went to when we were growing up, even in Las Cruces, although those sounds are more associated with northern New Mexico,” he says. “Those sounds are part of who we are and what we do.”

From southern New Mexico roots, Nosotros grew to reflect a larger swath of the I-25 corridor when the members migrated in 2000 to Albuquerque. There they grew closer by living and playing together, forming bonds that were put to the test in 2009, when they lost a second band member, David Diaz, who died due to illness.

Once again, the band decided it had no choice but to push through. “This is our business. We had a full schedule of shows, and we can’t really stop—we’ve worked for so long, it would have been a waste—so we just roll with the punches,” says Sanchez. “I can’t say in 20 years that I haven’t questioned what I’m doing, but when positive

shows come, we use that light to stoke us and keep us going.”

That work ethic is apparent in the band’s schedule: Nosotros plays a steady two gigs a week, three during the summer. They’re a draw at dance clubs and on the festival circuit, attracting a wide range of fans, from twenty-something women in little black dresses to middle-aged construction workers. That broad popularity earned Nosotros the headliner spot at the burning of Zozobra in 2013 and 2014, where attendees danced away their gloom to the band’s salsa, bachata, merengue, and rumba. When the group played the Santa Fe Bandstand summer concert series, a record crowd packed the Plaza. In recent years, Nosotros have appeared at the Telluride Jazz Festival and the San Jose Jazz Summerfest—events that welcomed the band’s improvisational sound, though it’s hardly traditional jazz.

Today, Nosotros is grooving to its boldest sound yet, thanks to a diverse eight-man lineup. Sanchez is the only original member, followed in seniority by Derk and Jasso. Carlos Fontana, the lead singer, imports the influence of his Costa

Rican roots. Manuel Ramirez is a trained jazz saxophonist. David Weeks plays trumpet, Gilbert Uribe is on bass, and Ricky Carrido rounds out the percussion section. Felipe Ruibal, the former lead singer, joins for occasional gigs. As *familia* goes, it’s a big one.

Nosotros hopes to capture this full-bodied sound on their planned sixth studio album. “We want everyone to feel like he owned the album,” says Jasso. But they don’t just want the band members to be part of the process; they want their fans to join in, too, via the crowdfunding site Indiegogo. “We want [donors] to feel like they are honorary band members,” says Sanchez. “I want this album to be a testament to the people of New Mexico who have helped us—for it to be produced by John Doe in Roswell, who gave \$5.”

The band is building the new record around the song “Aquí y Allá” (“Here and There”), which also appears as a bonus track on their 20th-anniversary CD, XX. Over the past two decades, Nosotros may have been here and there, but it remains a proud reflection of its members. It’s still about *familia*, *amor*, *la lucha*—and a really good dance party. ❖

Felipe Ruibal and Carlos Fontana man the mikes at Santa Fe Bandstand, where Nosotros draws energetic crowds.



NEED TO KNOW

To celebrate their 20th anniversary, Nosotros will play two release shows for their compilation album XX: one in Las Cruces, where the band began, and another in their new northern New Mexico home. They’ll perform songs in chronological order, with former members joining them on stage.

In Las Cruces, see the show at the Rio Grande Theatre on Saturday, November 29, at 7:30 p.m. (575-523-6403; riograndetheatre.com). In Santa Fe, catch them at Santa Fe Sol on Saturday, December 6, at 8 p.m. (505) 474-7322; solofsantafe.com

Nosotros also plays most Fridays at 9 p.m. at Thunder Road Steakhouse & Cantina, at Route 66 Casino Hotel, west of Albuquerque (505-352-7866; rt66casino.com). They will also be on stage in Santa Fe on Friday, November 21, at 9 p.m. at Evangelo’s (on Facebook). For more information about the band, visit nosotrosmusic.net.