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THE YEAR'S BEST: RECORDINGS

Latin

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Special to the Tribune

Published December 12, 2004

Aside from the intriguing electronic pop of **Ana Laan**, the year in Latin music was marked by the absence of any exciting new voices. Fortunately, a number of artists with a proven track record released provocative new albums, from Argentina's Babasonicos to Colombia's Carlos Vives and Mexico's Ely Guerra. 2004 also saw a number of artists defeating the sophomore jinx by releasing excellent follow-ups to their debut recordings: Vicentico, Bebel Gilberto and the Spanish Harlem Orchestra.

1. Babasonicos, "Infame" (EMI Latin) The Argentine sextet had already demonstrated it was one of Latin rock's most visionary outfits with 2001's groundbreaking Jessico. Few, however, could have expected a follow-up as gorgeous and subversive as this one -- a darkly humorous cross between the glam-rock of Roxy Music and the greasy melodrama of retro Latin popsters such as Sandro and Jose Jose. "Infame" is not only the best Latin album of the year. It is also a defining moment in the history of the rock en espanol movement.
2. Bebel Gilberto, "Bebel Gilberto" (Six Degrees) What's the original electro-bossa diva to do when the market has been literally flooded by wispy-voiced singers who borrow liberally from her seminal 2000 debut Tanto Tempo? Gilberto's solution was brilliant: She kept the electronica element to the minimum, focused on her considerable songwriting skills and recorded a sumptuous collection of acoustic bossa novas, proving once and for all that she's here to stay. A highlight? The majestic string section that brings "Simplesmente" to its haunting finale.
3. Los Amigos Invisibles, "The Venezuelan Zinga Son Vol. 1" (Luaka Bop) The most criminally misunderstood Latin album of the year is a lounge addict's delight, a collection of slow-motion bossas and lecherous salsa jams that finds the Venezuelan sextet revamping its party-friendly sound through an austere sheen of ambient aesthetics and the production savvy of Masters At Work. The resulting album is ethereal and funky at the same time, gleefully superficial yet deeply nostalgic.

4. Ana Laan, "Oregano" (Liquid Records) The debut album by this intriguing singer from Spain went by unnoticed in this country. A pity, because Laan's sultry electronic pop could very much turn her into the Hispanic version of Bjork. The title track, a bittersweet vignette describing the quiet frustration of a housewife on the verge of a nervous breakdown, is probably the most poignant Latin song of the year.

5. Carlos Vives, "El Rock De Mi Pueblo" (EMI Latin) Vives hadn't released a fully satisfying collection of new songs since 1999's *El Amor De Mi Tierra*, which makes this buoyant return to form particularly welcome. The Colombian singer's recipe of accordion-heavy, vallenato-tinged rock remains pretty much the same, although subtle touches of electronica add depth to trademark Vives anthems such as the impossibly moody "Que Tiene La Noche."

6. Ely Guerra, "Sweet & Sour, Hot y Spicy" (Higher Octave) Now that Julieta Venegas has gone pop, fellow Mexican Ely Guerra is the only Latin rock chanteuse left. A good thing, then, that she released this sprawling collection celebrating the pleasures of eros, the feminine spirit and fuzzy electric guitars. Forget the silly album title and concentrate instead on Guerra's ragged vocals and hopeless romanticism. The original two-disc version is available as an abridged single CD in the U.S.

7. Omara Portuondo, "Flor de Amor" (Nonesuch) A slap in the face of those who insist that the Buena Vista Social Club franchise has run its course, Portuondo's second album backed by some of the collective's star instrumentalists is elegant and restrained. Lush female choruses, simmering percussion and old-fashioned strings provide a richly textured accompaniment to the veteran's smoky voice.

8. Spanish Harlem Orchestra, "Across 110th Street" (Red Ink) The fact that the second album by this salsa revival outfit from New York would be relentlessly danceable was pretty much a given. But the orchestra gains extra points for inviting Ruben Blades to sing on a handful of tracks, bringing the Panamanian singer back to the genre that fits him best. Check out the hilarious (and unapologetically racy) closing track "Tu Te Lo Pee Pee." An exhilarating experience for salsa nostalgics and newcomers alike.

9. Oscar D'Leon, "Asi Soy ..." (Sony Discos) Venezuelan salsa singer Oscar D'Leon has spent the last decade trying to make a studio album that would emulate the Afro-Caribbean bravado of his seminal '80s output. He finally got it right. From the self-penned opener "Jibarito Enamorado" and its luxurious touches of Cuban charanga to the smoldering bolero "Punto Final," this is as good a representation of D'Leon's protean vocal talents as his legendary live shows.

10. Vicentico, "Los Rayos" (BMG Latin) The second solo album by the former lead vocalist with rock en español supergroup Fabulosos Cadillacs is a gentle, unassuming affair -- the kind of all-encompassing record that can be enjoyed equally by listeners of all ages and cultures. Vicentico's take on mainstream pop

is sunny and flavorful, drawing from cumbia, sentimental balladry and lilting Afro beats. If only other, more massively successful Latin crooners would pay notice.

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