

YERBA BUENA

ISLAND LIFE

The brainchild of acclaimed producer Andres Levin, New York's Latin-funk collective Yerba Buena came together as an outgrowth of Levin's extensive discography, including work as principal producer of the Red Hot Organization's applauded *Red Hot + Riot* album (year-end TOP-10 in *Rolling Stone*, *TIME* & *The New York Times*). That intense critical praise was just as instant and far-reaching with Yerba Buena's 2003 Grammy nominated debut album *President Alien*. The group's super-infectious live-band party feel totally changed everyone's idea of new Latin groove with a mind-bendingly original, Afro-Cuban/Afrobeat/hiphop attack.

Even with all the high praise for the first album's innovative sound, Levin and group cofounder Ilena Padron (aka CuCu Diamnates) were not satisfied with playing it safe and serving up more of the same. With its 13 contagious new tracks, Yerba Buena's new concept album *Island Life* is an ambitious urban-tropical synthesis that won't let you stop dancing. *"I always want the Yerba Buena sound to be evolving,"* said Levin, a/k/a Dre taking a break from the mixing board at his "Fun Machine" studio. *"Yerba Buena will always be about Afro-Cuban roots, but this record has more gypsy and cumbia influences – sounds I've heard around the world and that I'm now hearing across New York as well. I think the confluence of different immigrant music in New York is a great avenue for pop culture to explore."*

Since Yerba Buena has always channeled the spirit of tropical island rhythms with the energy of New York, it's fitting that the new album is titled *Island Life*. *"I always thought it was funny when I would hear people in New York say that they need to 'get away to an island' – forgetting that they were already living on one,"* explains Levin. *"With Manhattan's growing Spanglish soul, the island music is right here on our own streets – whether it's meringue, reggaeton or even steel drums. Island Life is a state of mind, and a way to express my love affair with New York City."*

Just as Yerba Buena's acclaimed live shows are known as a place where a wealth of eclectic special guests often join in, it seemed natural to continue that spirit on *Island Life*. *"To me, Yerba Buena is like a caravan, and I conceived this record as a sort of stage revue or film soundtrack to the urban travels of that caravan- with many cameo appearances from special musicians we find along the way."*

This staggeringly diverse lineup of guests include John Leguizamo, El Cigala, Les Nubians, Fulanito, Orishas, Joe Bataan, M1 of Dead Prez, Peret & Ile Aye, Gogol Bordello, Rosie DePalma & more. Whether musically, or vocally, each guest is a character actor bringing something fresh to the Yerba Buena production, like comedian John Leguizamo as the "Sugar Daddy" without a walletful of cash, vibing with Les Nubians and a sample of the late, great Celia Cruz. Between-tracks interludes feature guest narrators like actor Ajay Naidu, as Dr. Aneub Abrey (Yerba Buena spelled

backwards), dispensing advice on how to cope with day-to-day island life in Manhattan. The presence of the awe-inspiring flamenco singer Diego El Cigala, the legendary gypsy rumba vocalist Peret, and Pedro Almodóvar fixture Rosi De Palma, gives some tracks a decidedly flamenco-fusion feel. But Levin also keeps the progressive urban flavor out front by showcasing rappers M1 of Dead Prez, Fulanito, and Orishas, as well as Spanish Harlem boogaloo pioneer Joe Bataan.

As impressive as the array of guests is on *Island Life*, they always seem to perfectly compliment the core members of Yerba Buena. Vocalists CuCu Diamantes, Xiomara Laugart, El Chino and percussionist/vocalist Pedrito Martinez engage in solos and harmonies even more ecstatic than *President Alien's* and a large part of the joy of this album is reveling in the uncommon texture of their singing. This is sublimely supported by the foundation laid down by bassist Sebastian Steinberg and drummers Terreon Gully and Skoota Warner, as well as the distinctive Yerba Buena horns courtesy of Ron Blake, Rashawn Ross and Brian Lynch. The lineup that made *President Alien* swing so hard will leave dancers in need of oxygen this time out.

As much as Yerba Buena makes your body pop and swing though, the group's songs stand up on their own as elegant word games and melodic mini-masterpieces. "El Burrito," which appears in two versions, the standard one and the Peret/Ile Aye reprise, is a gypsy cumbia parable about the drama and karma of life. "Bilingual Girl" is a boogaloo which trades on the sexually suggestive double meaning of pursuing multilingual ladies... 'cause two tongues are better than one". "Candela" uses an Afro-Cuban bassline so funky it would have kept Sly Stone awake at night while Yerba Buena's singers seamlessly flow with Orishas in paying tribute to the progressive Cuban fusion masters Los Van Van. "La Vida La Life" tells it to you straight: life is not black and white and don't confuse love with hypocrisy. "Te Estoy Amando" is a rare cover of an ancient hit by the almost-forgotten flamenco-pop duo Las Grecas, while "Bellydancer" is a song that brings to life the spirit of a gypsy meringue celebration. Even our president, George W., makes an appearance talking about rumors he's seen "on the Internets" on the satirical "Bla Bla Bla," a song that also skewers label record execs and anyone else who just "talks to much shit".

Even though Yerba Buena is going in so many exciting and progressive directions on *Island Life*, its basic mission remains the same. This is a band that holds on to whatever brings you closer to the heart, what lets your passion fly, whether you're crazy in love, or just plain possessed on the dance floor. They are Latin-fusion ambassadors whose hip-shaking desires want to play Afrobeat one moment, cumbia another, with hip-hop to follow, and throwing down a Yoruban chant or two. Finding that music throughout their island of Manhattan, *Island Life* gets into your blood and won't let you go. Put simply, the album is about Levin and the members of Yerba Buena living and breathing the immigrant music scene of New York, and sharing as Dre puts it, "*a multicultural soundtrack for Urbanistic Island Living.*"