

SAN ANTONIO CURRENT | 1/27/2010

Print

Music

The grateful dead

If Tejano is finished why are these Grammy-nominated San Antonians still around?

by Enrique Lopetegui



William Lee

Sunny Saucedo (right) already has two Grammy awards, but singer Stefani Montiel and producer Gabriel Zavala want one of their own. This Sunday, one of them might get it.

Say what you want about the Grammys but, as Joe Posada, one of this year's nominees in the Best Tejano Album category, can attest, when Grammy time comes, even skeptics care.

"For Tejano musicians, [the Grammy] really hasn't helped anybody," Posada, who is nominated for *Point of View*, tells me in a phone interview. "Selena won the Grammy and then she got shot, so we'll never know what would have happened with her. But everybody else who won Grammys are still there, *sufriendo en la onda* [suffering in the [Tejano] wave]. At the same time, it's an honor because it's a recognition from your peers, so, as of today, I'll be there."

Sunny Saucedo, nominated this year for *Radiación Musical*, arrives for the *Current's* photo session carrying the two gramophone statuettes (a Grammy and a Latin Grammy) he already won for the great *Polkas, Gritos y Acordeones*, an album he released in 2004 with Joel Guzmán and David Lee Garza.

"You only have two Grammys because I submitted your product for consideration!" fellow nominee Stefani Montiel teases.

Saucedo smiles and proceeds to kiss and hug his friend and colleague.

Posada, Montiel, Saucedo, and fellow nominees Los Texmaniacs and Jay Pérez are among the lucky handful who can maintain a career in the Tejano music business — a business that's dead on paper, but with a loyal (and, seemingly, underground) fan base that refuses to let the genre die.

"If it wasn't for [the support of loyal fans,] we couldn't go on," says Montiel, who could take home a Grammy on Sunday for her *Divina*. "For that, we're very grateful."

For Montiel, this nomination marks the glorious end of an incredibly trying year. A win would be the cherry on the sundae.

"It is a much more personal album for the both of us," she says of *Divina*, produced by long-time creative and life partner Gabriel Zavala. "It was four years working on it, and we went through a lot of trials, sickness, and problems that caused us not to release the record for some time. When we were ready, we decided to finish it and make it as personal as possible."

Between June 2008 and December 2009, Montiel spent most of her energy caring for Zavala, who had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. He recovered, but the return to a normal life wasn't easy and, for a few months, they didn't know what would happen to their relationship.

“I’m pretty sure we’re going to continue working together,” Montiel says. “We go through these things that life brings us for a reason. But we’ve been together for 15 years, we have two kids, and we go through hardships just like any couple. We’ve been working on things together and, regardless of what happens to us, we’ll always have a special tie. We care too much about each other and each other’s music.”

Nine of the 13 songs on *Divina* are originals, but the standout track, hands-down, is the dynamite ranchera-with-a-beat “La misma moneda” (“The Same Coin”), arguably the best vocal performance of Montiel’s career. (I don’t know if it qualifies as Song of the Year for the next Latin Grammys, but change the damn laws if you have to).

The best moments in Montiel’s album are symbolic of a growing trend in the genre: a return to the roots.

“[*Divina*] has definitely a lot more Tejano in it, more rancheras, and a little bit of conjunto,” says Montiel, who is known primarily for her pop-flavored cumbias. “We decided to go back and bring that old-school Tejano back.”

Sauceda performs in the same vein, but he went all the way: His most recent album is the all-conjunto gem *Homenaje a mi padre* (*Homage to my father*), written mostly by his dad, Mariano Alberto Saucedo Jr. It includes an accordion-based version of Piero’s classic “Mi viejo” (“My old man”).

After the photo session is over and everyone gone, Saucedo comes back to pick up the gloves he forgot (he plays accordion with gloves on), and we end up talking conjunto and drooling over our children like first-time fathers do (we became fathers a month apart).

“It must be nice to record an album for your dad while he’s still alive, become a dad yourself, and have a good chance to win your third Grammy, all at the same time,” I tell him.

“Oh, man...,” is all Saucedo, his face shining with pride, can say. “Yeah ...”

Then he leaves, two Grammys in a box, and two feet in the air. •

The 52nd annual Grammy Awards will be held on Sunday, January 31, at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. You can watch it on CBS at 7 p.m., or follow it on grammy.com, cbs.com, and youtube.com.

The Nominees



Los Texmaniacs' Borders y bailes **(Smithsonian Folkways Recordings)**

“It was about time,” said Texmaniacs’ bajo-sexto player Max Baca. This near-perfect conjunto album was snubbed by both the Tejano Music Awards and the Latin Grammys. “I don’t know why, but the Grammy seems to be more accurate than the Latin Grammy. Whatever the case, we’re thrilled.”



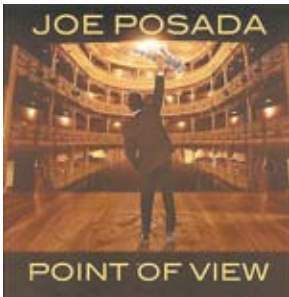
Stefani Montiel's Divina **(Ro Records/World Records)**

Less glossy and cumbia-pop-oriented than usual, this is Stefani at her best. Key track: “La misma moneda.” In a just world with Tejano radio stations in it, it’d be a mega-hit.



Jay Pérez's All The Way Live (Tejas Records)

Recorded at the 2008 Tejano Convention in Dallas. Yeah, I know, it's not fair to nominate a live album, right? But when you have the best pipes in Tejano, you can get away with murder.



Joe Posada's Point Of View (Baby Dude Records)

The saxman earned his fifth straight nomination with this “progressive Tejano” collection, which includes seven originals.



Sunny Saucedo y Todo Eso's Radiación Musical (Tejas Records)

C'mon, Sunny, are you kidding me? “Musical radiation”? Despite its title, the album's best moments use new elements for him (sax, keyboards, and Americana), old elements (his rapid-fire accordion solos), and Saucedo is closer than ever to finding his voice as a solo singer.