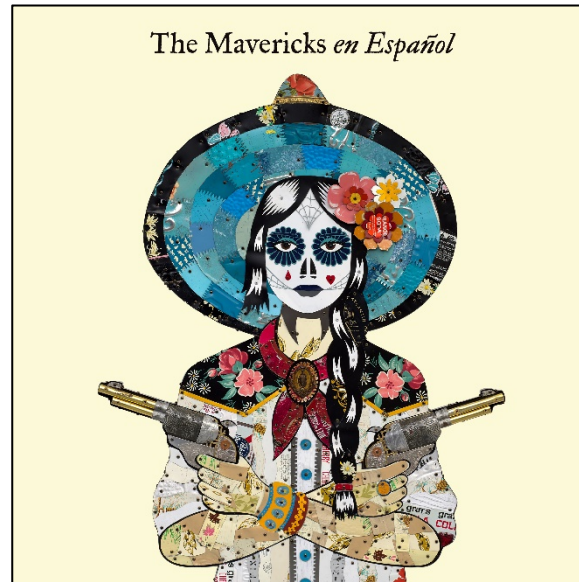


The Mavericks “*En Español*”

By Agustín Gurza



Any band that manages to survive three decades, seeing its core members go from young adults to music veterans, is bound to have its swings and cycles.

The Mavericks, the eclectic rock and country group known for crisscrossing musical boundaries with abandon, has gone through three distinct phases since it was founded in Miami in 1989. An initial period of heady success marked by big hits and critical acclaim in the '90s. A long hiatus starting 2003 when the musicians each went their own way. And finally, a triumphant reunion in 2012 which held long enough for them to recently celebrate the band's 30th anniversary.

Now, The Mavericks are releasing a new album that ushers in the fourth phase of their evolution.

“It's like we've had three different lives,” says Raul Malo, the band's lead singer and songwriter, “and now this is a whole new beginning. We're sort of going into uncharted territory. I'm looking forward to it and I'm kind of nervous about it too. It's certainly a new adventure.”

On August 21, The Mavericks officially launch that adventure with the debut of their first-ever, all-Spanish album, released on the band's own Mono Mundo label. Entitled simply *En Español*, it is produced by Malo and the band's long-time collaborator Niko Bolas (*Neil Young, Prince, Sheryl Crow*). The line-up includes Malo's fellow Miamian and charter bandmember, Paul Deakin on drums and vibraphone, as well as veteran Jerry Dale McFadden, who joined in 1993. Eddie Perez, a Mexican American guitarist from Los Angeles, is the band's youngest and newest member, becoming a Maverick in 2003.

The band readily embraced the all-Latin concept, as a team. “It's a communal project in many ways,” says Malo, “even though I'm leading the charge.”

Although all 12 tracks are in Spanish, as the title suggests, the collection represents a diversity of musical styles and cultural traditions, from tender boleros to brassy mariachi to reimagined Afro-Cuban classics. Seven of the tunes are familiar gems drawn from the vast Latin American songbook, while five are originals written or co-written by Malo.

Like the band's entire body of music, this one album cannot be boxed into a single category. The songs are as diverse as Latin America itself, and as cohesive as the ideal of the American melting pot. To

season this rich musical *paella*, The Mavericks add their signature country/rock/Tex-Mex flavors and a refreshing spontaneity to the mix.

En Español flips the band's usual fusion formula, which adds a striking assortment of genres – salsa, ska, norteño, mariachi, and much more – to its sturdy rock/country base. Now, the foundation is solidly Latin with streaks of irreverent rock and twangy guitars running through it, all branded with the unmistakable Mavericks style.

“This album, to me, celebrates all those cultures that are so beautiful and so vibrant,” says Malo, who was part of the diverse ensemble known as Los Super Seven in the early 2000s. “I'm proud of this record for that. I think it's a very inclusive record. Because this story is not just my story, it's the story of a lot of Latinos.”

The idea for an album consisting entirely of Latin music has been percolating in Malo's mind for several years. The concept crystalized toward the end of the band's extended separation, during which Malo was performing and making albums as a solo artist. But even when he was on his own, he never conceived of recording an all-Spanish album without his band.

“I was doing this solo stuff and I thought, ‘If The Mavericks ever get back together, I would love to do this project with them. I think The Mavericks would make a great album in Spanish.’ “

In 2012, the band finally did get back together, and started touring and recording as a group again. In 2019, they celebrated their 30th anniversary with a successful tour that was unfortunately interrupted earlier this year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

While the tour was suspended, work on the new album continued.

The inspiration for this labor of love is rooted in the immigrant experience of the band's founder. He was christened Raúl Francisco Martínez-Malo Jr., the son of Cuban exiles who was born and raised in the stimulating immigrant environment of Miami's Little Havana.

His parents, Raul Sr. and Norma, both came to the United States in the early 60s, fleeing Fidel Castro's communist revolution. They met after arriving in Miami, got married and bought a home in the shadow of the old Orange Bowl, west of downtown. The hub of the growing clan was the abode of Malo's maternal grandfather, who himself had immigrated from Spain to Cuba, later bringing his family to Florida.

As Malo entered adolescence in the 1970s, the Latin music industry was flourishing in the United States. Pop and folk music from many countries flooded Latin communities. Recordings from many countries were distributed domestically by major labels, sold in neighborhood *discotecas*, and broadcast on television and radio via a booming network of Spanish-language media.

Malo's musical milieu was a mind-expanding cultural mashup. At home, there was a family piano to play at family gatherings, and his grandfather regaled guests with his “beautiful baritone,” Malo recalls. And there was a stream of music always in the air. Songs by Cuba's venerable Omara Portuondo, Mexico's romantic Trio Los Panchos, and brash mariachi superstar Vicente Fernandez. But his father also loved Johnny Cash and Patsy Cline, while his mother exposed him to the refined art of opera and classical music.

The budding musician soaked in the sounds, unlike many first-generation teenagers who reject their parents' music as corny or old-fashioned.

“I was never one of those kids who were like, ‘Ah, I hate that music,’” says Malo. “I liked it all, and I would take it all in. To me, it was just part of the vocabulary, part of the DNA.”

With a lifetime of music to choose from, picking songs for the new album could have posed an overwhelming task. But for Malo, it felt like a natural selection.

“To me, the criterion really was pretty simple,” he says. “The songs all mean something to me, personally. You’ve got to remember too, I’m not only thinking about what I want to sing and what I think I’d sound good singing. I also have to consider what would sound good with The Mavericks. Because we’re a pretty versatile band, but let’s face it, we’re not a salsa band, and we’re not pretending to be mariachis either. Those are entirely different things.”

Among the first songs Malo selected was the introspective ballad “Me Olvidé de Vivir” (I Forgot to Live), originally written in French and popularized in 1978 by Spanish crooner Julio Iglesias, one of the biggest stars of all time in Latin pop music. The tune – about a singer’s regret for lost time in the manic quest for fame – was a favorite of Malo’s beloved grandfather.

As fans might expect, The Mavericks did not record straight-up covers of golden oldies. The songs may be sung in Spanish, but the musical language is all Mavericks.

“We had to tailor the arrangements to what The Mavericks do,” says Malo. “That was the trick, finding the balance of playing these beautiful songs without trying to imitate familiar renditions. I think that’s the best way to pay tribute to the music that we love – by doing it our way.”

Asked to explain what “our way” actually means, the normally articulate bandleader grasps for insight into his own creative process.

“Man, I wish that I could put a method into words, like that was on purpose,” he says. “I can’t say that it was. Sometimes I roll a joint and I mess with the sounds, I get the right guitar and sometimes an arrangement comes out, or sometimes a whole song. But sometimes nothing comes out. So it’s not as methodical as you might think. If it sounds good, I go with it. “I’ve learned to trust myself a little bit.” In composing the five new tracks, Malo trusted his instincts, both as songwriter and as a Maverick.

“I think I had one of them written,” he says, “and then the others, I just thought it would be fun to see what I could come up with, what I could write, and just give it a shot. After all, if you’re a songwriter, you’re a songwriter. Musically, if you really listen to them, it’s not that different from what The Mavericks do normally. It really isn’t.”

“Poder Vivir,” the first original song in the sequence, at first blush appears to be a simple song about lost love. The two-word title suggests much more.

“I had this phrase and melody that just kept playing in my head,” says Malo about how he wrote the song. “I wasn’t quite sure what it meant exactly, or what I was going to say, but somehow it felt right to start the song with those words... After many conversations and late nights out on the road, the song kind of wrote itself. We wanted it to be conversational and simple in the end, and that’s what we got.”

That, and a killer final verse that makes the song what Malo intended it to be: “a bit philosophical and wise”:

*A veces la vida nos hace pensar
Que el mundo no cambia sino para mal
Son solo momentos, también pasarán
En fin, ni la muerte nos marca un final*

Writing the lovely “Recuerdos” – about the ethereal memories left after love ends – came faster and easier.

“This one was a lot of fun to write,” Malo recalls. “We were under the gun a little bit, trying to finish the record. We were going into the studio on a Sunday. We got home from our show at the Ryman on Saturday night, and we had to be at the studio by noon. Alejandro met me at my house at 9:00 AM. I had coffee ready. I had a groove. I had a melody. And by 12:30, the Mavericks were recording this song at the legendary Blackbird Studios...”

Regardless of the songwriting process—quick or labored, solo or collaborative—the resulting five new numbers (including “*Mujer*,” “*Pensando en Ti*,” and “*Suspiro Azul*.”) clearly meet the high bar of blending seamlessly with the established standards.

This is not the first time Malo has written his own songs in Spanish. He included four Castilian compositions on “Today,” his 2001 debut solo album. But he’s still honing his bilingual craft.

For the new album, he listened to old boleros and closely studied his ancestors’ mother tongue, known as the language of love. He also enlisted the help of longtime collaborator and fellow Cuban Alejandro Menéndez Vega, the Mavericks’ director and videographer who’s also a writer and poet.

“I would try writing by myself, but I didn’t want to use just common language,” says Malo. “I wanted to work with someone who has a real clear command of the language.”

On this album, Malo joins the rarefied ranks of the esteemed Spanish-language composers of seven timeless tracks. Of these widely known standards, two are from Cuba, two from Mexico, and one each from Argentina, Italy, and France via Spain. Several have been recorded dozens of times, but Malo used as reference the versions with which he was most familiar.

For example, “Sombras Nada Más” was originally an Argentine tango about a desperate lover who threatens to slice his veins slowly and bleed out to prove his love to the woman who spurns him. The song was a huge smash in 1967 by Mexican mariachi star Javier Solís, but Malo was enamored of the lesser known version by elegant Spanish singer Rocío Durocal.

The romantic bolero “Sabor a Mí,” one of the two Mexican songs on the album, is another international smash with multiple renditions recorded over the years. Malo was most attuned to the hit version by U.S. pop singer Eydie Gormé with Mexico’s Trio Los Panchos. The other Mexican tune, “No Vale la Pena,” is a much lighter take on ending a relationship by flatly telling your ungrateful partner, as the title says, “it’s not worth it.” The song was written by Juan Gabriel, another beloved star who Malo considers “one of my favorites.” The Maverick’s mariachi-flavored rendition features guest artist Flaco Jimenez, San Antonio’s world-renowned accordion player.

The two Cuban numbers – “La Sitiera” and “Me Voy a Pinar del Río” – open and close the album like tropical bookends. But it almost didn’t happen that way.

“La Sitiera,” now the album’s featured track, almost didn’t make the cut. An early version was recorded on the band’s first day in the studio, but the results were disappointing.

“That one didn’t hold up,” recalls Malo, with some lingering frustration. “Shoot, we had played it live and it just rocked. But that first recording was not even close. So it just sat forever in the junk pile.”

Later, with some spare studio time near the end of recording, the song was resuscitated, and it jumped back to life with a jolt.

“I knew that once we had that new version, it was going to make the record. It just sounded right, and you can feel it in the studio. Then we added the strings, ... and I said, “Guys, this has to open the record.”

“La Sitiera” is a traditional guajira, or Cuban country song, that has been recorded by top performers, including Omara Portuondo and Celia Cruz. But its sweet melody, longing lyrics, and gentle rhythms are entirely revolutionized by The Mavericks. The track opens with Malo’s twangy Fender guitar, with delay pedal and reverb, adding an eerie undertone. The number then moves into a lush passage with horns and strings, culminating in a thunderous crescendo evoking Phil Spector’s “wall of sound.”

"We have a million versions of that song that have been done the traditional way," says Malo. "But these are The Mavericks. I know my guys and I know what they can play, and when the band jams, it's a special thing. So I thought, let's arrange this so that it showcases, not only the song, but also this arrangement that lets the band do what it does best."

The closing track, “Me Voy a Pinar del Río,” is a paean to the natural beauty of Cuba’s western-most province, relatively untouched by tourism. In tone and topic, it is polar opposite from the opening. This track is joyful, irresistible and danceable.

The song is played in a much more straightforward fashion, but it also went through a surprise twist in the studio. For the song’s guitar solo, the usual Cuban tres was replaced by the charango, a small Andean guitar almost never used in Cuban music. The instrumental switch happened by serendipity.

Malo, without The Mavericks, was experimenting in the studio one day with members of a new Cuban rock band, Sweet Lizzy Project, whom he had met while filming the 2017 PBS special, “Havana Time Machine.” Malo later brought the Cuban band to Nashville, recruiting lead singer Lissett Diaz as co-writer and background singer on the new album. On that day at Nashville’s Blackbird Studios, Malo was strumming on the charango while encouraging Sweet Lizzie to join in on an early take of what would become the album’s closing track.

When it came time for the guitar solo, Malo invited the band’s producer and lead guitarist, Miguel Comas, to take a crack at it. But the first take didn’t take. “He was playing a guitar solo and I was like, ‘Dude, that sounds like Eric Clapton. That’s not what we need.’”

So Malo handed the little charango to the long-haired Cuban rocker, who immediately protested, in Spanish, that he had never played the instrument before. But Malo persisted, and it paid off. The spontaneous Sweet Lizzy performance can be heard on the finished track, perhaps the world’s first Cuban charango solo on record.

It’s no coincidence that the album ends with this positive note about going home to Pinar del Río, where Malo’s father is from.

“It’s part of the journey and the longing to be there,” says Malo of his parents’ island homeland. “It’s the longing for that beautiful forbidden fruit which we have gone without for half a century, due to politics. It’s a way to view this journey, which would be a fun one, if we all went on it together someday.”

