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Hope floats at SXSW festival

Buzz-worthy indie acts have the success of Norah Jones and Los Lonely Boys humming in the background.

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Special to The Times

AUSTIN, Texas — The annual South by Southwest Music Conference here has carved out a reputation as spring training for the music industry — a great place to glimpse future stars and spot new trends. But it also has a knack for repeating itself.

This year's 19th annual event — rolling out today through Sunday — could be a flashback to SXSW festivals past in more ways than its heavy dose of hang-over-curing breakfast tacos.

Two of the conference's biggest success stories of recent years, Los Lonely Boys and Norah Jones, figure into the buzz accompanying some of the acts playing this year's conference.

Los Lonely Boys were literally the biggest draw at the conference last year, when their "Heaven" single started peaking on the radio.

They swept the Austin Music

Awards on opening night and drew the largest SXSW crowd ever — around 23,000 — at an outdoor park on closing night. It was "larger than life" for the band, says the Boys' manager, Kevin Womack.

This year, other Latino rock bands are hoping to get their own piece of SXSW heaven, including Austin's flamenco-styled Del Castillo and the harmonizing New Jersey group deSol.

"We've got a lot of [record-label] people coming out to see us, and I'm sure it has something to do with what happened last year," says Alex Ruiz, singer for Del Castillo, which is performing at the same place and on the same night of the week as last year's big Los Lonely Boys gig.

DeSol already has its record deal. Its album is due in May via the pop-rock division of Curb Records.

The release of the band's single, "Karma," was timed to SXSW, and the group won't shy away from any comparisons to Los Lonely Boys during the conference, says their publicist, Randy Alexander.

"They're seven guys of Latino descent raised on Santana and classic rock, so of course there are similarities," Alexander says. "This is a copycat industry, but the difference here is that these guys were already signed" when Los Lonely Boys hit.

Two other Latino rock acts coming to SXSW with a buzz: Columbia's electro-pop sextet Superlito, a best new artist nominee at the Latin Grammys; plus San Francisco's ska-styled party band Los Mocosos, touting

its new deal with reputable indie label Six Degree Records.

Another name already in the SXSW headlights — light and romantic Philadelphia singer-songwriter Amos Lee — will probably be judged on his connection to Jones, who made her coming out in a big way at SXSW in 2002.

Lee, 27, toured with Jones last year, and she and her band performed on his recently released self-titled debut album on Blue Note Records, also Jones' label.

"It's a very similar situation to Norah's record coming out right before SXSW three years ago, and obviously they have several professional connections," says Matt Hanks, publicist for Lee and Jones.

But Hanks believes "there are plenty of other factors" behind Lee's buzz, such as his opening dates on the Bob Dylan-Merle Haggard tour this spring, including five L.A. shows next week at the Pantages.

Another major contender at this year's SXSW, Maine's soulful folkie Ray LaMontagne, could also earn comparisons to Jones for his softly passionate and at times jazzy debut, "Trouble," produced by Ethan Johns.

Other buzz acts performing at this week's SXSW conference:

■ **The Frames:** The moody Irish rock quartet is promoting its new CD, "Burn the Maps," on ANTI/Epitaph.

■ **Sarah Lee Guthrie and Johnny Irion:** This singing couple's charming debut for New West Records was co-produced by the Jayhawks' Gary Louris.

■ **The Kills:** The London duo is gaining momentum off its second album on Rough Trade, an electro-rock effort that's part PJ Harvey and the Pretenders.

■ **The Hold Steady:** The sorrid-sounding band is one of the hottest in New York right now and has a strong sophomore album coming in May on the French Kiss label.