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LIVE MUSIC

Latin-rock band grooves to unique rhythm

Jersey band deSol talks about life on tour and being latino in America

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Halfway through deSol's set at the State Theater Tuesday, lead singer Albie Monterrosa took a moment to address the approximately 300 people in attendance.

"I just want to let you guys know that there's a good energy in the house tonight," he said. "And it's all because of you."

After a loud response from the crowd, the band jumped into a fun and uplifting, rhythmic number that got much of the audience grooving. Halfway through the song, percussionist James Guerrero dropped a rhyme for the crowd while wailing on the congas, gray hair flapping the rhythm of his beats.

Throughout its set, the members of deSol didn't just play, but seemed to have music oozing out of their pores, forcing them and the crowd to dance to the Latin-laced rhythms and melodies. At one point during the show, Monterrosa popped a string on his guitar and didn't notice until a stagehand came out not once, but twice, to replace the guitar. According to the members of deSol, that is the type of energy they want to bring to each show.

"For us it's a party every night," said lead guitarist Rich Soto. "We really leave it all out there. A lot of bands in the '70s used to do that and today it's more somber and melancholy at shows. We don't give a f---, we're happy with what we do."

Soto and his six bandmates are the latest in what has become a fertile market of Hispanic-influenced rock 'n' roll. But what sets the boys from Jersey apart is the family atmosphere of the band. Onstage, Monterrosa refers to Soto and his bandmates as his blood brothers. Soto and Monterrosa even look like brothers, sporting the same long, wavy black hair, and confusing some of the audience members. Not that the guys at deSol would have it any different.

"It truly is a family," Monterrosa said. "Ever since we started, we wanted to be a true band like The Beatles, no hired guys. Guys like The Beatles and the [Rolling] Stones, they started from nothing and formed a band and became brothers."

The seven "blood brothers" hail mostly from Asbury Park, N.J., save for keyboardist Andy Letke, who is from Indiana. According to Monterrosa, the group came together thanks to a "greater hand and seven guys who all wanted the same thing." The goal to create a band and a shared love for Latin music also played a part.

Overall, deSol's sound is influenced by a variety of different styles and

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genres. Soto and Monterossa grew up listening to Latin music in their homes and Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones with their friends. What results is, as Soto puts it, "rock 'n' roll with a Latin soul." But it doesn't end there. Guerrero, as evidenced by his rhyming skills, grew up listening to New York hip-hop in the late '70s and '80s.

"I love hip-hop, man, it's a big part of my life," he said. "I still listen to it to this day."

Despite the good vibes that the boys from deSol emit on and off stage, Monterossa and Soto admit that it's easy to get down on the road. Being an up-and-coming band means having to pay dues, including playing small venues with unreceptive audiences to not getting the opportunity to sound check, as was the case at the State Theater.

"You're up there and the monitor is going off and you're thinking, 'This is insane,'" Anderossa said. "But you gotta deal with that. We've gotten to the point that we just laugh at it. Ultimately, people aren't going to care if you sound checked as long as you put on a good show, and that's all on us."

There's also the pressures of being Latino and living in a predominantly white neighborhood that gets a kick out of the "ethnic kids." Before living in New Jersey, Monterossa, Soto and Guerrero lived in Queens, N.Y., a predominantly Latino neighborhood. After moving to the New Jersey suburbs, the three realized what it meant to be a minority in America. This led to the writing of songs like "Spanish Radio," a tribute to Latin-American family life in Queens.

"All our lives, we grew up with our friends speaking Spanish," Monterossa said. "Even Andy, the whitest friend we got, spoke fluent Spanish. Then you get to this neighborhood and people get a kick out of your ethnicity and you're like, 'I'm not getting a kick out of it.' It makes you prouder of who you are and your heritage."

As a result of the Jersey culture shock, Monterossa said that in the past he refused to play Latin rock, but after a while, he felt a compulsion to get in touch with his roots. Once Monterossa and his group decided to embrace their native sound, the natural rhythms of each member began to come through and the band started to make the music it plays today.

As deSol got to the last song of its set, Monterossa paid tribute to the Tito Puente song "Oye Como Va," a song made famous by the legendary Carlos Santana. The crowd screamed its approval as Soto shredded the classic notes on his guitar and Monterossa sang the familiar lines in Spanish. As Letke improvised on the keys and drummer George Sacca emphatically kept the beat, the noise in the crowd rose until the last note and then prompted cheers of "Muchas Gracias!"

If someone had asked the members of deSol, "Oye, como va?" as they walked off stage, they probably would've said, "Muy bien."