

**OZOMATLI WARNS: “DON’T MESS WITH THE DRAGON”;
CULTURE-SPANNING RAVE-UP CELEBRATES CITY OF ANGELS
Genre-Busting L.A. Band’s Mix Of Groove, Rock, Reggaeton And More Turns Art
Gallery Experiment Into Soulful Party, Addresses Katrina, Iraq and Changing Lives**

Los Angeles band Ozomatli always brings an artful touch to its mix of funk, rock, hip-hop, traditional Latin forms, Asian instrumentation and more. But the group’s latest disc, “Don’t Mess With the Dragon” (due March 27 on Concord Records), was born out of a unique scenario – the art came before the music.

With multiple laurels under their belts – including two Grammy awards, a Latin Grammy (and multiple nominations), two Billboard Latin awards and an Alma award, countless film, TV, commercial and game placements, and national tours with the likes of Santana, the Dave Matthews Band, Los Lonely Boys, Lenny Kravitz and many others – the band ventured into new terrain: a community art space in the heart of their hometown.

“We did an art installation at Tropico de Nopal, a gallery near MacArthur Park in L.A.,” recalls bassist-vocalist Wil-Dog Abers. “We stayed there for two weeks, writing; each member had a corner of the room, which we decorated ourselves. Visitors came in and each of us got a chance to show how we create music, individually and collectively. That environment gave birth to these songs. I think we created our most cohesive album yet.”

“It was an unusual experience,” agrees percussionist Jiro Yamaguchi. “There were no rules or definitions. We were in the midst of forming the seeds of these songs. I was pretty confused at first, and other people felt that way as well, but it came out really cool.”

“Dragon” reflects the creative explosion begun in the art installation and carried to fruition in the studio with producer KC Porter. The band rocks the dance floor with pulsing reggaeton jams like “Here We Go” and “Creo,” as well as the funky hip-hop of “Magnolia Soul” (a celebration of New Orleans spirit in the wake of Katrina) and the title track’s Chinatown-meets-the-Dirty-South vibe. But the expansive disc also features the moving Spanish-language ballad “Violeta” (about the mortal thoughts of a soldier in Iraq), the driving, ’80s-inflected rock-ska of “When I Close My Eyes” and much more.

It’s also an energetic tour of L.A.’s richly international character. “Los Angeles is a microcosm of the world,” Jiro proclaims. “You can drive through this city and hear music and experience cultures from all over the world. That’s who we are.”

The process of creating “Dragon” reflected numerous transitions in members’ lives that brought even greater immediacy to the material. “A lot of us were feeling we were becoming adults in a new way, and dealing with past demons, changes, families, relationships breaking up,” Wil notes. “That’s what the song ‘Don’t Mess With the Dragon’ is partly about – not forgetting where your heart is.”

The band’s ability to integrate instruments from around the globe (including requinto, koto and erhu) into dazzling jams is at the core of its extraordinary fusion. “We do a lot of mashing up,” Jiro volunteers. “Everybody in the band comes from a different musical background, and we throw everything into the pot.”



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Producer Porter, who'd worked with the band on some prior tracks, including their duet with Santana on "One of These Days" (from the rock icon's album "Shaman"), played a crucial role in streamlining Ozomatli's process. "We're all producers," says Wil. "We need a coach, a guy that's gonna get us together." Adds Jiro: "We're really good at putting things in – but self-editing is hard. KC helped us boil it down to what was really needed, and he has a great song sensibility. Also, he's fluent in Spanish, which was ideal, because he understood all the lyrics and styles."

Ozomatli's typically relentless touring has been aided, lately, by its highly trafficked MySpace page, supervised by Wil – who tries to stay on top of the voluminous messages from fans. "This kind of contact really lets us know how much what we do means to people," he insists. "It's pretty incredible. People say, 'Your music helped me get through a terrible experience in my life.' That's what makes it all worthwhile. For me, it's a dream come true; it's serving me as a human being, doing what I love to do, and others as well. Those people out there make it possible."

For more information, contact:

Joel Amsterdam
Concord Records
joela@concordrecords.com
(310) 385-4206

Julie Murray Porter
Concord Records
jporter@concordrecords.com
(310) 385-4234



100 N. CRESCENT DRIVE SUITE #275, BEVERLY HILLS, CA 90210 | 310.385.4455 FAX 310.385.4466
FANTASY RECORDS, TENTH AND PARKER, BERKELEY, CA 94710 | 510.549.2500 FAX 510.486.2015