

Bennington Banner/Saturday March 24, 2012



**Steve Berlin, and the rest of the band Los Lobos, are coming to MASS MoCA.**  
(Supplied photo)

## **Los Lobos' 'American' sound back at MoCA**

*K.D. NORRIS/Arts and Entertainment Editor*

NORTH ADAMS, Mass. -- Yes, Los Lobos was "Just Another Band from East L.A." when their debut album came out in the mid 1980s. But saying they are an "L.A. band" is like saying the blues is only Chicago, or country rock is only Alabama, or honky-tonk is only Texas.

Los Lobos, in fact, has taken their L.A.-bred, Latino-soaked, sound and blended it with the blues, country rock and even a little honky-tonk.

"We always, sort of, were in our own place; we do what we do," Steve Berlin said in a recent email interview while the band was playing in Ft. Collins, Colo. "We are proud of being from L.A., and we are (influenced) ... to a certain extent. But it is not anything big, not as far as our art ... We are not an L.A. band."

A rare example of longevity in a volatile music world, Los Lobos' lineup has remained uninterrupted since 1984, when Berlin -- a saxophonist and keyboardist -- joined original members Louie Perez, on drums, guitars and vocals; vocalist Cesar Rosas; bass player Conrad Lozano; and multi-instrumentalist David Hidalgo, who formed the band in 1973.

Los Lobos, which seldom makes it this far east, last made a stop in the area back in 1999, on MASS MoCA's opening weekend celebration. But the band will be at MASS MoCA's Hunter Center on Thursday, April 5, at 8 p.m.

"New England is always fun ... catching up with some friends," Berlin said. "We get out to Texas and Chicago often, even New York, but not to New England, so it is always special."

The band is touring in support of their latest -- and very fine -- recording, "Tin Can Trust," their first new music in nearly four years. In review of the CD, Rolling Stone Magazine said, "With the exception of U2, no other band has stayed on top of its game like Los Lobos."

The band has consistently evolved artistically, while maintaining its unique mix of rock, blues, Tex-Mex, folk and traditional Spanish and Mexican music -- with numerous No. 1 singles, three Grammys and millions of albums sold along the way. Best known, maybe, for covers of the Ritchie Valens classics, "La Bamba" and "Come On, Let's Go," Los Lobos has assembled a body of work diverse enough to captivate any fan, no matter the style they happen to choose to play.

On this tour, Berlin said, "we are pretty much doing the folkloric thing that has very little to do with L.A. ... It is Peruvian, and South American, and to some extent it is Mexican. But we are as much about Texas and Chicago. The California influence would be marginal, that is part of it, but not a big part of it. We don't really think about it all that much. We do the music that makes us happy."

The "doing what makes them happy" is pretty much what they did on their latest recording, "Tin Can Trust," when the band set up shop in East L.A., and got "back to the basics" of making music.

"Yes it was, definitely," Berlin said. "The previous 10 years or so we recorded in ... a small space, not all together most of the time. When it came time to do this one, we looked around and found a space in East L.A. From the first moment, we decided to make it playing like it was live, all together. After all these years, it was good to rekindle that kind of music."

The recording is filled with fine cuts, many with an edgy rock 'n' roll sound, but none better than "I'll Burn It Down."

"The record, to a certain extent, was influenced and informed by the times and place we were in, by the bottom of the economic downturn," Berlin said. "If there is anger, it is influenced by seeing the economic downturn, what was happening to people. But we never discussed it, as a polemic, if you will."

There is also the unusual "Twenty Seven Spanishes," which attempts to encapsulate in one song nothing less than the entire tale of the Spanish conquest of Mexico -- "It is five minute version of the Aztec conquest ... but it is obviously tongue and cheek -- you would not get a very good grade in history class using that history," he said.

There are also two lively, rolling Spanish language songs, "Yo Canto" and "Mujer Ingrata" -- "I sing" and "A Grateful Woman," he translated. "We do do it quite a bit, it is a big part of who we are and what we do."

But what will be heard live is not what is on the CD, Berlin warns.

"Clearly we never know, song for song, what is going to work live," he said. "They always take a bit of retrofitting, but we definitely are taking liberties (on this tour) ... doing everything acoustic. ... We are approaching them rather quietly, and enjoyably letting them breath a little bit."

Not only did the band enjoy getting back to the basics with "Tin Can Trust, Berlin said that the band still enjoy the audiences they find on the American road.

"We're long haul guys," Berlin said, in supplied material. "If you're in it for the long haul, it makes staying together a lot easier. It's a challenge, but the thing I'm most proud of is that we've never rested on our laurels. We keep trying to make every record feel like the first one and try to do the best we can and not tread on territory we have already trod on. What you hear is exactly what we wanted to do."

What the MASS MoCA audience will hear is exactly that, and whatever they "want to do," the place is bound to be smokin' like a fine L.A. Mexican food stand -- or is that a Texas barbecue joint?

Contact K.D. Norris at [knorris@benningtonbanner.com](mailto:knorris@benningtonbanner.com), and follow or tweet him on Twitter @banner\_arts\_KD.

*MASS MoCA is located off Marshall St. Los Lobos' performance in the Hunter Center is a "standing room only" show, with tickets at \$29 in advance and \$35 day of show. For tickets and information call 413-662-2111 or visit [massmoca.org](http://massmoca.org).*