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MUSIC

80s rock maintains popularity in Mexico

BY JONATHAN CLARK
The Herald Mexico

Ostensibly, 41-year-old Dante Dessavre, an engineer for Petroleos Mexicanos, had come to Mexico City from his home in Tabasco on a business trip.

But, as he readily admitted, the real reason that he had made plans to be in the city on July 14 was that one of his all-time favorite rock bands, Survivor, would be making its first-ever appearance that night in the nation's capital.

Seated that night at a table at the Hard Rock Café in the city's swank Polanco District, a Survivor t-shirt pulled over his Oxford and grey hairs peeking out of his thick moustache, Dante was bubbling in anticipation of the Chicago-based band's set.

"I've seen a lot of rock concerts: The Rolling Stones, Kiss, Styx, AC/DC..." he said, proudly ticking off the names with his fingers. "But Survivor has always been one that I've looked forward to. Even today, when I hear 'Eye of the Tiger,' (Survivor's 1982 hit single from the 'Rocky III' movie soundtrack) I feel like I did back when I was a kid. It just gives me so much energy; I feel like I'm ready to take on the world."

Rock music from the 1980s — and especially English-language 80s rock — enjoys great popularity in Mexico. On the streets of Mexico City, where ubiquitous pirated-CD vendors blast out their wares from makeshift booths, passers-by are almost as likely to hear The Outfield's "Your Love" or Europe's "The Final Countdown" as any Latin pop, norteño, or cumbia classic. And at capital rock clubs like The Bulldog and the Hard Rock Café, an endless parade of re-formed 80s acts like Quiet Riot, Asia, Men at Work and Poison perform to packed houses.

A LOYAL FOLLOWING

Dana Flores, the publicity director at the Hard Rock Café, says the audiences that come to see concerts at her venue are motivated by something more than mere irony or kitsch.

"These are true fans who come out to hear bands that they know and love," she says. "We're different, in that sense, from other nightclubs, where people come more for the ambience."

People might go to an "80s night" at a disco for the chance to dress outrageously and revel in the tackiness of the period, says Flores, but at the Hard Rock Café, "the performer is the attraction."



RAMÓN ROMERO/EL UNIVERSAL

STILL GOING STRONG: Rock heroes Survivor entertain the crowd at Mexico City's Hard Rock Café on July 14. The club consistently draws enthusiastic audiences for English-language 80s rock bands.

"These 80s bands came along, and not only could you dance to the music, but they had these crazy hair styles and wild outfits. It was so chic, and so compelling."

-DANTE DESSAVRE
music fan

"The biggest consumer class in Mexico is this largely professional, 25-to-44 age group. And this type of music corresponds directly to that demographic. It's the music that defined their youth."

-ENRIQUE ROJAS
radio programmer

When Survivor took to the Hard Rock's stage last Thursday night, it was indeed clear that they were playing to dedicated followers. The crowd bust into cheers at the opening notes of each song, and crooned along faithfully to former Top 10 hits like "Can't Hold Back" and "The Search is Over," pumping their fists emphatically during every chorus.

Yet, while the 30- and 40-something crowd was more than eager to relive the music of their high school years, they were much less interested in reviving the fashion of the era. Comb-overs far outnumbered mullets, and while business suits were prevalent among the 300-member throng, there was nary a skinny tie to be found.

In fact, the Survivor audience resembled the attendees of a real estate seminar more than a rock crowd — a reality that is not lost on Enrique Rojas, programming director at Universal Stereo, a Mexico City radio station dedicated to English-language 80s rock.

"The biggest consumer class in Mexico is this largely professional, 25-to-44 age group," he said. "And this type of music corresponds directly to that demographic. It's the music that defined their youth."

Asked to explain the popularity of English-language 80s rock in Mexico, Rojas pointed to the "exotic" nature of the music.

"The sound, the rhythm, the musical tension is very different from the music of Latin American countries," he said. "And this rhythm is appealing enough that, while most people don't understand the lyrics, they are still animated by the music."

"Plus," he added, "in Mexico, people are always interested in those things that come from outside (the country)."

Dante Dessavre, who discovered rock as a teenager in Veracruz in the 1980s, talked about how the rock music of the era clicked with his generation in a way that other genres hadn't.

"The rock music of the 70s was guitar-driven; it was music that you listened to rather than

danced to," he explains. "Then, these 80s bands came along, and not only could you dance to the music, but they had these crazy hair styles and wild outfits. It was so chic, and so compelling."

REBEL MUSIC

A telephone operator named Augustín and his friend Amir, a computer systems engineer, added another explanation for the popularity of 80s rock — especially hard rock — as they waited in line for the Survivor concert.

"This is music that talked about freedom, non-conformity, about breaking the rules and defying the corruption of authority," said Amir. "It's music that spoke directly to the lives of young people."

And that anti-establishment ethic, said the two men, was especially compelling during the waning years of the Institutional Revolutionary Party's reign in Mexico.

"Back in the 80s, the government restricted rock music on the radio, it restricted the sale of

rock records, and it didn't allow rock groups from the United States, Canada or Europe to play here," said Augustín. "We had to go to El Chopo (a counterculture market in central Mexico City) if we wanted to buy rock records."

The fact that a widely resented, authoritarian government was opposed to the music, he said, made it even more appealing to the nation's youth.

Augustín and Amir said that it was in the 80s — 1988 to be exact — that rock experienced its "watershed" event in Mexico: a government-approved Rod Stewart concert in the state of Querétaro. Since that time, the two friends have been able to see countless numbers of their favorite English-speaking bands in concert. Among the highlights, they said, were a stadium show by Pink Floyd; the Ramones' first concert in Mexico City; and a 1994 performance by the Satanic speedmetal outfit, Slayer, that Amir could describe only as "brutal."

Now, they were preparing to see another long-time favorite for the first time. "The second record I ever bought, back in 1986, was Survivor's 'Eye of the Tiger,'" said Augustín.

A FITTING FINALE

Later that night at the end of the band's set, after much prompting by lead singer Jim Jamison ("What song do you want to hear? I said, what song is it that you want to hear???"), the band set off a frenzy among its followers by launching, finally, into the signature opening riff of "Eye of the Tiger."

Hoisting illuminated cell phones into the air — a modern adaptation of the traditional cigarette lighter ritual — sweat-drenched fans danced deliriously and sang along in thunderous unison.

Even Miguel Espinosa, a nattily attired, 36-year-old businessman who had previously admitted to not understanding the English lyrics to most of his favorite 80s rock songs, joined in belting out lines like, "face to face, out in the heat/hangin' tough, stayin' hungry," in pitch-perfect English.

As the last notes faded away and the spandex-clad band members took their bows, the p.a. announcer bellowed: "Let's hear it for one of the most emblematic groups of the 80s: Survivor!" The crowd gave one final, mighty cheer and headed for the exits, snatching up flyers for the upcoming Romantics show as they filed out the door.