

## Mp3 Alex Alvear - Equatorial



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All-original compositions and arrangements based on and inspired in traditional Ecuadorian music adding jazz, bossa nova, rock and tango elements to create a new approach to Ecuadorian music. 13 MP3 Songs LATIN: Latin Folk, WORLD: South American Show all album songs: Equatorial Songs Details: Getting kidnapped by the Ecuadorian secret police was the last kick in the butt for musician Alex Alvear. He left for the U.S. with seventy dollars in his pocket and has remained here ever since. Now, with the release of Equatorial, an album that is a breakthrough for modern Ecuadorian music, Alvears connection to his home country has come back to life. The Andean, indigenous, and Spanish roots show through in a gently arranged modern palette of sounds. The result is a sweet collection of tunes with beautiful vocals, a lilting groove, and timeless acoustic melodies. Like many middle-class kids growing up in Quito, Ecuador (and thanks to a three hundred-year colonial legacy left by Spain and cultural alienation instigated by commercialism and American pop culture), Alvear hated everything Ecuadorian, he could name and recognize any rock band from the 60s through the 80s but could not hum one Ecuadorian song. He began playing rock n roll to later discover not only an array of Latin American musical styles but embracing Ecuadorian music without shame or prejudice. Fully adopting the rock rebel lifestyle, he lived off of an alley in a hole in the wall and used music to speak out against the governments unjust practices. While still in Ecuador he co-founded the ground-breaking Promesas Temporales, a group that incorporated Rock and Jazz elements into traditional music, recording only 1,000 LPs at the time and later becoming an icon in the development of Ecuadorian music. As he became exposed to jazz and fusion, he wanted to learn more, but there were few opportunities at home so he started saving money with the hope of studying abroad. In December of 1985, he was kidnapped in broad daylight by the secret police of then right-wing president Len Febres Cordero. His captors erroneously thought he was linked to

a growing guerilla group, but because of their imprudent daylight capture, public protest led to Alvears freedom by the end of the day. Less than two weeks later Alvear bought a one-way ticket to the US. Soon after, Alvear found himself enrolled at the Berklee School of Music and launched into a career in Afro-Latin funk, Latin jazz, and salsa music in the Boston area. He recently realized, however, that something was missing. When I wrote a recent pasillo [an Ecuadorian song form], I said, Hold it, I already have six pasillos and all these sanjuanitos and albazos this could be an album! explains Alvear. I also realized I had come full circle. All these years, I played Cuban music, but Im not Cuban. I played Brazilian music, but I am not Brazilian. I played North American music, but Im not really North American. I had been writing Ecuadorian songs for myself, as a way to remember. And now this is what I want to do. This finally makes sense with who I am. Anyone who has heard Andean music will hear familiar elements on Alvears Equatorial, from pentatonic melodic motifs to Indigenous flutes like the dulcet bamboo quena and Ecuadors unique brand of panpipes played by Quechua master flutist Roberto Cachimuel, from the syncopated beats of the sanjuanito cadence to the rhythmic use of acoustic guitar. But the most immediate reaction to Alvears two-decade slow sonic brew is that of timelessness and melodic soulfulness. Just as Perus Susana Baca and Colombias Tot La Momposina researched and updated the roots music of their homelands to reach new audiences, Alvear delicately brings in elements like jazz harmonies, tango instrumentation, Brazilian sensibilities, funky bass lines, and pop melodic structure to build a bridge between old and new, sometimes even sounding Beatlesque. An early turning point in Alvears appreciation of Ecuadors musical heritage occurred when he accompanied a filmmaker friend to the pueblo of Peguche in the northern province of Ecuador called Imbabura. I brought my guitar and as soon as we stepped out of the van we were in the midst of a huge Indian celebration, recalls Alvear. Its a weeklong solstice party they have every July with all this symbolism everywhere and, while it was officially the celebration of Saint John (San Juan, thus the name for sanjuanito), it had more to do with ancient beliefs than with Western religion. I had envisioned this little getaway, writing another pop ballad under a tree somewhere; I had no idea what I was getting myself into. An old man with a harp caught the eye of Alvear. The man was playing a repetitive mantra-like motif and asked Alvear to join him. I started jamming with him, but its just two chords ad nauseum, Alvear remembers. He was playing this simple pentatonic melody going around and around in circles. For five minutes, I was thinking, What am I doing here?! But then it was like someone hit me in the head with a pan. Everything clicked and I realized how

removed I was from a whole, amazing universe undervalued by the mestizo and white cultures that was under my nose the whole time. Alvear spent the rest of the week in a joyous stupor playing music door to door with Ecuadorian and Bolivian musicians. The instrumental titled Sanjuaneando, which was born during that celebration captures the spirit of that experience. The more personal Ausencia, which means Longing, started out being about the sadness of a long-distance relationship. Writing it was like an exorcism of sorts, but later it took on a broader meaning of longing for anything. It could be longing for a place or anything that you love. Like many songs on the album, this one is extremely melancholic.

Pasillos are sort of like the blues, explains Alvear They are fatalistic. The blues will go, My baby left me, life sucks, but here I am. But pasillo takes it a little further. Like tango it can often be tragic and fatalistic, but also unique for an underlying sense of sorrow. To help illustrate this Alvear says: Most love songs talk about If you ever leave me A pasillo would more likely say, the day you leave me. Pasillo, in some cases, will have a middle part that switches to a major key, where the mood gets kind of happy, but eventually the minor mood returns for the final blow. Another song takes its name from Taita Imbabura, a striking mountain about a kilometer tall overlooking a lake in the province Imbabura, where many of the songs on the album were inspired. Taita in Quechua means father, and this mountain carries a lot of mystical weight among the surrounding people. Taita Imbabura is based on the yumbo rhythm which Alvear first heard performed by an Imbaburan group called anda Maachi. I think of yumbo as war like, says Alvear Its very earthy, like people stomping on the ground. As the melody is repeated the arrangements shift, giving it a different feel each time around, eventually leading to one of the heaviest, rock feels on the album.

Other highlights of the album are the vocals of Marta Gomez and lyrics by Margarita Laso on Soando con Quito, a tribute to Alvears birth city; the cumulative grooves of Esta Historia no es de Risa, by Juan Carlos Gonzalez, one of the first to inspire Alvear to write original music; and, the very few jazz chords in Flor de Kikuyo, a song considered heretical when Alvear and Promesas Temporales first played this in Ecuador. The lasting impact of the collection of tunes is one of respect of tradition as well as pure song form. I have been here in the States for twenty years, says Alvear. I think I have blended as much as any immigrant can blend and continue to contribute my part as a member of this society. But deep down inside theres always been an undertone that as much as I have made a home here there is a longing for something I left behind. Ecuador is not a paradise. But it is still home, it is always with me. As much as I have blended into this culture, there is always something that reminds me, You are not from here. I think

that is the common immigrant experience. Writing this music for me was perhaps a subconscious way to not forget, to not lose that connection. For the rest of us, Alvear has opened a door into a soulful, rich music tradition. In the process of soothing his own soul, Alvear has created a sonic bridge from America to a small underexposed diverse musical nation.

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