

FEATURES

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In your face

Cuban rappers Los Aldeanos test government's limits with lyrics critical of the country's communist masters

BY ISABEL SANCHEZ
AFP, HAVANA

Cuba's underground hip-hop duo Los Aldeanos are boldly grooving where no Cuban has gone in five decades: criticizing the communist government loud and proud for the first time to a sell-out crowd.

"They tell the truth, say the things we feel, the things that a lot of Cubans cannot say. The freedom that we do not have," explained Yoelvis Fonseca, a 27-year-old construction worker, as he sweated and swayed to the beat of the rhyming twosome that recently packed the Acapulco movie theater with more than 2,000 rabid fans.

True, this event was not advertised in state-controlled media. And even the sign in lights outside the Acapulco disjunctedly read "Today, Sherlock Holmes."

But the word was on the street, and the under-30s were in the house for the first major show by the dissident duo who have been around — stealthy and not wealthy — for seven years.

They called the show "Seven years with the village," and maybe because the venue was huge, they held off singing their underground hits most critical of life in Cuba.

Los Aldeanos — which means villagers, but is a riff on one member's name — have come a long way.

In the only communist country in the Americas, where confronting the government can be a ticket to prison, they have hit it big taking on the government, corruption and giving voice to Cubans' everyday frustrations.

Their rhymes — they sing in Spanish — are direct and pull no punches, with lines like "I can't stand one more lie," and "All of this/one day will change/for the good of the people."

And it gets hotter in this country with a one-party regime and a leadership dominated by officials well over 70: "I'm from a chilling society/that listens with piety/to the same people who have gagged it/with a bag of fake freedom," one Los Aldeanos line goes.

Another classic for fans: "So many are dead/or in jail/people would rather die for the American dream/than live through this Cuban nightmare."

'CRITICIZING IN MIAMI MAKES NO SENSE'

Tattooed friends Bian Rodriguez (El B) and Aldo Rodriguez (El Aldeano) first got their act together back in 2003, playing mainly in Havana's dingy underground rap halls as well as at parks and the odd cultural event.

But the Acapulco theater gig was a landmark, as the group and its fans pushed the envelope. For now, the government has not push back.

"This concert is breaking the silence," the duo's representative Melisa Riviere said.

For the Aldeanos, however, the crux of the group's political viewpoint is that they need to speak out, to say something, but they are not interested in leaving Cuba.

"Talking about what is happening here is the way that we take part in the Revolution," El B says. "Criticizing in Miami makes no sense; this is where the shit is hitting the fan."

Riviere went out on a limb insisting that "Miami and Washington have tried to manipulate what Los Aldeanos are. We have spent a long time explaining that they are not counter-revolutionaries."

Aldo himself insists in one line, "I am not a communist; nor am I a socialist; nor am I a Leninist; I am a Revolutionary." It is a masterful spin on the everyday wordplay of the government which constantly implores everyone to be just that — "revolutionary."

The duo are rhyming as if to see if there is any reaction to their not being communists, as long as they are with the Revolution, a the regime that has been in place since 1959 and was led by Fidel Castro for more than 40 years.

Their 18 CDs — such as *Censored* and *Viva Cuba Libre* — are sold widely on the black market in Cuba.

Though some clubs refused to let them play, Los Aldeanos also have played with the likes of mainstream artist Pablo Milanes, and won some national prizes.

Occasionally a radio station will play one of their less critical numbers.

"I am a fan because they sing about what the people are going through," said Yamel Gonzalez, who at 26 is getting ready to start at university. "People's words cannot be a crime."

Among the 200 people unable to get into the concert was a young man in a black T-shirt, jeans and earrings who asked not to be named.

"They are really ballsy," he said, referring to the rappers, "because they talk about the way things really are: that there is a dictatorship."



Los Aldeanos perform during a concert at Havana's Acapulco movie theater. PHOTO: AFP

3D TV:

the future of television?

Manufacturers pin their hopes on consumers' willingness, despite a lack of content, to upgrade

BY TOM LAMONT
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



Panasonic's new Viera 3D TV and Blu-ray player.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

THE last time I voluntarily wore sunglasses to watch television, I was an eight-year-old fan of Michael J Fox, committed for reasons long forgotten to watching films from the actor's cool-dude period — *Back to the Future*, *Teen Wolf* — through plastic, wraparound shades.

Those sunglasses probably had a street value of around US\$0.50; the pair I am wearing today, to test Samsung's latest hi-tech television at the company's headquarters in Surrey, south of London, cost about US\$120, have a power socket in one arm, an infrared sensor on the bridge — and allow me to watch images on Samsung's new TV in 3D. My eight-year-old self would have traded in an instant.

On sale from this week, the 55-inch set is the first in a wave of 3D televisions that are hitting the market. Panasonic's version swiftly joined Samsung's, with models from LG and Sony expected to follow in the summer. The industry hope is consumers, many of whom have only just made the costly upgrade to high-definition TVs, will want to ratchet up their home entertainment options once more and shift to a TV that costs about US\$1,800 for the lowest specification. (And that's without factoring a 3D-equipped player to watch Blu-ray films). It is a big ask, but one Samsung and its rivals hope will be off-set by the "wow" factor of 3D which impressed those who saw *Avatar* in the cinema and spent 160 minutes pawing at colorful objects that weren't there.

"*Avatar* has really kicked things on; got everyone in the groove," says Darren Petersen, a television expert at Samsung HQ. "But as for how 3D looks in the home, it can't really be explained. You have to see it for yourself." So we are doing just that, in the Surrey showroom, wearing special glasses to watch *Monsters vs Aliens*. It is an animated film about a giant-sized superhero, voiced by Reese Witherspoon, who is laying waste to the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Pieces of the bridge seem to fall out of the screen. An alien villain points a ray-gun

at us — it pokes right out and follows me to the left or right as I move about the room.

Kids will love this. The next footage is of the floating, leather-jacketed torso of director James Cameron, speaking to a crowd in Times Square in New York. This is taken from the US launch of the TV, Cameron giving a glowing speech about 3D technology to a crowd of raving electronics fans.

I'm quite impressed. Can I see more?

This, the team at Samsung concedes, is a bit of a problem — there isn't much more. Footage of players at the London soccer club Chelsea having a kickabout will be available in time for a planned road show, showing off the TV around the UK. Early buyers, it seems, will really have to like *Monsters vs Aliens*, which they'll be watching on loop until another animated film, *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*, is released in the UK in June.

The UK satellite broadcaster Sky plans to launch a dedicated 3D channel at about the same time, but the broadcaster admits it's taking a while to get going because "there's not a seam of 3D content we can tap in to at the moment."

Parts of the World Cup in South Africa will be filmed in 3D, but the BBC and ITV are unlikely to be ready to broadcast them. Not even Cameron, chief cheerleader of 3D media, has stepped up: the recent Blu-ray release of *Avatar* was 2D only and distributor Fox has no fixed date for the release of a 3D version.

The Samsung team buzzes about excitedly and I am told to leave my 3D specs on. Darren calls up a menu screen and turns on a mode called "2D to 3D." We watch random clips from normal television — break-dancers performing on a stage, highlights from an Arsenal match — that have been processed by the TV to appear three dimensional. In theory, I could plug in one of those 25-year-old Michael J Fox films and watch it as if it had been filmed by Cameron with his special *Avatar* cameras.

In reality? The results are pretty variable — at times impressive, as when a dancer sticks a spinning leg in my face, at times ropery and disorienting, as when a soccer goalkeeper has a shoulder that floats centimeters in front of his neck. It's only a stop-gap option, but after just a few minutes I'm keen to go back to the crispness of a cartoon character wrecking the US.

Another looming problem for 3D TV is which glasses will prevail as the industry standard. It's one of those tiresome format battles at which the home entertainment industry excels — this time between cheaper "passive" glasses, the kind handed out in cinemas, and gizmo-riddled "active" glasses.

The active glasses receive information from the TV through an infra-red sensor, telling them rapidly to block one eye, then the other in time with alternating frames on the screen, tricking the brain in to seeing a 3D image; the passive glasses are simpler, with polarized but unchanging lenses that create an effect (in theory) less refined. Which will prevail as the industry standard? Samsung, Panasonic and Sony endorse active, LG passive, while Sky says it is "agnostic" and that its service will work on both. My instinct is to wonder about the family of four gathered around the set to watch a blockbuster, or the gang of pals squeezed on to a sofa for the football, and whether it's realistic for each to need pricey specs of their own.

"I love to be ahead of my friends," said Matt Rajah, the first customer in line to buy this TV when it went on sale at the UK's John Lewis department stores, offering one of the few plausible reasons for buying a technology that's so new and unpredictable. 3D TV might be an advance that transforms your living room, like flat screens, but it could prove to be an impractical flop and leave early adopters with much cumbersome eyewear.

For now, I'm ready to go back to watching television in the way I have ever since the magic of *Teen Wolf* diminished. Sunglasses off.