

# LIZ MELENDEZ: ALL ROCK SKILLS, HOLD THE POP POSES

BY ALAN SVERDLIK



**W**hen Liz Melendez was a little girl, her daddy used to blare Led Zeppelin, the aggressively macho licks and howls of manly angst thundering through the home. Although Zeppelin's grimy, industrial imagery was way beyond her years, the battering-ram forcefulness of the band's heavy metal guitars somehow left an imprint.

Years later, searching for a style that straddled blues and hard rock, she found it in the playing of Stevie Ray Vaughn, whose early audiences wore tight jeans and cowboy regalia and affected studly poses.

"Take my heart from my chest and put my will to the test," she sings in "Justice County," an homage to her great-great-grandfather, a member of Billy The Kid's crew in Melendez' native New Mexico. "'Cause I will not seek and I won't request / Your consent / So send your best."

(Her surname still throws people. Melendez's ancestry is Spanish—on her mother's side—and Mexican—on her father's side—going back scores of generations.)

Defiant, provocative and dismissive of facile media labels, Melendez has no designs on being the "it" girl of Atlanta's indie music scene, though her bravado, raw guitar and tightly curled, cascading brown locks might qualify her. But it's just not like Liz to lump her persona—or her divergent musical styles—into a lone category, friends and fans say. Her versatility aside, however, a Melendez gig is bound to alter some perceptions about how women can rock 'n' roll.

### Her own aesthetic

Arriving at her Marietta home in the twilight of a winter's day, Melendez says she prefers not to speculate if she's making an enduring impact or if she'll even reflect in history's rearview mirror.

She describes her consciousness as "in the moment."

"I go forward without a lot of thoughts about tomorrow," she says. "History may be happening right now, but we won't know if it is" without the benefit of hindsight. Bringing her muse into the

conversation, she adds, "Stevie Ray wasn't a legend when he was alive, only after he died at 36 in a plane crash."

Melendez's lead and rhythm guitar, backed up by an ever-revolving medley of bass, keyboards, harmonica, saxophone and percussion, orchestrate her shows and her trio of CDs—*Mercy*, *Sweet Southern Soul* and the recently released *Liz Melendez Live*. The sound borrows from others' ideas of hip—Freddie King's and Carlos Santana's among them—but Melendez makes the music her own.

The way she and the band embellish "Don't Want To Leave You Alone" and "I Never Do" turns classic shuffle into an unexpected interplay of rhythm and voice. In the title track "Sweet Southern Soul" Melendez' interprets the dulcet African-American solos of her adopted region. "Drink From My Cup" brings out the balladeer in her, and "No More Love" harkens to her audacious, blueswoman-rocker roots.

Rarely do political sensibilities consume Melendez compositions, but "Battle Cry (Rhythm of Suffering)" acknowledges the historic oppression that existed across America: "...from the desert / to the sea / wounded souls / wounded knees."

Asked to comment on the tunes she's written, she replies, "Like some, love a few. Lose many by not writing them down immediately."

Asked her age, Melendez breaks a dictum of feminist convention by refusing to answer, except to say, "I'm a Generation Xer." She can't easily be cornered into identity politics, the affiliation of many in the indie movement. Instead, she's developed her own paradigm, although Melendez can't really give it a name.

### 'Scaring the boys'

She doesn't shrink from controversy: Melendez believes that inborn masculine traits allow for the swagger and aggression that produces authentic rock. "It's not in a woman's nature," Melendez says, "or women tend not to have the freedom to express themselves in that way."

Local indie icon Diane Durrett, who's co-authored songs with Melendez, says, "Liz is one of the first female guitar players that I've seen scare the boys into practicing the guitar more."

So how did Melendez overcome the biological determinism she spouts? By listening to virile, belt-it-out guy groups "at an early age," she responds, "I was predisposed" to go against the grain.

Her father Dan, a bass player by avocation and a butcher by profession, kept the virgin/vixen/bimbo stereotypes of the era's female-driven music hidden from view, at the same time playing albums by rude boys in studded denim and black-leather cool. Dad did turn up the volume on one female artist—Bonnie Raitt

Dan Melendez died three months after the release of her first CD. Had he not been alive for its debut, "I would have something to bemoan," the daughter says.

In the late '90s, Melendez left Albuquerque for Atlanta, passing over Los Angeles, Austin and Nashville, all considered music capitals. She chose Atlanta, rather than "the industry towns," because there, "everyone's worried about their image and trying to get one over on you," and here, "it tends to be more about the music and being real." **gM**



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**Nuçi's Space 396 Oconee Street Athens, GA 30601 706.227.1515 [space@nuci.org](mailto:space@nuci.org)**