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**Rock without borders The May Fire doesn't want to ignore -- or be defined by -- its Latin roots**

by JEFF INMAN

MOST kids in the neighborhood went for the iconic stuff: Spider-Man, Batman, the superheroes everyone knows. El Pipe -- he was a little different. The May Fire drummer and songwriter didn't want to be some regular defender of the universe for Halloween. That wasn't him. He wanted to be a rock star -- Peter Criss, to be exact. He might have been just a little kid, but he was already addicted to Kiss, and he wanted to dress up like his favorite drummer. So he asked his mom. She said yes. The rest of the kids in his Barranquilla, Columbia, neighborhood looked at him like he was crazy.

Some people still give him that look, though the reasons are different now. He gets looks from the rock en Español crowd, questioning why The May Fire doesn't sing more songs in Spanish. And when the band busts out that one track that is in both his and vocalist Cat Tasso's native tongue -- "Marcha," a strutting, guitar heavy track perkier than a cheerleader day camp -- he gets looks from the American kids, wondering what the hell just happened. Pipe (pronounced Pe-pay) is like a dude caught between two worlds: Peter Criss in a land of superheroes.

"For a long while I just wanted to run away from the rock en Español thing," he says. "If you play one of our records for someone who doesn't know our roots, then you wouldn't even know where we come from. We just wanted to be a rock band."

But things have changed a little lately. There's "Marcha," of course, which was on last year's La Victoria EP, the second disc in a three EP trilogy. (The third EP, The List, is out this week.) And the band did a stint opening for Mexican super-group Zoe last year. Plus, there's been this nagging sensation that, no matter how much The May Fire wanted to be just another rock band, the San Francisco quartet isn't. Pipe is a bilingual guy from Columbia. Tasso grew up in Chile. Guitarist Johnny Beane is Columbian by descent. And bassist Rob Gwin -- well, he grew up in Connecticut, so that doesn't matter much. But as a whole, the band has been searching for the right way to bridge two worlds.

MTV -- or MTV Tr3s, to be more specific -- came up with an answer for the band. The network's Latin-tinged bi-cultural offshoot spent its first two years trying to find that niche of kids that, like Pipe, grew up listening to Café Tacuba and top 40 radio. In fact "Indie 101" is dedicated to indie bands with Latin roots. It's helped to create a burgeoning scene of bilingual rock bands that, like The May Fire, are trying to splice together the two cultures they sprang from. Some groups, like Monte Negro, have scored major label deals. Others, like The May Fire, are sticking to a strictly DIY plan. Both have become focal points for the scene.

Which is why both groups, along with L.A.'s Astra Heights, are on MTV Tr3s' Circo Rocktastico tour, a six-week jaunt meant to showcase homegrown Latin alternative. And for Pipe, that's perfect: It's about the rock, not the en Español. "I grew up bilingual, so for me it didn't matter what language the song was in,

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The May Fire

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it just had to be cool to me," he says. "This tour is about Latin roots, that's it. That's something we're more than happy to celebrate."

And it also allows the band to do what it does best: pound out snarling pop that sounds like The Breeders minus that urge to be odd at all the wrong moments. That means you get something like "Mother Father," a buzz-soaked nod to grunge, except with Tasso singing like a drunk and pissed Debbie Harry. Or "Under the Wave," a frantic piece of pop meant to be played during a car chase montage, the melody shining through all that speed.

"Really, we just try to keep things both simple and interesting," Pipe says. "That's not always easy, but it's what comes natural to us. We just want songs that are fun that everyone can understand."

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