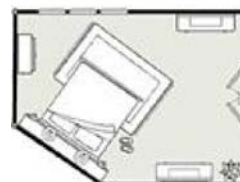


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Even gray skies can't dim the Sol.iLLaquists' luster

Jim Abbott
Sentinel Pop Music Critic

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For a group that exudes so much good karma, the members of Orlando's Sol.iLLaquists of Sound were starting to wonder when they would catch a break.

In 2004, they were being evicted from their rented house because of a seldom-enforced Edgewood city zoning law that states no more than three people can live in a residence unless related by blood or marriage. No exceptions for a progressive hip-hop collective that's more spiritually connected than many real families.

In the midst of the group's fight with city hall, Hurricane Charley sent a tree through the roof of the house, trumping the legal problems. Sol.iLLaquists of Sound was homeless, except for the kindness of audiences uplifted by the music. They embraced the road because they had no home and turned misfortunes into blessings.

"The tree falling on the house was one of the best things that ever happened to us," says lead vocalist Alexandrah, 27, on a recent afternoon at Culture Mart, a downtown shop offering art, music, merchandise and a social hub for the group. "We thought, 'Man, there has to be something awesome coming up, because we haven't done anything wrong.' "

The other members -- Swamburger, the MC, 31; producer and MIDI mastermind DiViNCi, 24; and poet/spoken-word artist Tonya Combs, 25 -- exchange warm smiles.

Good things are happening now. SoS is touring behind *As If We Existed*, its debut album on indie stalwart ANTI-/Epitaph, a trek that stops for a homecoming show on Tuesday at the Social. There's a new house, a charming one on a lake.

The new music is the group's most accomplished yet, a combination of uplifting ideas framed by a soundtrack that ranges from funky to whimsical and experimental.

Swamburger, the group's tongue-twisting MC, considers it the group's first album, although SoS has released other material on hometown Nonsense Records. In the sense that it's a culmination of years of work, the notion is accurate.

"It's great because you have your whole life's worth of material to choose from," he says. "People ask us how long it took to make the album. In reality, it took us 30 years."

Talking and actualizing

The deal with ANTI- also was a painstaking process that stretched for months. At one point, Swamburger and label president Andy Kaulkin got into a heated debate over the relative merits of commercial and indie rap that made DiViNCi think that the group had blown its chance.

"I felt, 'If he doesn't want to sign me knowing what I'm about, then I don't want to be there,' " Swamburger says now.

It all worked out in the end and, in the group's typical family fashion, the parting with Nonsense was amicable. Nonsense act X:144 & SPS is opening shows for SoS, including Tuesday's at the Social.

"It's definitely unique," Nonsense co-founder Kelly Shockley says about the SoS vibe. "It's not about stardom; it's not about making money.

"It's more about the message, and living the message, which is really hard to find. You can find people who are talking about a movement, but it's hard to find people who are actualizing it as well."

Shockley hopes that a successful showing by Sol.iLLaquists on its new label will boost the prospects for acts on Nonsense, which launched two years ago. He thinks the time is right for more intellectually challenging,

spiritually uplifting hip-hop.

"It's about the pendulum swinging around after a while" in the music business, he says. "With pop music and the fake facade, people will start asking for realism again. There's better music coming out, and it's been given a lot of attention."

For SoS, there was welcome attention from progressive hip-hop star Sage Francis, who called on SoS to perform with him on his "Healthy Distrust" tour in 2005. That eventually led to the record deal.

Gaining strength

Although the group's new label is based in Los Angeles, SoS intends to stay in Central Florida.

"Orlando's pace is very well-suited to our pace," says DiViNCi, who moved here from Pennsylvania in the late 1990s to attend Full Sail Real World Education. "It's not too fast, it's not too slow."

DiViNCi takes inspiration from Orlando musicians such as drummer/ multi-instrumentalist Anthony Cole, whom he praises for his "sense of freedom when he plays."

DiViNCi and the group's other members like the odd juxtaposition of a busy core of progressive artists and musicians that often faces an uphill battle for attention in the large shadow of Orlando's world-renowned theme parks.

Or, as Alexandrah puts it more succinctly: "Mickey's armpit."

Swamburger, who nurtured a local poetry and art scene with regular spoken-word/hip-hop events at Boddhisatva, describes it more poetically:

"It's really a heart-garden, with really amazing plants," he says. "But it's like all those plants were just put there."

He says that without Orlando's distinctive mood, Sol.iLLaquists wouldn't have developed in the same way.

"It's a negative, but in a good way," he says. "It's given us an edge, because you have to pound people in the face here to make them pay attention."

He points to entertainers such as Eugene Snowden, charismatic lead singer of the Legendary JCs, as the kind of wonderful talent that the city's challenging attention span can create.

"Eugene Snowden proves that all the time. You have to sell yourself and buy yourself."

But, as much as the music, Sol.iLLaquists is about family.

"It's not the type of work that chips away at your soul," DiViNCi says. "It's like working out; your soul gets stronger that way."

To celebrate the return of Orlando's Sol.iLLaquists of Sound, there will be a screening of a new DVD documentary on the group on Saturday at Cafe D'Antano in Orlando.

Fam Glorious, conceived, directed and edited by Sol.iLLaquists' lead singer Alexandrah, features performance footage culled from concerts at the Fillmore in San Francisco as well as the Social and Will's

Pub in Orlando.

The music is accompanied by a recounting of the group's history by the members themselves, including re-enactments of a few episodes in the story.

Among the DVD extras: DiViNCi's explanation of how he creates guitar solos out of drum beats on his MIDI keyboard.

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