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31 Flavors and Counting

The varied talents of Helado Negro's Roberto Carlos Lange
By Taylor K. Long

It's a wonder that Roberto Carlos Lange found time for this interview.

Between releasing a second album under one of his several solo monikers, collaborating with Julianna Barwick, recording and producing a record for a friend, creating abstract video art and sound installations and playing shows, the artist we've come to know as Helado Negro is hard to pin down.

Phoning it in (in only the most literal sense) from his Crown Heights apartment, he explains, "I don't even know how to keep track of myself, and I don't mean that in a funny way, that sounds like I'm being silly. But sometimes I can't sleep or I'll wake up and I'll just do something and finish it."

Most recently, Lange finished *Canta Lechuza*, his second album under the name Helado Negro, which means "black ice cream." Where debut *Awe Owe* was a folksy, psychedelic, full-band exultation of Lange's Latin roots, *Canta Lechuza* is a sensual bedroom electro-pop album, reminiscent of Lange himself: easy-going, intriguing and brimming with ideas.

When he's not using his voice like another instrument, adding layers of "whoah"s, "oh-ah"s and other sighs, his soft, buttery voice purrs in Spanish. But where others might get lost in translation, Lange's vocal delivery feels like another texture in his soundscape, so listening comprehension doesn't feel as reliant upon the lyrics.

Still, when hearing his wordplay in "Lechuguilla," one of *Canta Lechuza*'s sunnier tracks, non-Spanish speakers may be tempted to run to the nearest Spanish dictionary. "I played on words with the word 'lechuguilla,' which is 'Let you,' and then 'guilla' means guide in Spanish—phonetically, not the way it's spelled. And so, let you guilla me: let you guide me." He elaborates, "The whole song is about everything that runs through your mind when you're having sex. It's like, getting pregnant, or being with the person for a long time or waking up the next day and not wanting to be with this person."

Working with several moving parts seems to come naturally to Lange, who often sends his work out to family and friends throughout the creative process. He feels strongest about things he is comfortable playing for others, he says, and actually values honest response. "I play stuff for my wife a lot, she's a good barometer," he says. "She'll tell me whether she likes it or not, and that usually helps."

Having a network of people has inspired him in other ways, too. "I like YouTube a lot. I really do," he says. "It's the best tool to have the biggest audience. I think it's informed so many people. There are so many things to be seen there."

Though it may be a controversial stance to take, Lange appreciates the tools and opportunities the Internet has brought to the world of music. To Lange, broader audiences and quicker turn-around times are reasons to produce more work. "I think people are really upset right now, and they should be, but they just have to know, it's just not the world we live in anymore. People are mad about record sales, that musicians aren't selling records. I think people romanticize the Rolling Stones' lifestyle or the Led Zeppelin lifestyle, this thing of being a working musician, but fuck that. Yeah, it would be kind of nice to buy a big-ass house or fly first class or have people treat you really well and have shows in symphony halls, but music is all levels," he says. "If you want to make music, just make it."

As perfect proof of this view, Lange has any number of musical outlets—even beyond Helado Negro—to keep him busy, including a collaborative recording with Asthmatic Kitty label mate and fellow Brooklynite Barwick, mixing a record for his friend Guy Fantastico, and his other solo project, Epstein, for which he's thinking of recording a four-album opus, with each album featuring a different experimental approach.

In case a handful of music-based efforts isn't enough, Lange also works with visual forms, and lately finds that his late-night obsessing is taking the form of abstract videos made with retro technology. "They made this machine called the VideoMusic. The whole idea was you had your turntable and your stereo system, and you plugged the output of the stereo system into this thing and played your favorite records and it makes different

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shapes. This guy in Austin modified this and I got one and I've been able to use it to generate these visual pieces that I've been scoring." He hosts these on his website, where you can also find videos of his sound sculptures.

But even though Lange is quite the visual artist, he won't be displaying his videos during his live shows on the Helado Negro tour. That honor goes to his friend Jonathan Dueck, who spent two months listening to Helado Negro and creating a visual accompaniment. Lange is so happy with the visuals, he doesn't mind if they occasionally eclipse what he's doing on stage, he says. "People walk up to me and are like, 'I don't give a shit about what you were doing musically, but the visuals were great.' And I'm like, 'Cool, as long as you liked something, that's fine with me.'"

>> Helado Negro

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