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ENTERTAINMENT

A 'Brand New Day' for the Mavericks with new album, new Mono Mundo label

By **Randy Lewis**

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Raul Malo, the lead singer and songwriter for the genre-crossing roots band the Mavericks, sat on the balcony of the third-floor office of his group's new record label, Mono Mundo, surveying the kingdom below: a parking lot and an alleyway extending into an open field.

"Yeah," he said in a tone dripping with sarcasm, "it's great to be a mogul. I'm like Jay Z!"

Swimming in bling he and his band mates are not.

But the long-running group members who have seamlessly blended rock, country, Latin jazz, early-'60s pop, soul and gospel for nearly three decades are nonetheless grinning about the big step they've taken toward independence.

"When we started back with this, our objective always was that we weren't going to let anybody mess with the product, so to speak," said Malo, 51, who possesses a pop music voice that has earned comparisons to the stately romance of Roy Orbison.

The Mavericks, one of the leading lights of Americana music since the early 1990s, have been signed since 2012 to Valory Music, an offshoot of Big Machine Records, the label that brought Taylor Swift to the world.

"We weren't going to compromise the music for any reason," Malo said. "Not that Big Machine was asking us to do that. It's not about any one label. But even with management, or situations you might get in with your booking agent — we've taken control of it all.

“It feels great on one hand, and also a little scary, of course, because now you have no one to blame,” he said with a laugh. “I think everybody’s confident and excited that this is the right move for us...”

“Here we are,” he said, “a bunch of middle-aged guys playing music nobody can describe, and we’re still doing it and having more fun than ever.”

That attitude consistently comes through in the band’s exuberant live shows, which channel an energy and a gleeful disregard for musical boundaries that also has been a hallmark of the Mavericks’ albums, especially the most recent works from the rejuvenated and reconstituted band.

The maiden release from Mono Mundo was “All Night Live, Volume 1,” a 16-track album issued in October. Now, the Mavericks’ first studio collection for the new label, “Brand New Day,” is due Friday.

It’s the group’s third since reuniting after going into a decade-long hibernation while Malo recorded several solo albums and participated in two of three albums with the Los Super Seven Latin rock supergroup.

From the get-go on “Brand New Day,” it’s clear that the members of the Mavericks are still marching to their own irresistible drum beat.

The opening track, “Rolling Along,” rides rhythmically along on a dance floor-ready rhythm. Guitars, bass, keyboards and drums are augmented by accordion and banjo as Malo applies his soaring tenor to a number extolling the virtues of lighting up and kicking back.

“Yeah, we’ve got banjo and accordion and the song’s about smoking weed — everything you’re not supposed to do — so of course we thought, ‘Let’s start the record with it!’” Malo said of that decision reached with his band mates, guitarist Eddie Perez, keyboardist Jerry Dale McFadden and drummer Paul Deakin.

There’s also the grandly upbeat pop-rock title track as well as a sultry Latin-drenched tune, “Easy As It Seems,” that brings the band — one that most often champions good-time grooves and themes of love lost and found — back into the realm of social commentary. Malo wrote it, with Perez and Alan Miller, after sensing tensions in his own family and hearing similar stories from friends during last year’s divisive presidential campaign.

As usual, he looks to music to bridge such divides: “Do you want to get cruel? Do you think it’s wise to play the fool?/Take a look around you, it’s not easy to see/Building walls between us don’t fix a thing.”

Once again, Malo and his cohorts go forward boldly without fretting much about whether such commentary will rub anyone the wrong way.

The Mavericks are getting initial reactions to some of the new songs at a trio of shows this week in Europe, which will pave the way for a string of dates in the U.S. starting April 7 at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville. The band will be on the road most of the summer until the tour brings the group to Southern California in the fall for a stop Oct. 5 in San Diego and Oct. 6 at the Regent in downtown L.A.

Along the way the band will visit Cuba, the country Malo's parents fled following Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution.

The trip, in part to film a PBS special, raises a multiplicity of emotions for Malo. Many members of his family, like a lot of Cuban Americans, are strongly anti-Castro and harbor considerable animosity toward the country and its government, which for more than a decade has been run by Fidel's younger brother, Raul Castro.

But as a musician, Malo sounds thoroughly excited at the prospect of collaborating with musicians steeped in the country's rich cultural history, the land of his parents he last visited almost four decades ago, at age 13.

"I think anybody who left the island was very anti-Castro," he said, "and certainly very vocal about it, and there was no wavering on that. Even now, my mom, when they talk about Fidel — my dad has passed, but my mom is still with us — her feelings are still pretty strong. And yet there's still a part of her, like all Cubans, they put it aside for the love of Cuba. It's so strong. I don't think that ever goes away. Cubans are Cubans first."

The Mavericks are planning to collaborate with Cuban musicians and shoot a concert intended for home video release as part of the rollout for "Brand New Day."

"We're just waiting to see how the album goes over, with that little bit of nervousness and anticipation," he said. "You never know. You think it's good work, and you can feel good about that, but you never know how people are going to respond."