

How Novalima modernizes and revives Peru's African roots music



For more than a decade, Novalima has updated the traditional sounds of Afro-Peruvian music with a healthy dose of electronica. The band is now adding sounds from other parts of Latin America. (Vito Mirr / Novalima)

Afro-Peruvian music was born of slavery and, over the centuries, has been on the verge of slipping into obscurity on many occasions — overlooked by record labels, shrugged off as marginal. Yet it has always somehow managed to stage unlikely resurgences.

It's the sound of the African experience in Peru, with lyrics often born of tragedy (think: Peruvian blues). Its rhythms unite the thumping sound of the signature wooden drum known as the *cajón* with the complex arrangements of the Spanish guitar. The sound is distinct, often as mournful as it is danceable.

Novalima's distinct sound comes from the use of the *cajón*, a box drum. Band member Marcos Mosquera is seen playing the instrument at a gig in Quito, Ecuador, in 2013. (Novalima)



In its latest incarnation, the Afro-Peruvian sound has reemerged — updated and modernized with a dash of electronica. For more than a decade, the Peruvian band [Novalima](#) has taken the form and brought it back to life (and international recognition) with a healthy infusion of digital sounds, Cuban *son*, reggae and other international musical styles — the sort of grooves that make for a good night in a dance club.

Their latest album, "[Planetario](#)," expands on the tradition, adding some sizzling guest appearances by a Cuban rapper (Kumar, based in Barcelona, Spain) and Colombian salsa musicians (such as Eka Muñoz of the synth cumbia band Sidestepper).



Northern California Peruvian
Chamber of Commerce

Leadership. Opportunity. Networking.

2351 Sunset Blvd. Suite 170-146 Rocklin CA, 95765-4306

"It has more of a Latin American feel," says Rafael Morales, one of the group's founders. "But the foundation is still Peruvian rhythms."

The album has already attracted the attention of the musical desk at NPR, where the band has served as guest deejays and where the melancholic "Quebranto" (partially recorded on a cellphone) was featured as one of the broadcaster's ["Songs We Love."](#) (With its patina of nostalgia — which comes from the scratchy recording — it is absolutely hypnotic.)



WATCH: 'Beto Kele,' from the new album 'Planetario,' by Novalima, which features strong African grooves. The song includes guest appearances by Colombian musicians Eka Muñoz and Pernet.

Novalima is now closing out a 20-city North American tour to support the release — which will bring them to Los Angeles on Thursday for a one-night gig at the [Skirball Cultural Center](#). This will be followed by an extensive European tour in the fall, as well as a remix album based on "Planetario's" songs. The band has helped take Peruvian music well beyond its borders.

"In a way, it breaks the scheme of race and class in Peru," says Novalima co-founder Grimaldo del Solar. "Here you have this group that travels all over the world, different colors of people making music together. It opens people's minds."

Novalima began as an unlikely experiment about 15 years ago, a digital exchange among a group of four Peruvian high school friends who had scattered to various cities around the world. Morales was living in Barcelona. Del Solar was in London. Two other members (Ramon Perez-Prieto and Carlos Li Carrillo) were divided between Hong Kong and Lima.

The group began sharing sounds and mixes via the Internet, and remotely, produced a namesake album that explored a mix of electronica and a diversity of other sounds — including Asian music, rock and traditional Latin American folklore.

"As part of that, we started experimenting with Afro-Peruvian music and it was really interesting because of the rhythm," explains Del Solar. "We loved the way it mixed with electronic music. It was very danceable. It pulled you right in to move."



Northern California Peruvian
Chamber of Commerce

Leadership. Opportunity. Networking.
2351 Sunset Blvd. Suite 170-146 Rocklin CA, 95765-4306

For their next album, "Afro," released in 2006, they focused solely on the Peruvian sounds. The album received international attention — reviewed in newspapers in the U.S. and Europe and making an extended appearance on Latin alternative radio charts in the U.S.

In a way, it breaks the scheme of race and class in Peru. Here you have this group that travels all over the world, different colors of people making music together.- Grimaldo del Solar, co-founder of Novalima

At that point, the group, with all of its members resettled in Lima, launched itself as a full-fledged band, and began working with longtime Afro-Peruvian musicians like the *cajón* player Juan "Cotito" Medrano and singer Milagros Guerrero; both are now an integral part of Novalima. (Guerrero is a particularly notable presence in the band. Her vocals are warm and rich, channeling both joy and sadness with equal power.)

Subsequent albums, including the well-received "Coba Coba," released in 2009, helped fuel an interest in Afro-Peruvian music in Peru, where the music was regarded as local folklore, not something that could be contemporary. (Interestingly, "The Soul of Black Peru," a compilation of Afro-Peruvian classics released by former Talking Heads frontman David Byrne in 1995, brought international attention to the form — but did little to heighten interest for it in Peru itself, where the songs were already familiar.)

"It was music that you listened to at parties or cock fights or a night out drinking, but young people in Peru were not listening to Afro-Peruvian music," says Del Solar. "When we were young, we wouldn't have bought a disc of Afro-Peruvian music. But now young people see it with different eyes. They know it's important."

In modernizing the sound of Afro-Peruvian music, and penning new tunes, Novalima has helped make it relevant again.

"We have learned so much in the process, too," says Morales. "This was music that was always there, always in the background. But to play it, to compose it, to work with people like Cotito — it's a whole new experience."

Novalima will take the stage at the [Skirball Cultural Center](#) on Thursday, Aug. 27 at 8 p.m. 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, [skirball.org](#).

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-novalima-afroperuvian-band-coming-to-skirball-20150821-column.html>



Northern California Peruvian
Chamber of Commerce

Leadership. Opportunity. Networking.

2351 Sunset Blvd. Suite 170-146 Rocklin CA, 95765-4306