

Mexican art and music collective **Los Lichis** emerge from the shadows with a great double album of out rock. By **Byron Coley**



Jean-Baptiste Favory



Gerardo Monsivais



Gerardo Monsivais (left) and Manuel Mathar

## Los Lichis

### Dog

No label 2xLP

### The Giant Lichis

No label CD-R/DL

This deep into the internet era it's unusual to discover a weird ass band who've been active and recording since the 1990s without ever appearing as a blip on any known radar screen. Yet, here are Los Lichis: a Mexican music/art collective whose recording history goes back 18 years and whose sound is as powerful and strange as any combo around. Some might suggest that Mexico is not known for its underground sonic emanations, but many dig artists like Loch Ness, Chac Mool, Lorelle Meets The Obsolete, Los Llamarada and various improv types heard about from folks who tour down there. Some of Mexico's punk and metal bands have their moments as well. But none of them on the scale of Los Lichis.

Los Lichis were formed in 1996 in Mexico City by three visual artists – Manuel Mathar, José Luis Rojas and Gerardo Monsivais. They had met a year earlier and their social collaborations on drawings, collages and actions eventually morphed into musical experimentation. They ended up recording quite a bit of improvised psychedelic material using a variety of instruments they approached with more enthusiasm than knowledge. In Paris in 2000 for an exhibition of their work, Mathar and Monsivais met the French sound artist Jean-Baptiste

Favory, who was excited by the cassettes they played him. Favory became the fourth member, visiting Mexico once a year to play live and record with Los Lichis, and to help in processing the resultant material.

Soon after their French sojourn, a slightly different version of the group, featuring a couple of Mexican musicians, began playing and recordings under the name The Cacaflies. Various CD-Rs and cassettes were released by the core group using both names, but the details are vague. Largely these recordings seem to have been distributed free at live shows. Several are also available online.

The first vinyl issued by Los Lichis is the sprawling retrospective *Dog*, which includes material recorded throughout their first decade of activity (1997–2007). It is a massive work, and as defining as classic double albums like Richard Youngs and Simon Wickham-Smith's *Lake*, The Dead C's *Harsh 70s Reality* and Royal Trux's *Twin Infinitives*. Although it's difficult to nail specific sonic bits to specific inspirations, Los Lichis admit to liking Can, Pink Floyd, Sir Richard Bishop and... Ween! That said, musicians I would be more likely to compare their approach to are Ritual All 7-70, No-Neck Blues Band, Sun City Girls, Mako Sika and (especially) the French free rock combos of the 1970s: Mahogany Brain, Red Noise, Gutura and so on.

There is something very special about the way non-musicians approach music as

an artform. It's usually something they have long appreciated from afar, and they often attack it with a unique brand of amateur gusto mixed with a sophisticated conceptual approach. Los Lichis – named after a stray dog, not the tropical fruit – sound like a million different things from track to track and moment to moment. I've been trying to map the evolution of their sound by cross-referencing the dates the material was recorded, but there's a delightfully shocking lack of standard technical advancement. This takes some doing.

Witness the brief flash of the no wave scene in NYC. When it began, many no wave band members were non-musicians involved in other artistic pursuits – painting, movies, sculpture, etc. But over the course of a short year and a half, many of these same players began to understand the rudiments of rock dynamics well enough to become beholden to them. What had begun as a weird explosion of loud primitive sound art was destined to become mere rock 'n' roll. Thankfully, the bands mostly imploded before this became a problem. But Los Lichis manage to document a decade of playing without showing evidence of their becoming trapped by structure (although the quality of the recordings definitely improves over time). This demonstrates a fairly perverse dedication, and sounds like a total blast.

Some bits (all of which are instrumental, barring the occasional flash of found radio squawk) remind me of Hawkwind, some are

more like Noise Maker's Fifes, some like International Harvester, others Sapat, but there are never any specific quotes that let you know these guys have even heard those artists.

Since they made it to France, and collaborate with a musician there who's pretty well connected, it's possible to assume they're fully clued in. But the fact they namecheck Ween (rather than Magical Power Mako or something) has the honesty of randomness, and reads like a suggestion that they really do hew their own path. They pick up whatever they find that interests them, but immediately break it up and toss it into their collage-engine. The process itself is not odd, but discovering people who have stuck to it for so long in this day and age is not easy.

*Los Lichis* have now recorded a brand new EP called *Giant Lichis* with visual artist Ismael Merla joining on guitar. I would be lying if I didn't say this EP sounds a bit more together (in standard terms) than their earlier work. They incorporate a couple of dub elements in a way that recalls the On-U Sound *Mothmen* LP, and there are some extended passages that focus on found-riffs that remind me of either The Homosexuals or Rick James. But ultimately *Giant Lichis* is as implausible and original as any of their other work. Whether or not the music now exists inside of a known stream of sound, it's very damn cool. What are the chances? □