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AROUND THE GALLERIES

DAVID PAGEL



Playing off a Tijuana groove

Josh Kun's smart exhibition in a small upstairs gallery at Steve Turner Contemporary focuses on two types of popular music made in Mexico and the United States in the 1960s. With great clarity, "Last Exit USA" demonstrates that culture is not a conventional commodity: Neither imported nor exported like ordinary goods and services, it instead grows out of back-and-forth exchanges that are far more fascinating than those accounted for in terms of trade deficits and surpluses.

Best of all, Kun's exhibition is a lot more fun than that sounds. There's plenty to look at, plenty to listen to and plenty to think about, all presented in an easy, see-for-yourself way that leaves visitors free to go at their own pace and make up their own minds.

Narrow shelves on each of the four walls display 44 album covers from the 1960s. Most have "Tijuana" in their titles. The imagery falls into three groups: women with come-hither eyes, bands dressed in mariachi costumes and barely road-worthy cars. Sombreros abound. Other clichés, such as tequila, banditos and burros, appear frequently.

All of the albums were made in the U.S. by big record companies. All followed hot on the heels of "The Lonely Bull," a 1962 hit record by Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, which is also displayed.

Collectively, the albums created and cashed in on what became known as "the Tijuana

Sound," a lively trumpet-and-marimba combo that played up standard south-of-the-border fantasies.

On two walls, two listening stations allow visitors to tune into 16 songs from the 1960s. The playlist features bands probably unfamiliar to contemporary listeners, including Los Dug Dug's, Los Rockin Devils, Los Tijuana Jet's and Javier Batiz and the Famous Finks. All were active in Tijuana in the '60s, playing and recording music inspired by such north-of-the border rock 'n' rollers as Fats Domino and James Brown.

Listening to Kun's selections is like visiting a world both familiar and strange, a sort of parallel universe that is disorienting, eye-opening, exciting. Spanish and English intermix, as does slang and proper diction.

Riffs on such rock 'n' roll standards as "Chain of Fools" by Aretha Franklin and "Hush" by Deep Purple are often comical and always playful.

Overall, it's an eclectic grab bag of rock, pop and folk.

The two halves of Kun's show, its visual and audio components, add up to a whole far greater than the sum of its parts.

No matter where you start, art happens when adventure-some individuals fantasize about something different from their daily grinds. What happens next is anyone's guess. But that's where culture comes from: the impure mish-mash of imagination and reality and the verve to bring together the two.

Steve Turner Contemporary, 6026 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 931-3721. Ends Nov. 14. Closed Sundays to Tuesdays. www.steveturnercontemporary.com.