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Joe "King" Carrasco and the Crowns

Carrasco to play on Union Plaza today

Carrasco's live shows span spectrum of locomotive rhythms

By Charles Lieurance
Staff Reporter

Austin's Joe "King" Carrasco, unrivaled monarch of Tex-Mex New Wave music, will perform a free concert this afternoon from 3:30 to 5 p.m. on the Nebraska Union Plaza. The event is sponsored by the University Program Council's Concerts and Coffeehouses Committee.

Band Preview

Carrasco came barreling out of Texas in the late 1970s like a cross between Georgia's B-52s and the heyday of the Sir Douglas Quintet. With farfisa shrieking around a Norteno rhythm section, Carrasco's band, the Crowns, conquered bars across the nation before turning out a self-titled party masterpiece on vinyl in 1981. Carrasco's hiccupy tenor guided the band through melodic ethno-pop that could be touching, as on the outlaw weeper "Federales," or just serve as mindless dance music.

The album was critically acclaimed and landed Carrasco and the Crowns a recording contract with MCA for their second LP, "Synapse Gap." 1982's "Gap" is a little harder to digest than the debut album, with an emphasis on Carrasco's new-wave side. The cover depicts Carrasco floating in the Milky Way, and the album is similarly spacy. The combination of psychedelia, earthy ethnic dance music and Devo-esque musical pranksterism was a new, if not entirely accessible, idea. Still, the album contained enough pure pop influence to call the faithful onto the dance floor.

By 1982, Carrasco had developed a loyal myriad of followers throughout the bars of the nation's midsection, and his shows here in Lincoln were always jam-packed with the king's eager serfs. Carrasco's live shows are dance extravaganzas, spanning the spectrum of locomotive rhythms, both foreign and domestic. Carrasco's rhythm guitar slashes cleanly between the beat, giving the music the same propulsive jump as the finest ska. Kris Cummings' ? and

the Mysterians farfisa blankets the rhythms in 1960s garage exuberance. The Crowns are exhaustive performers without peer.

The "Party" LP in 1983 brought the Carrasco sound back down to earth with 10 variations on the theme of the McCoys' "Hang on Sloppy." The approach here is pure, derivative party music that might be accused of outright plagiarism if it weren't for Carrasco's indomitably carefree attitude. He knows he's not doing anything new and he couldn't care less. There's not a note, musical phrase or even song here that hasn't been played, often to better advantage, by someone else. Still, somehow it works, and halfway through the third song you start to forgive the impish upstart and give way to his glorious fetishes.

That album's "Tears Been a Fallin'," however, with its calliope-driven melancholy, is perhaps Carrasco's crowning achievement.

Carrasco will also perform Tuesday night at the Royal Grove, along with Lincoln's venerable Charlie Burton and the Hiccups.

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