

LIVING LA VIDA LOCA AT CLUB INTERNACIONAL

The 11-piece grupo de banda churns out the brassy, frenetic music of rural Mexico from the Club Internacional stage onto a huge dance floor jam-packed with rancheros - with their cowboy hats and fake Versace shirts - and cholos, most of whom look maxed-out on Fubu.

The Latinas look too sweet and innocent - clutching virginal white teddy bears sold on the premises - to be in this smoky southwest Detroit honky-tonk. Or they look hardened and streetwise - as they chain-smoke and constantly check their dark eyeliner and lipstick.

The patrons dance as if in flux. To the quick almost skalike beat, they hop wildly from one foot to the other, appearing to never gain solid ground on either border. They hurl their elbows in sharp angles as if fighting their way through a resistant crowd. Some of the men let loose with a grito, the shrill yelp that is a Mexican tradition and sounds like a primal mix of joy and pain. Many of the young look like they're having the time of their lives.

Club Internacional is not just a club. It is an outpost of rural Mexico, and occasionally parts of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, clashing with the badass streets of Detroit. On Friday and Saturday nights, up to 3,000 people pay \$25-\$35 to enter this pink cinderblock building on a ragged section of Fort Street to hear songs of their homeland.

They are songs of bitter, haunting loss. Other times they are raunchy tales of adventure wherein the protagonist battles la migra (United States immigration officers) and drug lords. Or they are desperate songs of love.

Sometimes these songs come in the form of Puerto Rican salsa or Dominican merengue bands, such as Grammy-nominated act Elvis Crespo, who performed here in April. Mainly, they are banda and narco-corrido groups from west-central Mexico, the region where the majority of recent Mexican immigrants in southwest Detroit originate.

Despite the bulging crowds, the club is controversial within the barrio. I know many Latinos, let alone non-Latinos, who will not come here.

Actor-comedian-brilliant race relations analyst Chris Rock once said no one hates niggers more than black people. Apply that same logic to Latinos and those who have succumbed to la vida loca - or at least to the wardrobe and mannerisms - and you get an understanding why some avoid Club Internacional. Despite a security force dressed in black paramilitary garb and armed with rottweilers, I did not feel at ease among some of these

drunken, macho souls who have nowhere else to party.

As I was in line waiting to be patted down by security, the cowboy in front of me wore a belt with the words "Detroit" and "Jalisco" stitched into it. Jalisco (say ha-lease-co) is a state in Mexico. In fact, the last time I saw this cowboy was in Jalisco, specifically his hometown of San Ignacio Cerro Gordo, a town of about 12,000. (It is estimated that up to two-thirds of the town's residents have some relations in Detroit.) I was there for a story. This guy, who is in his mid-30s and didn't want his name in print, was there to pick up his 16-year-old bride.

Club Internacional is testimony to the vigorous, chaotic energy Latino immigrants have brought to southwest Detroit. Those immigrants have the bravery-desperation to move into streets infested with crack houses and gangbangers and appear to have brought the entire barrio close to stability.

Club Internacional comes from the entrepreneurial spirit that's spawned dozens of thriving small businesses catering to Latinos. That would include the illegal ones. Like the pirate Spanish-language radio station that lasted for almost a year before it was busted by the FCC. Or the restaurant someone opened in a house on the street where I grew up.

And about those darling little shirts of the rancheros: Many rancheros favor long-sleeved silk shirts with the garish, bold designs of Versace, which was surely the original source. These have a uniquely rural Mexican twist.

One patron wore one with an Uzi machine gun, a marijuana leaf and a fighting gamecock that formed some unholy trinity on his back. Another simply had one checkered with marijuana leaves. He was standing right next to an hombre who had the Virgin of Guadalupe - patron saint of Mexico - on the whole of his back.

To complete the look, rancheros usually wear white or black Stetson cowboy hats, tight, creased blue jeans and cowboy boots with fancy patterns. Do these macho studs have any idea they are on the verge of a gay cliché?

Club Internacional is for a particular subculture within a subculture. And for those outside that subculture, you will likely feel much more comfortable at places like the Parabox on Saturday night or Los Galanes restaurant on weekends. And, though it is certainly part of the city's cultural landscape, it will likely never be part of the brochure and information package handed out by the Southwest Detroit Business Association - no matter how many Grammy-nominated acts are booked to play there.