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Primal groove

by David Kirby

There's a restlessness churning just beneath the surface of Kan'Nal's music, lurking between the tribal percussion thump and the growl of a blurred, fuzzed-out electric guitar line. It will come across as a rush, or an aimless respite dressed in an acoustic-guitar filigree, or the strains of an urging, pleading, vaguely desperate rasp of a vocal line.

This is music that asks as many questions as it tries to answer, and if it sounds like a work in progress, that's exactly what it is. Music that shoots for the soul doesn't always find its target, but it's in the reaching that a connection is made.



We caught up with lead singer and primary songwriter Tzol (we tried to coax his birth certificate name out of him, but he wasn't biting) last weekend, as the band was resting up for a weekend stint at the Fox with Otis Taylor and an opening gig for Michael Franti at the Fillmore. He says the band really got its start as a gathering of like-minded players and artists in the hills of Guatemala.

"I'm from Austin originally. I'd been in bands since I was 15, but singing was really my passion—singing and songwriting," says Tzol. "I decided around 19 or 20 that I really wanted to travel and learn to play guitar, and after traveling around awhile I ended up at Lake Atitlan in Guatemala. About six or seven years later, I met [guitarist] Tierro. He and I started playing and writing, and we developed this whole idea of a band that included artists and dancers, a complete experience. The band came together down in Guatemala about 2001."

Kan'Nal came to the attention of longtime producer and New Age multi-instrumentalist Dik Darnell. The young band embraced some of the same dedication to spiritually inclined music that fueled his own solo work, with roots deep in Mayan and other New World mythologies, and it was at his urging that the now 11-piece band settled in Boulder a little over a year ago. They have since become semi-regulars at the Fox, staging a unique live show that includes dancing and what could best be described as neo-tribal performance art. That may sound contrived in a dressed-down musical world these days, but the music which throbs at Kan'Nal's core—an edgy elixir of post-alternative howl, buoyant Latin acoustic guitar, dark metallic drone and propulsive percussion—burns with a rare, unique passion.

"The hippies who come out to see us will say, 'Hey these guys actually rock', while the rock fans will comment that we're a hippie band," says Tzol. "I guess we're kind of the missing link."

"But that's OK," he continues. "We get people from 18 to 65 to come out to see the show. It's pretty hard to really identify our audience as a single group."

For now, the band is working toward consolidating a solid Denver-Boulder following, getting their CD out and picking up where they left off on the festival circuit.

They'll be packing some strong medicine. We noted that we found some of the new tracks on their website—previews of their first real-thing CD due out in spring—surprisingly dark, almost menacing. The graphic elements of the band's website, the bright costumes—you're lulled into this sense of a marketplace festi-
vale, all joyous and communal and peasant-simple. But the songs we heard call upon a primal power, surging with uncertainty and the throes of tortured identity.

"It's not all light," says Tzol. "I think that's the point of the songs, and in some ways about the band itself. There's a lot of darkness in this world, too. It's about finding balance."

Kan'Nal plays with Otis Taylor at 9 p.m., Friday, Jan. 14, at the Fox Theatre, 1135 13th St., Boulder, 303-443-3399, with Michael Franti and Spearhead at 8 p.m., Saturday, Jan. 15, at the Fillmore Auditorium, 1510 Clarkson St., Denver, 303-837-1482, and at 10 p.m., Saturday, Jan. 15, at Dulcinea's 100th Monkey, 717 E. Colfax Ave., Denver, 303-832-3601.

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