

Music

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A SPOTLIGHT BENT THROUGH A PRISM

Teri Gender Bender of Bosnian Rainbows

by Allyson Polsky McCabe

Bosnian Rainbows is the latest passion project of Omar Rodriguez-Lopez, the Grammy-winning producer and musician. Rodriguez-Lopez is widely regarded as brilliant but fickle; either way, he is nothing if not prolific: to date he has produced more than 40 albums and released more than two dozen solo albums. He's been involved with many bands and side projects—the Mars Volta and At the Drive-In are among the most prominent—and has collaborated with a diverse group of artists that includes Damo Suzuki, John Frusciante, and Lydia Lunch.

Rodriguez-Lopez's current outfit, Bosnian Rainbows, features Deantoni Parks, on drums and keys, and Nicci Kasper, also on keys; Rodriguez-Lopez plays guitar. The three are long-time collaborators: Parks and Rodriguez-Lopez played together in the Mars Volta and the Omar Rodriguez-Lopez Group, and Parks and Kasper, together with vocalist Sylvia Gordon, are founding members of the band KUDU. New to the Rodriguez-Lopez mix is Bosnian Rainbow's 24-year-old vocalist Teresa Suarez, better known as Teri Gender Bender.



Teri Gender Bender and Bosnian Rainbows. Photograph: Allyson Polsky McCabe

Gender Bender founded the Mexican garage punk band Le Butcherettes while still in her teens. Though the band has been through several lineups, in its original incarnation Le Butcherettes was an all-female duo. In 2009, the group won the Best New Artist award at Mexico's Indie-O Awards, along with the prize for Best Punk Record for their self-produced EP, *Kiss & Kill*. During their live performances, members donned elaborate costumes to symbolize women's domestic enslavement, using blood, flour, eggs, meat, and a real pig's head as props. Gender Bender earned a reputation for being wild and unpredictable at shows, often climbing the rafters, hanging upside-down above the stage, sometimes even urinating on the floor.

While performing with Le Butcherettes during a power outage in Guadalajara, Gender Bender was “discovered” by Rodriguez-Lopez. Impressed by her talent and theatricality, he signed the band to his label, Rodriguez-Lopez Productions, eventually producing and playing bass on their 2011 full-length debut *Sin Sin Sin*. The following year, Gender Bender contributed lyrics and vocals to Rodriguez-Lopez’s 22nd solo effort, *Octopus Kool Aid*, and appeared in *Mi No Y Esperanza*, an as yet unreleased film that Rodriguez-Lopez wrote, directed, and produced. Le Butcherettes have recorded a sophomore album, but the record has been put on indefinite hold as Rodriguez-Lopez shifts the spotlight onto *Bosnian Rainbows*.

With regard to past projects, Rodriguez-Lopez has admitted to being, in his words, a “musical dictator,” exercising full creative control. He would write all the music, including the parts played by his fellow musicians, which he would then record individually. Though at first he had billed *Bosnian Rainbows* as a variation on his project the Omar Rodriguez-Lopez Group, he is now promoting the group as a genuinely collaborative effort, a claim that appears to be borne out by the band’s self-titled debut album, which was recorded in only eight days and released in June.

The album has elements of alt-rock, art-rock, goth-rock, synth-rock, psych-rock, prog-rock, and electronica, which, depending on how much coherence you expect from a band’s debut, is either good or bad. Relative to Rodriguez-Lopez’s back catalogue, the new tracks are generally more succinct and accessible—dare I say even radio-friendly, particularly the bright and poppy “Torn Maps” and the dreamy and melodic “Turtle Neck.”

Bosnian Rainbows’s live performances echo this vibe of close-knit eclecticism. The band has been touring together for nearly a year. On stage, Gender Bender appears barefoot in a simple black dress, with her bandmates directly behind her in a tight formation: drums, keyboards, and electronics are fused into a single unit, with Rodriguez-Lopez alongside on guitar. The band is focused and energetic. Gender Bender stares, sweats, and sways hypnotically. Her vocals are powerfully emotive but they’ve lost some of their raw aggression, and there is no more swinging from the rafters. Dispensing with her former stage antics has served Gender Bender well. Her recalibrated presence is formidable, and she has more than enough chops to keep up with her seasoned band-mates.

Before a recent show in Connecticut, Gender Bender described herself as shy and socially awkward. She explained to me that she’s always pursued musicianship out of necessity, as a means of self-expression. Still very young and in the early stages of her career, she feels she’s maturing and learning a lot in *Bosnian Rainbows*. In contrast to the volatility of *Le Butcherettes*, she describes her new band as democratic, positive, and balanced.

Wondering what’s next for Gender Bender is more interesting than questioning whether *Bosnian Rainbows* is a truly collaborative project with staying power rather than just another of Rodriguez-

Lopez's temporary aliases. Though only in her early 20s, Gender Bender has already been compared to established frontwomen like Karen O, Siouxsie Sioux, PJ Harvey, Johnette Napolitano, and even Grace Slick. Her 2012 NPR Tiny Desk Concert, where she performs stripped-down Le Butcherettes songs on an acoustic guitar, gives a sense of her singular depth and intensity. She has a great chance of sustaining success. This may not be dependent, though, on how well she practices Bosnian Rainbows' enlightened "*con vivir*" philosophy, with the emphasis it places on togetherness; rather it will depend on how she skillfully she manages to negotiate her creative independence.

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