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Going Out Guide

Off-the-wall WORKOUTS

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LINDA DAVISON/THE WASHINGTON POST

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ADAM COHEN

Rana Santacruz, a Mexico City native-turned-New Yorker, recorded his debut solo album in Spanish but says he's likely to record in English in the future.

Crossing borders and genres

BY DAVID MALITZ

Rana Santacruz's music bears many similarities to a genre we might call "NPR rock."

A handful of his acoustic creations have

IF YOU GO

RANA SANTACRUZ

Saturday at 8 p.m. at Artisphere, 1101 Wilson Blvd., Arlington. 703-875-1100. www.artisphere.com. \$18; \$15 in advance.

collaborations between Iron and Wine and Calexico.

There's just one major difference that sets Santacruz's songs apart — he sings in Spanish. For many American listeners, that's a non-starter, and it means Santacruz is often cast off into the world music wilderness.

"It is an obstacle," the Mexican-born Santacruz says about finding an American audience. "Just the definition of world music here — if it's 51 percent sung in a language that is not English then it's world music, regardless if it's Mexican or African or Middle Eastern or whatever."

A few better descriptions have been tossed around — "Mexican bluegrass," "Irish mariachi" — but it's an uphill battle to

fight the preconception that world music is some sort of academic curiosity, to be appreciated like a museum piece.

"I kind of want to transmit the idea that you don't have to be opening a National Geographic magazine to listen to this kind of music," he says. "It's way closer to the day-to-day city life than you think."

Santacruz (who turns 39 on Saturday) has lived in Brooklyn since relocating from his native Mexico City 10 years ago. The move represented a career shift, as Santacruz left behind his Rock en Espanol band La Catrina to adopt a more diverse sound, combining his love of Irish bar-rockers the Pogues and bluegrass with the ranchera sound of his home town. It came together on his solo debut, 2010's "Chicavasco," which feels less foreign than familiar.

"I love the idea of making a lot of noise

with acoustic instruments," Santacruz says. You can hear that throughout "Chicavasco." The songs are filled with banjos, guitars, trumpets, accordion and more — always lively, but stopping short of raucous.

"No Puedo Mas" is close to a hoedown, and "El Ranchero Punk" is a speedy romp, if not quite as wild as its title indicates. But "El Funeral de Tacho" is more representative — it's a full-bodied, accordion-and-trumpet-driven waltz that covers the topic of death in both a romantic and lighthearted manner. "I would've left him there to be eaten by the dogs / I would've left him there to rot on the mountain / but I don't want the priest to come yelling 'round my house,'" the translated lyrics read.

Santacruz plays banjo and guitar but spends most of his time on accordion. It's not an instrument he has been playing his

whole life. About 10 years ago, a friend inherited a house from a recently deceased grandparent, and Santacruz moved in as a roommate. While rummaging through one of the rooms, he found an accordion and was instantly drawn to it. He still doesn't consider himself a virtuoso — "I play enough to play my songs," he says — but by making it the foundation of his songs, it has helped define his sound.

Adding an accordion on top of Spanish lyrics might not be the recipe for stateside success, but Santacruz is wary of making changes for the sake of appealing to a wider audience. He tried a song in English a few years ago, and it made him a bit too self-aware. And he says the language barrier actually helps when he performs.

"A lot of my songs have stories behind them, so I like to give a little introduction to what they're about," he says. "People like when I do that. And then I go to Mexico, and since everyone speaks Spanish, I don't have to do that. So there is something missing from my live shows."

He speaks English nearly perfectly and admits that he'll almost certainly sing in that language again in the future. "I'm not a purist: It's Mexican and you have to sing in Spanish! I'm not like that," he says.

That might be the tactic that gets Santacruz on the radar of more casual music fans. But he has already proven with "Chicavasco" that a language barrier isn't much of a barrier at all.

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THE DOWNLOAD

For a sampling of Rana Santacruz's music, check out:

From "Chicavasco":

"El Funeral de Tacho"

"No Puedo Mas"

"Ojitos de Maguey"

