

# MerleFest Mix 'n Match.

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## LOS LOBOS' MUSICAL *MÉNAGE À TROIS* BRIDGES THE EAST-WEST CULTURAL DIVIDE

**W**ILKESBORO, NC (May 1, 2012) – Some things identify us; some bring us together. Music can do both. California and Appalachia are generally associated with different kinds of grass. But last weekend those stereotypes disappeared when the veteran Grammy-winning Chicano rock band [Los Lobos](#), from East L.A., teamed up with Kentucky's Bluegrass mandolin great [Sam Bush](#) and blues/gospel/R&B artists [Susan Tedeschi and Derek Trucks](#) to top off the second full day of music at [MerleFest](#) in the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

Held annually on the campus of [Wilkes Community College](#), MerleFest brings together and mixes a variety of traditional and progressive folk, country, and alternative music that at times is as breathtaking as it is unlikely.

Every seat was taken in front of the Watson stage, and blankets and chairs covered the 100 or so yards of grass behind them as thousands listened to these Grammy winners fill the evening air with sounds that were both strange and familiar – like opposites morphing into harmony.

Hawaiian guitarist [George Kahumoku Jr.](#) says that he can tell what part of Maui a slack-key guitarist is from by the way he plays, and he can tell on which street the guitarist



Steep Canyon Rangers at MerleFest

learned by how he tunes. Growing up in the late 50s and 60s in West LA, it was easy to tell what part of town someone was from by the music they listened to.

And you can tell Los Lobos is from East L.A.

East L.A. is just an hour to the east, but beyond the geography the two parts of town shared little but the County hospital and juvenile hall.

On the West side, the boys wore high-top Converse All Stars or go aheads, and smeared zinc-oxide on their noses for protection from the rays. The Kingston Trio was huge, and so were Joan Baez, the Limelighters, Chad Mitchell Trio and the Beach Boys. Westside kids wearing light blue Levi's, sandals and T-shirts went to the Ash Grove, the Garret, the Blue Grotto, the Fifth Estate, the Epicurean, the Unicorn, the Snail, the Insomniac, the Bit or to Doug Weston's [Troubadour](#), where they might see Elton John,

Linda Ronstadt, the Eagles, The Byrds, Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Carole King, Bonnie Raitt, J.D. Souther, Jackson Browne, Van Morrison, or the Buffalo Springfield. Later, the Kaleidoscope, a club run by Skip Taylor and John Hartman in Hollywood, was the short-lived scene for 60s psychedelic bands. If you tried, you might even find the Dillards playing somewhere.

To the Chicanos across town, starched khakis, spit-shined [French toe shoes](#) and pressed [Sir Guy](#) shirts were *de rigueur*. The weekend hot spot was the [El Monte Legion Stadium](#). There, DJ Art Laboe would promote dances with entertainment by Chuck Higgins or the Viceroyes. In the parking lot, radios played “*To the Aisle*,” Rosie and the Originals’ “*Angel Baby*,” “*You Cheated*” by the Shields, “*Pachuko Hop*,” or Santo and Johnny’s “*Sleepwalk*.”

Midway between these two cultural enclaves was the Black ghetto of South Central L.A., better known as Watts. There, DJs Hunter Hancock and Dick “Huggy Boy” Hugg drew Blacks, Whites and Latinos to Central and Vernon avenues, where they broadcast R&B on station KRKD from the window of [Dolphin's of Hollywood](#) record store. In his obituary, [LA Weekly](#) wrote: “Huggy Boy’s call-in shows . . . became a communal salon for Southern California Chicanos, a living museum where Huggy Boy shot the shit with three generations of listeners and everyone eventually dedicated “Angel Baby” to La Sad Eyes in Tustin.”

**W**hat Huggy Boy was to Chicanos, Hancock was to Blacks. And he was so much a part of the Black music scene that audiences at public appearances were surprised to learn he was White.

“Nowadays,” Hancock told the *LA Times*, “we call it rhythm and blues. Without



**Los Lobos brought their Chicano rock to MerleFest 2012**

realizing it, I became the first disc jockey in the western United States to play R&B.” Ironically, although I knew Los Lobos’ music I first saw them in Appalachia, not L.A. East and West L.A. are a world apart and it never crossed our minds to head east to see a band when so much was going on closer to home.

**T**he road to racial equality had high-profile moments in the United States including the murder of Medgar Evers in Mississippi in 1963, the March on Washington and just four weeks later the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, the Selma to Montgomery marches and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. But all racial inequality was not in the South; Los Angeles had a more subtle way to keep the Blacks and Latinos away from the White neighborhoods, using deed restrictions and covenants to limit the transfer of property.

Chicanos for the most part lived in the barrios of East L.A., an unincorporated section of Los Angeles County, and there were restrictions on what jobs they could get.

[The Watts riots](#) of 1965 showed the world that L.A. had much in common with the South, and the consequences there were greater than what had been seen in Mississippi and Alabama: 34 people died, more than 1,000 injured and \$40 million in property was burned or damaged. Nearly 50 years later, there still is not much cross-town cultural pollination. Chicanos and Blacks may head west to go to the beach or for entertainment, but few from the West Side have the occasion to head to East L.A.

So thank you, MerleFest, for letting me see my hometown band without having to go home. –