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New trio could make Emmett a Juno bride

Former Triumph guitarist happy to have ended two-decade feud

By Adrian Chamberlain, Times Colonist March 13, 2010

IN CONCERT

What: Pavlo, Rik Emmett and Oscar Lopez

Where: McPherson Playhouse

When: Saturday, 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$45 (tel. 250-386-6121)

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With his new group, Rik Emmett might achieve the one thing Triumph never managed -- winning a Juno.

Emmett first made his name as an incendiary rock guitarist three decades ago. Now he has joined a trio with fellow guitarists Oscar Lopez and Pavlo. Last week, their debut recording, *Trifecta*, was nominated for a Juno award in the best instrumental category.

Emmett's old band, Triumph, was regularly nominated for Junos but never won (although the group was inducted into the Juno Hall of Fame in 2008).

"We were always the bridesmaid," he said with a laugh from his Toronto home, "never the bride."

Renowned for his fleet-fingered chops, Emmett is a Canadian guitar hero who played with Triumph in the 1970s and '80s. Lopez is an accomplished Latin musician originally from Chile, while Pavlo (full name Pavlo Simtikidis) is a Greek-Canadian who brings a Mediterranean/Arabic flavour to the ensemble's sound.

Trifecta comes from the old horse-racing term, in which the bettor correctly identifies the horses coming in first, second and third. The name is a tongue-in-cheek nod to the high calibre of these musicians.

A listen to the the trio's instrumental disc shows what the Juno buzz is about. Trifecta, featuring all-original material, reveals an impressive level of musicality and skill. Gentle world-music influences and rhythmic precision make for a shimmering, tasteful collection of tunes.

Emmett, 56, said the trio has been together almost three years. It was his manager -- who also manages Lopez and Pavlo -- who roped in the rock guitarist. The three first played together in the summer of 2008 at the home of Pavlo's parents in Toronto. After consuming dinner ("a huge spread," recalled Emmett) and plenty of wine, the three musicians jammed. Everyone agreed the chemistry was there.

What made Emmett interested in the project, aside from the musical skills of his colleagues, was the fact that each man brings a distinct sound to the table. Lopez, for instance, is an instinctive, hot-blooded player, while Emmett's approach is more methodical.

Once, on a road trip to a gig, the musicians discussed who would be who if each musician represented earth, wind or fire. "Everyone was in agreement that Oscar's the fire," Emmett said.

Emmett whipped up his own share of sonic blaze with Triumph, back when shaggy manes and double

electric guitars were the rage. Most of the the prog-rock band's albums went gold in Canada. Emmett quit in the band in 1987 and had a falling out with bandmates Gil Moore (drums/vocals) and Mike Levin (bass).

The quarrel, in part, was over how to divide Triumph's lucrative publishing catalogue following Emmett's departure. "But there was a dispute over all kinds of stuff," he said. "It went a lot deeper and a lot wider than just that."

For two decades, Emmett cut off contact with his former bandmates. That ended when his brother, who was dying of cancer, expressed a wish that Emmett end the feud. The guitarist contacted Triumph's old manager, who acted as a diplomatic "Henry Kissinger" in bringing the men together again.

"It was a huge, cathartic experience for me," Emmett said.

The reconciled Triumph even reunited for several concerts. In the summer of 2008, they played the Sweden Rock Festival along with Whitesnake, Electric Light Orchestra and Judas Priest. There was also a show at the Rocklahoma rock festival in Pryor, Okla.

But it's not like Triumph is back in business, says Emmett.

To play the 2008 shows, Moore (whose main business is running Metalworks recording studio in Mississauga) had to work hard to re-build his drum chops. After the concerts, Moore -- an avid golfer -- said he preferred hitting long drives to playing rock.

Still, Emmett was touched that his bandmate had made the effort. The friendship was rekindled.

"It meant a lot to me, more than I can actually say," he said.

Triumph's legacy lives on with the new trio. One of the songs Pavlo, Emmett and Lopez play is Lay It On The Line -- a 1979 single that's likely Triumph's best-known tune.

Emmett suggested it after Pavlo and Lopez pressed him for a Triumph song to cover.

"I think Lay It On The Line lends itself best to the whole idea of fiery Latino guitar players having a rip at it."

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