

Ninety Years of Latin Music at The Hollywood Bowl

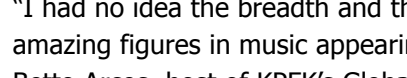
by Agustín Gurza

Most major cultural institutions in Los Angeles took time to warm to the idea of diversity. Until the 1950s, when whites still made up almost 90 percent of the county's population and minorities were still geographically segregated in inner-city neighborhoods, the city's arts establishment was content to cater to that seemingly homogeneous majority culture. It would take the social upheavals of the 1960s for society at large to accept the multicultural concept that multiple cultures can be appreciated on an equal par.

The Hollywood Bowl, however, stands out among these institutions as a pioneer in cultural diversity before that term even entered the popular lexicon. Since its very inception, the lineup of artists featured on the stage of the fabled outdoor amphitheater has included artists from Mexico, Latin America and Spain. The Bowl didn't need political pressure, a cultural revolution or a population explosion to voluntarily open its doors to Latino performers. On the contrary, multiculturalism seems to have been an artistic cornerstone of the venue almost since it was carved into the hillsides of Bolton Canyon.

Nowadays, however, Latinos and other ethnic groups have become the majority in Los Angeles and diversity as a policy has become commonplace. Perhaps because memories are short, the Hollywood Bowl, summer home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, doesn't always get full credit for its long-running practice of sharing its prestigious stage with Latino artists working in a wide variety of musical genres, from classical to mariachi, romantic boleros to hard-driving salsa and Latin jazz. In the past year, there has been much ado, and rightfully so, about the arrival of **Gustavo Dudamel** as the Philharmonic's latest Music Director. The appointment of the charismatic young Venezuelan was hailed by some as the ultimate fulfillment of the progressive vision of the Bowl's founders: The notion that the elite world of classical music was indeed accessible to all, regardless of race, social status or national origin.

Many of those cheering the move as a breakthrough, however, may not have been aware that more than half a century earlier, two Mexican classical composers and conductors—**Eduardo Vigil** and **Carlos Chávez**—had taken up the baton as guests of the Philharmonic, performing on separate occasions at the Hollywood Bowl during its first two decades.



Eduardo Vigil

At long last, that forgotten history is now being showcased as part of a new exhibition at the Hollywood Bowl Museum titled "Música y Sabor: Latino Artists at the Hollywood Bowl." As the outdoor venue approaches its 90th anniversary, the multi-media exhibition highlights the participation of Latino artists in every one of the nine decades since it was founded in 1920. Even for veteran observers of the Latin music scene in Los Angeles, the exhibition is bound to be an eye-opener.

"I had no idea the breadth and the depth of the history with so many amazing figures in music appearing at the Bowl over the decades," says **Betto Arcos**, host of KPFF's Global Village and a consultant on the exhibition. "They've been inviting Latin artists of all kinds, from classical to popular music, and they've been doing it every step of the way from the very beginning. There was this progressive, forward-looking thinking behind all of those shows, and you have to give them credit. Nobody else was doing that."

A Unifying Vision For a Divided City

The new museum retrospective shows that Latin music programming at the Bowl was inconsistent and uneven, with ups and downs throughout its history. But considering the state of race relations in Los Angeles during the Bowl's first, formative decades, what's remarkable is that it featured any Latin programs at all in the early years. In the seven decades before the Bowl was founded—from the time of the U.S. victory in the war with Mexico and the resulting white expansion westward—the Latino population in Los Angeles had been falling steadily and precipitously. By 1920, the year the first outdoor show was held on the current bowl site, Mexican-Americans had gone from being a majority in the city to being a small minority.

For at least the next three decades, powerful forces in Los Angeles aggressively attempted to suppress multi-cultural mixing. Racist real estate practices, legally written into deeds, worked to contain minorities to their ghettos and barrios. Meanwhile, during the swing era, police crackdowns violently suppressed the street exuberance of Chicano Zoot Suits while municipal policies worked quietly to discourage young whites from "slumming" in South LA at the hopping jazz clubs along Central Avenue.

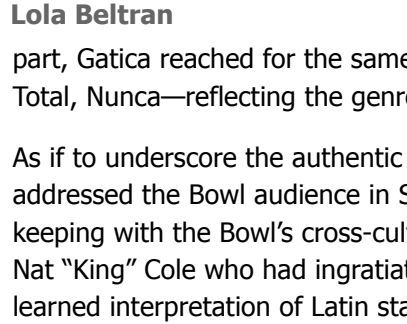
The Bowl was born and raised, so to speak, in that segregated environment. And though it was no inter-racial utopia, its founders shared the era's progressive faith that music, when democratically shared, could bring people together. Thus in 1924, during only its third official season, the nascent venue offered its very first "Spanish Program," featuring **Eduardo Vigil** y Robles, the bearded and bespectacled Mexican opera conductor, and soprano **Alma Real**, also from Mexico City, who sang folk songs in costume. Remember, this was a time when Mexican-American children still attended segregated public schools and Mexican men were still being publicly lynched in California. Despite the overt racism and the dwindling demographics, the Bowl quickly established itself as a safe harbor welcoming Mexican artists.

Over the years, the Bowl managed to keep its pulse on cultural trends in Latino arts, and even occasionally feature the avant-garde in some fields. The 1937 appearance by **Chávez**, perhaps the most renowned of Mexican classical composers, was a case in point. That year, the Bowl's 16th season, Chávez led the Philharmonic (without a baton, as was his preference) in an eclectic program that included Rossini's "William Tell Overture" and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 ("Pathétique"). The composer's own Sinfonia India, written the year before, captured the spirit of the explosive nationalist movement in Mexican arts that celebrated the country's indigenous cultures, which suffered discrimination at home. As Chávez once explained, he sought to project "what is deepest in the Mexican soul." That same ethos fired the imagination of Mexico's great muralists, such as **David Alfaro Siqueiros** who had earlier shocked LA's arts establishment with his controversial anti-imperialist mural, "América Tropical," painted at Olvera Street in 1932.

But while the city's scandalized cultural elite immediately ordered the Mexican mural whitewashed, along with its central figure of a crucified Indian, the Hollywood Bowl would continue to feature concerts with Chávez as guest conductor, right through the 1960s. By then, concerts featuring Latin music of all kinds, both classical and popular, had become a regular part of the Bowl's annual programs.

The Bowl Celebrates a Golden Era in Latin Pop Music

During the 1940s and 50s, the Bowl's Latin programming became safe and predictable, often reflecting the mambo dance craze that swept America with watered-down versions of Afro-Cuban music. In 1943, bandleader **Xavier Cugat** starred in a program titled "Latin American Fiesta," emceed by **Desi Arnaz**, the young Cuban who would become a trailblazer of television sitcoms with his red-headed wife, his conga strapped over his shoulder, his shock of hair dancing on his forehead and his screams of "Babalú!". The Bowl show also exuded Hollywood influence with the on-stage appearance of actors **Clarence Nash** and **Jose Oliveira**, who voiced the **Donald Duck** and **Joe Carioca** characters from **Walt Disney's** animated feature film "Saludos Amigos." The animated cartoon figures also appeared on the program cover along with a third stereotypical figure, a gun toting Mexican rooster in a big sombrero. Pure Americana!



Lola Beltran

Sixteen years later, the Bowl would once again turn South of the Border, but this time for genuine Latin music, unprocessed through a Hollywood filter. In 1959, the venue featured a show starring two superstar vocalists, Mexico's **Lola Beltran** and Chile's **Lucho Gatica**. Simply titled "Pops," the concert faithfully embodied the best of Latin music from the post-war decade, specifically the boleros and rancheras that were so popular throughout Latin America at the time.

The songs performed that night represented perhaps the last truly great era in Latin pop music, before rock 'n roll had a chance to invade and overpower global pop culture. It was a repertoire composed of such beloved standards that a reprise of the very same concert might be a draw today. The dignified Beltran offered classics—**Paloma Negra**, **Cucurruucu Paloma**, **Que Bonito Amor**—that helped define the golden age of mariachi music which dominated pop culture in Mexico for three decades, from the 1940s through the 1960s. For his part, Gatica reached for the same gold standard in his set of boleros—**El Reloj**, **La Barca**, **Total**, **Nunca**—reflecting the genre's international origins in Cuba and Mexico.

As if to underscore the authentic quality of the evening, emcee **Ricardo Montalban** addressed the Bowl audience in Spanish, with apologies to non-Latinos in the crowd. But in keeping with the Bowl's cross-cultural spirit, the show was co-hosted by American crooner **Nat "King" Cole** who had ingratiated himself to Latinos the year before with his phonetically learned interpretation of Latin standards on his hit album, "Cole Español." The suave Mexican actor Montalban directed the orchestra under the direction of his compatriot, composer, pianist and arranger **Chucho Zarzosa**. Anybody even casually familiar with Mexican pop music at the time would have recognized the name of the bandleader who worked with the biggest pop stars of his day—**Pedro Vargas**, **Agustín Lara**, **Toña La Negra**—and whose credits are listed on scores of popular Mexican recordings.

That show sent a signal that Latin pop music was to be appreciated for its own intrinsic value and on its own terms. The following decade, the Bowl built on that premise with big shows featuring artists from across the Latin music spectrum. In 1966, for example, one such concert, under the music direction of local Latin jazz luminary **Rene Touzet**, featured mariachi singing stars **Miguel Aceves Mejia**, **Tito Guizar** and **Lucha Villa**, as well as Afro-Cuban stalwarts **Xavier Cugat** and **Miguelito Valdés**. LA's own **Nati Cano**, head of **Mariachi Los Camperos**, served as the evening's "director of Mexican folklore."

Though classier than the large vaudeville style revue, the show resembled in its size and variety the typical Latin tours called "caravanas," or caravans, that typically toured the Southwest in the 1960s, playing popular Mexican venues like downtown's Million Dollar Theatre. The title of the show—"The Bowl Goes Latin"—was a common phrase used in the 50s and 60s, often on recordings by U.S. artists doing Latin-themed albums, which seemed almost de rigeur in those days. As if to underscore its total commitment to the repertoire, the Bowl's program that night carried a headline that took the concept a step further: "The Bowl goes Latin all the way."

Beatlemania at the Bowl, Chicano Style

The Bowl's showcasing of international Latin stars didn't always satisfy local audiences. While big on mambo, flamenco, samba and mariachi, the venue was late to embrace the talented Mexican-American musicians making exciting pop music in its own backyard.

In Southern California, Chicano rock traces its roots to such 1950s Top 40 hits as **Ritchie Valens' "La Bamba"** and **The Champs' "Tequila."** But it really flourished during the 1960s in East LA where a dynamic garage band scene fused Latin stylings with doo-wop and R&B to create the fabled "Eastside Sound," bringing national attention to a handful of top exponents such as **The Midneters**. In the barrio, the movement was such a powerful cultural force that the musicians were seen as "symbolic shamans who led their audiences in their inborn passion for musical expression and life," writes UCLA musicologist **Steven Loza** in his comprehensive study, **Barrio Rhythms: Mexican-American Music in Los Angeles** (University of Illinois Press, 1993).

Clearly, it would be important for Mexican American fans to see one of their bands take the stage at a hallowed cross-town venue like the Hollywood Bowl. That milestone was marked in a most memorable way when **Cannibal** and the **Headhunters**, a pioneering Chicano rock band, opened for **The Beatles** at the Bowl in August of 1965, the year before **Carlos Santana** formed his own band that would come to define Latin rock.

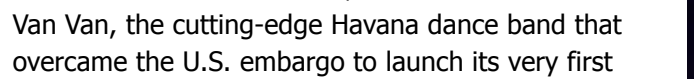
The **Headhunters** had been formed barely one year earlier. The vocal quartet was composed of four young friends from Eastside brothers projects, **Richard ("Scar") Lopez**, **Frankie ("Cannibal") Garcia** and the **Jaramillo** brothers, **Robert ("Rabbit") and Joe ("Yo Yo")**. They quickly scored their one and only Top 40 hit with "Land of a Thousand Dances," featuring **Cannibal's** famous novelty hook ("naaaaa, na-na-na-na"), created by chance one night when he forgot the lyrics during a live performance at an Orange County club.

For those now legendary Bowl shows, East LA fans came out in force to give their hometown boys a welcome that rivaled Beatlemania. "They rocked the house that night!" said UC Riverside Ethnic Studies Associate Professor **Anthony Macias**, author of **Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968** (Duke University Press, 2008). "Mexican Americans still remember that performance because it showed how we can break through to the mainstream culture on our own terms, without going Hollywood, without being too schmaltzy. It proved that pop culture is important, even if it's not political. Black and brown representation in such a venerated highbrow venue sends a powerful social message. Here are these kids from East L.A. singing soul music on that famous bandstand, under that shell, opening for **The Beatles**. Back then it proved we could make it in a white man's world."

Retrenchment and Recommitment

During the 1970s and 80s, the Bowl retreated from its Latin pop experiments, falling back on more conservative, classical programming that was respectable but not daring. The venue seemed to be taken over by Spaniards—**José Carreras**, **Plácido Domingo**, **Paco de Lucia** and **The Romeros**. And by Brazilians—**Middle Mendes**, **Flora Purim**, **Eliane Elias**.

While the Bowl settled into a easy-listening middle age, **Southern California** saw the start of a massive explosion in the immigrant population from Mexico and Latin America. Mostly young and working class, these new Angelenos would pose a new challenge for the Bowl and its managers: How to reach a growing audience from a different culture whose members were largely unaware of the Bowl's history and prestige as an entertainment venue. To this day, some major Latin pop stars still don't recognize the importance of playing the Bowl, says concert promoter **Martin Fleischmann**, who co-produced the Bowl's salsa festivals and many other Latin music shows at other locations.



Flora Purim, 1979

Playboy Jazz Festival impresario and veteran Philharmonic executive, the late **Ernest Fleischmann**. "For Latin artists of all kinds, it should be a goal to play there. The Bowl is a pinacle."

Toward the end of the 1980s, there were signs that agured a new direction. In 1987 and again in 1989, the **Playboy Jazz Festival** featured one of the most provocative and groundbreaking artists in all of Latin pop music, Panamanian singer/songwriter **Ruben Blades**, who had launched a brilliant solo career on Elektra Records in 1984. Blades would return repeatedly during the next decade, including once in 1997 for a thrilling reunion concert with Nuyorican bandleader **Willie Colon**.

Once again, the Bowl stage resonated with the most powerful expressions of Latin pop music. The venue came roaring back in the 90s with a series of shows that spotlighted two enduring strains of popular music: **The Mariachi USA Festival**, now in its 22nd year, and the **Hollywood Salsa Festival**, which ran for seven consecutive years during the salsa revival sparked by the rise of young Nuyorican singers **Marc Anthony** and **La India**. At the same time, the **Playboy Jazz Festival**, which had featured West Coast Latin jazz greats like



Willie Colon

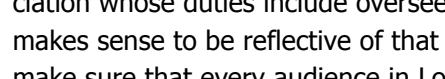
Willie Bobo and **Mongo Santamaria** since its very first year at the Bowl (1979), intensified its programming with a roster that reaches like a who's who of the genre—**Tito Puente**, **Poncho Sanchez**, **Arturo Sandoval** and **Chucho Valdés**. In 1997, the festival featured **Los Van Van**, the cutting-edge Havana dance band that overcame the U.S. embargo to launch its very first U.S. tour. That show put the Bowl at the center of an exciting and historical cultural opening between Cuba and the United States.

More To Come

The most recent decade has been the biggest for the **Mariachi Cobre**, 2010 in terms of the number and variety of Latin artists who performed there. The programming has become so diverse in the past decade that Latin and world music in general are now inextricably intertwined in the venue's musical DNA. In fact, it's getting more and more difficult to speak of a mainstream in the Bowl's cultural identity, distinct from ethnic sub-cultures. They all make up a musical fabric as colorful and textured as Southern California itself.

For that reason, it's equally difficult to single out highlights from the last ten years. In past decades, Latin concerts stood out precisely because they qualified as special attractions. Today, it would be ludicrous to use that quaint promotional term, "The Bowl Goes Latin," for any one concert, because the Bowl now "goes Latin" almost every week.

In fact, the Bowl has even managed recently to fill some gaps from previous decades, booking legendary artists it missed the first time around, such as **Brazil's** Milton **Nascimento** and **Gilberto Gil**. At the same time, it provided a spectacular stage for the debut of many emerging artists. As **Betto Arcos** notes, Mexico's folkloric diva **Lila Downs** made one of her first major international appearances at the Bowl in 1999 during the **World Festival of Sacred Music**. The 2000s also saw the debut at the Bowl of some big names in Latin alternative music, such as Mexico's **Café Tacuba** and Colombia's



Gilberto Gil

Ateliercopeland, not to mention appearances by the major U.S.-based stars of Latin rock, **Santana**, **Los Lobos** and **Ozomatli**.

Clearly, the Bowl has come a long way from that first "Spanish Program" in 1924. No longer content to just dabble in Latin music as a sideshow, the Bowl now serves as an indispensable showcase for Latin music in Southern California. Indeed, The Bowl is helping to keep the music alive at a time when the record industry seems stuck in a recession and the popularity of specific genres, such as salsa and mariachi, has waned. For example, although the Cuban music craze peaked ten years ago and quickly faded, the Bowl still drew a sold-out crowd of 17,000 to a concert on August 24, 2011, featuring **The Buena Vista Social Club** and **Omara Portuondo**, along with Cuban trumpet virtuoso **Arturo Sandoval**. It's a good bet that The Bowl is the only venue that can still draw that size audience for a Cuban concert in Southern California.

Omara Portuondo

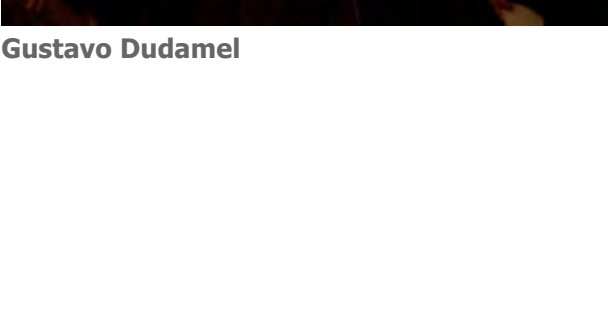
Of course, the crowning achievement for The Bowl in its determined march toward diversity was the arrival of **Dudamel** two years ago as the Philharmonic's new Music Director. All of LA came out to welcome the maestro from Venezuela in a free concert at The Bowl on October 3, 2009. The title of the show in Spanish—**¡Bienvenido Gustavo!**—served as a signal that the venue as an institution had become openly and totally inclusive, from top to bottom. The pride of Latinos was palpable that night as they flocked into the outdoor amphitheater for a five-hour show of gospel, jazz and folkloric music, capped by the orchestra's performance of **Beethoven's** triumphant **Ninth Symphony**, with a fireworks finale.

For Latinos in Los Angeles, that concert was a cultural shot in the arm, arguably the most significant Latino cultural event of the young 21st Century. It declared, "We have arrived." For the city as a whole, the night was also significant, for it symbolized the ideal of cultural unity, echoing **The Bowl's** founding philosophy.

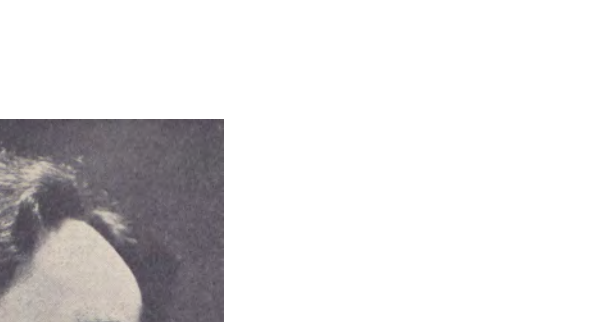
"We live in the most diverse city in America and some say the most diverse city in the world," says **Arvind Manocha**, chief operating officer of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association whose duties include overseeing jazz and world music programming. "So it only makes sense to be reflective of that and engage with the broader community. I want to make sure that every audience in Los Angeles thinks that that there's something for them at the Hollywood Bowl."



Gustavo Dudamel



Carlos Chávez



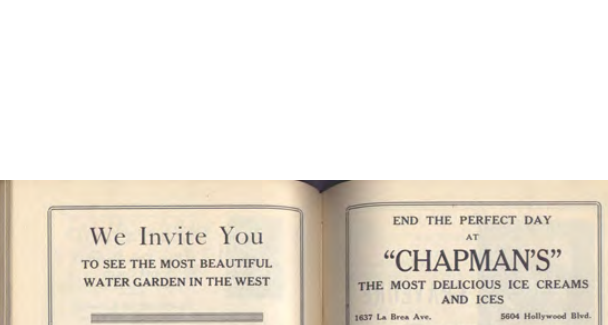
Xavier Cugat



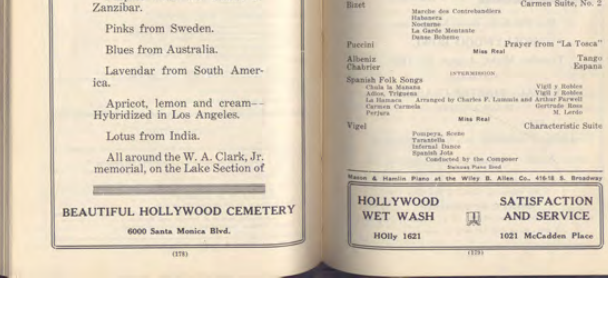
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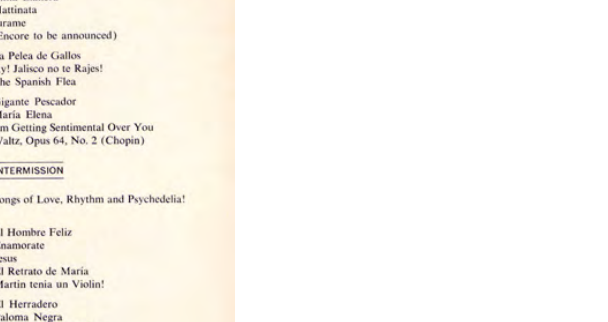
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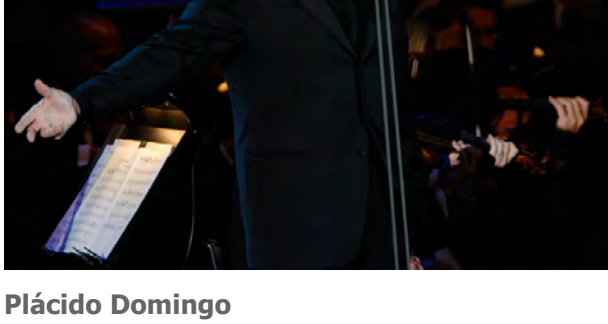
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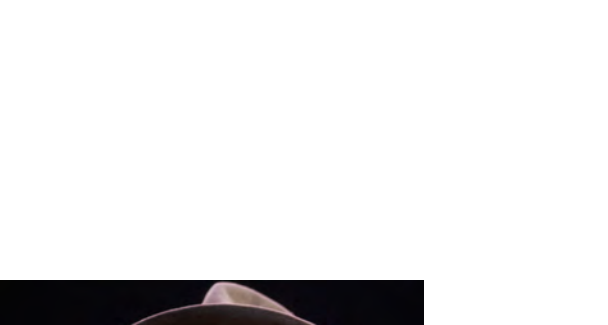
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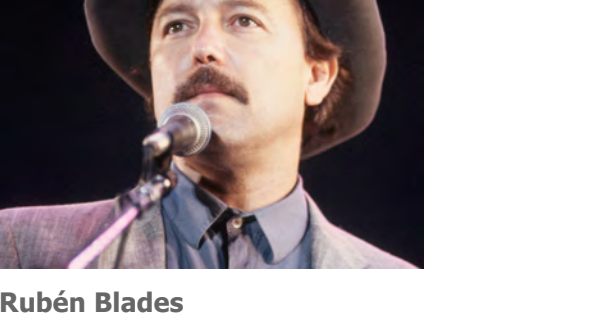
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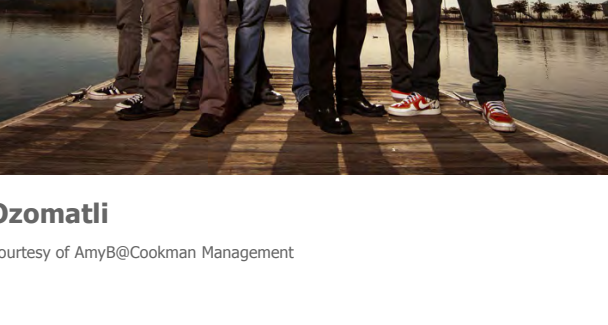
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