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NASHVILLE - The Mavericks are an aptly named collection of iconoclasts. The lead singer is Cuban-American, they pop open country music with a rock twist, and this month, the Mavericks began a tour of hotel lounges at the beautiful Timonium Holiday Inn outside Baltimore.

In between these idiosyncratic lines comes "From Hell to Paradise," the Mavericks ' first project for MCA Records. It is one of the most powerful debuts of the year, either in the country or rock fields.

"From Hell to Paradise" carries the big, twangy, loud drums sound of early Steve Earle, which makes sense, because Mavericks ' engineer Chuck Ainlay also worked with Earle. The Mavericks push country boundaries with an aggressive rock attitude, which Earle unsuccessfully (at least, commercially) has attempted. And their songwriting is remarkably sophisticated for a young band.

But what really works in the Mavericks ' behalf is the fact they don't have much to do with Nashville. The band is based in Miami, and outside a few obligatory visits to Music City, such as a recent radio seminar, they are free to be, well . . . Mavericks .

"When we started, we were kind of a 'Spinal Hat,' " said drummer Paul Deakin in a recent interview at the Opryland Hotel here. "We actually evolved into country music."

The Mavericks were formed in fall, 1989. Lead

singer-songwriter and guitarist Raul Malo was playing bass and singing backup with older and fuzzier guys who covered cool artists like Buck Owens. (A honky-tonk version of the Buckmeister's "Excuse Me (I Think I've Got a Heartache)" appears on the new record.) Deakin had played funk and punk for six years in progressive Miami area bands before fellow future Maverick Robert Reynolds hipped him to Patsy Cline and Johnny Cash.

Malo moved to lead vocals and rhythm guitar, Deakin took over guitar and Reynolds traded in guitar for bass. The Mavericks began playing in outposts such as Little Haiti, outside Miami.

South Floridians were captivated by such wrecks on the beach. Successful in Miami

"The band was started for the right reasons: to play, with no idea of what was going to happen," Malo said. "People started coming out, and before you knew it, every place we played was packed. We'd get thrash kids, the punks and heavy metal kids with Mohawks thinking we were the hippest thing in town, then we'd get older people coming out because we were playing country music."

Playing country music in Miami made it easy for the Mavericks to create their own style. "On one hand, we were so different, we were like an alternative band by playing the most traditional music," Reynolds said. "But on the other hand, it was difficult because we weren't exposing ourselves to country audiences. The country bars around Miami are strictly Top 40."

The infamous Club Elvis, halfway between Miami and Fort Lauderdale, is a prime example. Club Elvis is a nice place, but it books only Top 40 country bands.

"Places like that wouldn't even let us do a featured set," Deakin said. "They are very close-minded. But we knew one thing. We wanted to play originals - but they're country originals. You can't go into a rock club, say you're a country band and expect to play there. So we'd tell a rock club we were an 'original band,' they'd let us in, we'd play 'I Fall to Pieces,' and everyone would scream."

The Mavericks found greater support with Miami radio, specifically, KISS-FM. The radio station put several cuts from "The Mavericks," an independently produced tape released in October, 1990, into regular rotation.

That got the buzz going.

The Mavericks then won opening slots for T. Graham Brown and Lee Greenwood. And a copy of "The Mavericks" was given to regional promotional man Joe Deters, who passed it on to MCA Nashville president Bruce Hinton. In May, 1991, Tony Brown, MCA's executive vice president and head of artists and repertoire, flew the band to Nashville for a showcase. MCA, home of country legends such as George Jones and Reba McEntire, offered a deal before the Mavericks finished the soundcheck.

Brown was the executive producer of "From Hell to Paradise." In a separate interview, he said, "These guys do have that Steve Earle-Austin,

Texas, sound. But I don't think I intentionally did it that way. That's just the way it came out."

But after Brown cut the basic tracks for "From Hell to Paradise," he did add guitarist David Lee Holt to fill out the Mavericks' punch. Holt had just come off the road with Carlene Carter. Before that, he was the guitarist of Antone's house band in Austin, Texas, and toured with fellow Lubbock, Texas, native Joe Ely.

"The reason this band has so much substance is that it doesn't listen to radio trying to be a country band," Brown said. "South Beach in Miami has the same kind of vibe Austin, Texas, has. And it is the only country band down there. So to be a country band in South Beach, you have to put on a damn hard show. Nashville doesn't have a real live club scene. All our clubs have a lot of showcases, and it gets pretty boring."

The Mavericks' edgy sound centered on Malo's vocals. His vibrato captures the tension of Patsy Cline and Roy Orbison; his sense of drama comes from profound phrasing, especially in fragile originals like "This Broken Heart" and "Children."

#### American influences

Malo, 26, was born as Raul Martinez-Malo in Miami, but his parents, Raul and Norma, are from Cuba. The Malos owned an all-American record collection that incorporated seminal Sun Records artists, Bill Haley and Hank Williams Sr. (a raucous cover of "Hey, Good Lookin'" was the Mavericks' debut video).

"They had all that stuff in Havana," Malo said, speaking from under a big black cowboy hat. "Before Castro, Havana was a happening town. Anything that was happening in America was happening over there. And they brought it all over. I grew up listening to those records."

Malo's family figures into the record's title track. The cresting "From Hell to Paradise" recalls a 30-year wait to make 90-mile trip from Cuba to Miami to escape political oppression.

"It is an anti-Castro song," Malo said. "About 30 years ago, my aunt (Dolores) lived in Havana. She was very anti-Castro and pro-American. She was running underground papers, keeping very active. One day, Castro was riding through the streets of Havana. She broke out from a barricade and called him every name in the book. She was hauled off to

jail.

"For 30 years, she couldn't leave the island. Then, 30 years to the day of that incident, she left and came to America. Somebody asked her what it felt like and she said it was like going from hell to paradise. In Spanish, it sounded really pretty, 'Del Infierno al Paraiso.' It was such a neat phrase, a simple phrase when you think about it."

Malo concludes the song by singing in Spanish, over a fiddle and tiple, a soprano guitar: (a translation) "With tender eyes someday I'll look at you, with open arms someday I'll embrace you, my old Havana, someday I will return."

Malo, who was last in Cuba 12 years ago, is not worried about people overplaying the Cuban connection. "Ask my grandmother what I am, and she will say I am an American," he said. "That's what I am. But if they want to play up the Cuban, I also am that. I am an American-Cuban."

"Then the way Raul writes around that voice of his - his lyrics remind me of '70s album-oriented rock 'n' roll, like Jackson Browne," MCA's Brown said. "A lot about the Mavericks is that I feel the music when I hear it, but I don't have to analyze it. To me, that's what made the Beatles great. If you listen to a lot of the old country music, some of it is so silly, there is no way in hell we would cut those songs today. Yet we treasure those songs. They (old artists) just did what they do."

"The Mavericks? Raul just writes these songs, and they just play and sing the hell out of them."