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Singer/songwriter Nano Stern brings Chilean roots music to Cactus Café

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Monday, Nov. 3, 2014

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By Nancy Flores - American-Statesman Staff

As a young boy in Chile, singer-songwriter Nano Stern's earliest music memories were of his grandfather's hypnotic accordion. Stern's grandfather had escaped Nazi Germany and moved to South America carrying his prized possession. It wouldn't take long before Stern picked up an instrument himself. In fact, by preschool Stern had already become obsessed with the violin and begun lessons. Today, the multi-instrumentalist, whose style offers a fresh take on traditional Chilean music, has gained a loyal following throughout Latin America.

Stern, one of the rising voices of Latin American folk music, will perform at the Cactus Café on Nov. 8 as part of his first North American solo tour. Stern made his American debut this spring during South by Southwest, where he found it challenging to introduce his indie-folk-rock-jazz fusion given the "overwhelming amount of music just flooding the city." Despite the intensity, he says he managed to connect with the audience on a personal level, something that's not always easy to do during short SXSW showcases.

Stern, 28, says he's looking forward to returning and experiencing a taste of non-SXSW Austin. Ahead of Stern's performance, he chatted with us about

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CONTRIBUTED BY GONZALO DONOSO

Chilean songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Nano Stern will perform at the Cactus Cafe on Nov. 8.

being a musical activist and Chile's rising music scene.

Austin American-Statesman: Under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, folk musicians wound up in exile and people were in danger if caught listening to certain musicians. Given Chile's complicated relationship with folk music, was that something that was readily available when you were a kid?

Nano Stern: I lived my early youth under the end of Pinochet's dictatorship, so there was very little access to the great tradition of Chilean music. Most of the Chilean music that

was allowed to air was very superficial pop songs and completely stylized folk music which was a (fascistic) version of the real thing, so I was not at all attracted to it. Through my violin studies, I came in contact with the classical music repertoire and was very much into it, until I hit puberty, and rock 'n' roll came into my life.

Slowly as things in the country started changing, the tradition of Chilean music from before the dark military times started to circulate again, and I came across it in a number of ways and contexts. Today, I feel enormously privileged to be able to be playing with and learning from many of the same people who created that amazing music some 50 years ago. I have the feeling that kids in the future won't really believe me when I tell them I once toured with Inti-Illimani (Andean folk-rock legends), just as it's very hard for me to grasp that they once played with (early Chilean folk music icons) Victor Jara or Violeta Parra.

Some musicians prefer not to weave social justice or politics into their music. Why are those themes important to you?

I think that you should sing about what moves you. And growing up in such an unfair society such as Chile's, it just happened naturally that I started writing inspired by that need for a more just reality. Also, there are such strong referents in the tradition of Chilean song who have given their lives in order to stand up for their message, that it is very hard not to follow their brave example. The more massive my reach as an artist becomes, the more I feel the responsibility to use that opportunity not only to shine as an individual, but to contribute to social well-being, to the vindication of those in need, to the illumination of those dark causes, which are tremendously important for us as a whole.

We're seeing a lot of emerging talent from Chile in the

Stith: Rocky start, then rock, hip-hop and much more at Fun Fun Fun

Latin alternative scene. What's the Chilean folk music scene like?

It's hard to separate scenes here. There is a very beautiful energy around young artists in Chile now, and even beyond the arts. I believe my generation is very unprejudiced and capable of producing important change at the very base of our society. In that context, folk music is a very strong player, which connects us directly with our tradition and identity, with the struggles and achievements of our people. I'm very proud, and also lucky to be a part of this particular moment in Chilean history.

IF YOU GO

What: Nano Stern in concert

When: Nov. 8

Where: Cactus Café

Time: Doors open at 8 p.m.

Cover: \$20 in advance; \$22 at the door

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