

El Cantante

salsa music for the eyes

Cinematographer
Claudio Chea

Director
Leon Ichaso

Digital Intermediate Colorist
David Cole

Main grading tool
Autodesk Discreet Lustre color grading system

El Cantante was the signature song and nickname of Hector Lavoe, a Puerto Rican pop star who conquered the Latin music world during the 1970s. He started the current worldwide salsa music phenomenon. It's also the name of an upcoming biopic about the singer, starring real life husband and wife Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez.

Lavoe's life encompassed the peaks of celebrity and success as well as the valleys of sordid personal tragedy. The filmmakers behind *El Cantante* devised a wide array of looks and textures to portray Lavoe's life and times over the course of three decades.

Cinematographer Claudio Chea and director Leon Ichaso shot scenes in 35mm, Super 16mm, and Super 8mm film formats. They collaborated with digital intermediate colorist David Cole at LaserPacific in Hollywood to integrate the different film formats and fine tune the various looks and time periods.

"Most movies have four or five looks at the most," says Cole.

"This film had closer to 20. It's not a gratuitous use of color because the story lends itself to that kind of manipulation, partly because it spans such a long period of time. There are scenes where he is headlining at Madison Square Garden, and other times when he's shooting up drugs or smoking in a crack house.

Early scenes where Lavoe gains popularity in 1960s Puerto Rico were graded with a vibrant, lush, postcard feeling. Some shots depicting home movies were photographed in the Super 8 film format, including a trip to the beach in Puerto Rico and other family festivities.

Cole also wrote plug-ins for the Autodesk Discreet Lustre color grading system, which was his main tool on the project. One plug-in allowed the filmmakers to adjust intensities for each layer of color in a particular image for shots that had been photographed in color but appear in the film closer to black-and-white. "Draining the color out of a shot seems simple," he says. "But with this plug-in we could create a different luminance in the blue, for example, and create a substantially different overall effect in a black-and-white image. We could also mix back in a certain percentage of color.

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Lavoe has inevitable setbacks, including drug addiction and emotional meltdowns. Two scenes that take place in a New York City crack house provided opportunities to create a disturbing visual design. Those scenes were shot in Super 16 format.

"We really pushed the crack house scenes into quite a surreal world," says Cole. "We used golds, yellows and greens, and real thick color to add a hyper-reality to depict the desperation."

The film features at least eight musical numbers. Situations range from the stage at large arenas to the streets of Puerto Rico. Chea and Ichaso wanted to make viewers feel present at the performances.

Throughout the film, milestones in Lavoe's career are marked through the use of album covers mixed with other graphic elements. Cole had an opportunity to grade some of the elements before they went to the visual effects house to be blended into montages.

Sometimes we'd really push it to create a newspaper kind of grain or texture."

Another plug-in devised by Cole allowed the filmmakers to use an "out-of-registration" effect similar to the fringing seen in poorly printed magazines. That effect was only used in two shots to conjure a shocking, surreal image. He also used plug-ins to delete period-inaccurate details like satellite dishes.

In all, Chea and Ichaso spent about three weeks in the digital intermediate suite at LaserPacific. "The director had never done a DI before but he loved it, and hit the ground running," says Cole. "It was a complex undertaking but he was totally focused on using these tools to tell the story. Even though we have a wide variety of looks, and some of them are extremely stylized, they were always used to demonstrate or underline a story point. Our aim was never to be ostentatious. That was the exciting and rewarding thing about this project - using the technology creatively to serve the story."



1 Actress Jennifer Lopez in a scene from *El Cantante*, shot by DP Claudio Chea. Courtesy of Nuyorican Productions and R-Caro Productions. Photo credit: Eric Liebowitz.