

Intoxicating cocktail:
Pink Martini, with
singer China Forbes and
founder/pianist Thomas
M Lauderdale seated
together at front



ALICE LEVITT

The world is their dancefloor

Pink Martini – a multi-lingual, genre-busting band from Portland, Oregon – are on a mission to bring back romance and beauty. They talk to Jane Cornwell

The 12 musicians crammed on stage in El Floridita, a basement club in London's Soho, are, if the hype is anything to go by, the new face of... well, no one is exactly sure what. Snappily dressed in suits and ties, vocalist China Forbes in figure-hugging satin, this ensemble from Portland, Oregon, segue from Latin, jazz and pop to lounge, swing and world music with category-defying flair.

Originally sound like standards: an upbeat show-tune makes way for an Afro-Cuban rumba. A big band number is followed by a catchy ditty in French. There are songs in Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Greek, Croatian. Assisted by the showmanship of pianist Thomas M Lauderdale, the vibe is elegant, old-school danceable. Cocktail music for internationalists, perhaps. "If life is a cabaret, they are the band in the existential orchestra pit," said Variety.

Whatever you call their sound, their name – Pink Martini – is one to remember.

Hang On Little Tomato, Pink Martini's second and current album, went straight in at number one on Amazon's best-seller list. It is currently zooming up the European charts; in France, where they are particularly loved, it has hit the commercial top 10. Their

music continues to be used in film and TV (including *The Sopranos*), and splices up innumerable compilations.

Their fan-base is diverse, and growing. Not bad for an indie collective with an aversion to major record companies (their own label, Heinz, is named after Lauderdale's labrador), whose self-sufficient, pan-global aesthetic lets them perform what, where and with whom they want – a list that includes the choir from Lauderdale's old high school in Portland, more than 25 major orchestras across America, and Shura Stein. Collaborations with the likes of the Los Angeles Philharmonic help fund regular tours at home and abroad.

"Our culture needs a commitment to beauty right now," says Lauderdale, 34, a dapper, diminutive chap in black-rimmed specs, over lunch with Forbes the next day. "It needs romance, optimism, a sense of community." The Harvard graduate founded Pink Martini in 1994, ostensibly as an opening act for political fundraising events. "The music of these functions was either techno or really bad '80s D.I.A. I decided to create an exquisite musical wallpaper, a utopia of songs and rhythms from different parts of the world."

Music that, whether

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rivers, public broadcasting or, more recently, the presidential campaign of John Kerry to distant cousin of Forbes' represented an America that was multi-lingual, outward-looking, ready for dialogue. Oh, and fun. "It's like being a character from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*," grins Lauderdale, who wore little black dresses to some of the band's early gigs.

Political awareness came early for Lauderdale, who has postponed long-held ambitions to be mayor of Portland. One of four adopted children – "I've an Iranian and two black siblings; I'm the mystery Asian" – he moved from rural Indiana to Oregon aged 12.

"My father ran off with a German boy who worked in my parents' plant nursery. So we had to get out," Lauderdale Senior is now an openly gay pastor at the Peace Church of the Brethren in south-east Portland. The family remains a model of tolerance. "Everyone's the best of friends. My father even married my mother and her new husband." Singing hymns in his father's church, he adds, nurtured his love of beautiful melodies. "I never paid any attention to the lyrics, but I always thought *Nearer My God to Thee* was lovely."

The mixed-race Forbes, 35, all quirky glamour and sky-high cheekbones, was working as a singer-songwriter in New York

when Lauderdale asked her to replace Pink Martini's original singer, whom he'd just fired. "I remembered our nights at Harvard, singing operatic arias and doing kooky versions of *The Way We Were*," she says. "So I let myself be lured to Portland."

The band released their debut album, *Sympathique*, in 1997. Featuring vaguely kitch takes on such standards as *Bolero*, *Brazil* and *Que Sera Sera*, it went on to sell 650,000 copies,

boosted by heavy rotation on influential California radio station KCRW. That same year they travelled to the Cannes Film Festival, where they played at a fund-raising auction for the American Foundation for AIDS Research. Elton John and Ringo Starr joined them on stage; MC Shara Stein elbowed her way up and danced. "People were going crazy," Forbes grins.

Portland, they say, is the right sort of laid-back, affordable place for independent music. Some 600 bands, including the Dandy Warhols, are based there. Pink Martini's members moonlight with other groups, while Forbes has plans to release her own pop/folk album down the track. *Hang On Little Tomato* is titled, inspired by a 1964 ketchup ad in *Life* magazine, depicting a single tomato clinging to a vine benefits from such a free-thinking approach.

Lauderdale co-wrote the poignant *U Plan Zora* with Maria Lalić, his Croatian next-door neighbour; *Una Notte a Napoli* has input from Alba Clemente, an Italian stage and TV star of the 1970s, as well as DJ Johnny Dynell of infamous New York club Jackie O. "We never wanted to pander to that 'Will it sell?' mentality," says Lauderdale. "When you do that, you're doomed."

The fact that Pink Martini do sell, a lot, is put down to their wide-ranging appeal. "Everyone loves us," says Forbes. "Children, Dogs, Grandmothers. Most of our musicians are classically trained, so we're sophisticated enough for even the stiffest classical music fan to find a way in."

Then, of course, there are those who love to dance. Together. "In clubs today people tend to stand facing the DJ, isolated, lost in their own worlds. We help people connect with each other again."

Not everyone gets this, of course. "The FBI recently asked us to play their Christmas party." They shake their heads in disbelief. "OK, we've got a diverse audience," smiles Lauderdale. "But I mean, how ridiculous is that?"

Hang On Little Tomato is selected by Winter Records on Monday. Pink Martini play the Festival Hall, London SE1 (0870 401 8555) on April 2.