Listen to this: Mabe Fratti’s experimental cello pop

The opening notes of “Kravitz”, which kicks off Mabe Fratti’s 2024 record *Sentir Que No Sabes,* are lodged in my brain permanently. It’s not a showy album, by any means. But there’s something about the buzzing of her cello, plucked as you might an upright bass. The way they ring out before coming to an abrupt stop, fuzz still hanging in the air, set against a simple kick and snare sat firmly in the pocket. There’s something industrial about the way it all comes together, like a jazzy “Closer.”

Then come Fratti’s paranoid lyrics in Spanish about ears in the ceiling and someone listening through the walls, and the slightly atonal horn blasts. In the back half, the arrangement blooms with big piano chords, and the drums pick up steam. It’s the perfect opening to a record that sees Fratti taking her experimental impulses and working them into something that more closely resembles pop music, straying further from her avant-garde roots.

Fratti was born in Guatemala, but operates out of Mexico. She’s told *Pitchfork* that, as a child, her parents mostly played Christian and classical music around the house. But as a teen, she discovered Limewire and the works of experimental composers like György Ligeti. This more expansive, internet-fed musical diet is on display in tracks like “Pantalla Azul.” It flits about, toying with various styles from goth rock to new age, but always coming back to the strength of Fratti’s melodic instincts. Meanwhile, “Oidos” leans fully into chamber pop, with echoed cello stabs, plaintive trumpet, and what sounds like an autoharp.

Even when the arrangements are stripped down, *Sentir Que No Sabes* sounds lush and enveloping. It would feel equally at home in a coffee shop or on an arena stage. The production from I. La Católica (Héctor Tosta) is the glue holding together Fratti's frantic stylistic shifts and jagged cello manipulations. It would be easy for the delicate horns, atonal pizzicato strings, and icy digital synths to sound like several different albums stitched together haphazardly. Instead, the undercurrent of unease and lightly crushed drums form a thread tying all the disparate pieces together.

That's not to say there aren't moments of full-on experimental freakouts. Fratti indulges her more abstract musical inclinations on interludes like "Elástica" I and II, but the brilliance of *Sentir Que No Sabes* is in how it repackages her experimental instincts into something more approachable and downright catchy at times.

A comparison often thrown around when discussing Fratti's music is Arthur Russell, and it makes sense. Russel was also an avant-garde cellist with surprising pop instincts. But he rarely married those two sides of his music as directly as Fratti does. For the most part, he had pop songs, and he had experimental compositions. Over her last few albums, both as a solo artist and as one half of the duo Titanic, Mabe Fratti has sought to break down those walls.

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