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Orlando's best hip-hop act has battled hurricanes, eviction, and a city that didn't want them. Now, with a major album and a headlining tour, are Sol.illaquists of Sound ready to call Orlando home?

By [Justin Strout](#)



Andrew Spear

Amidst the bustling bodies, droning overhead announcements and hurried goodbyes at a Chicago airport, Alexandra Sarton could only hear her own voice repeating itself: "They can't leave."

It had been a long week of inspiring performance, commerce and, most important, family. A dozen or so Orlando friends — artists, painters, poets and rappers — had pooled their money to visit her and share the experience of showing their craft to a big-city audience. But they had all flown back to Orlando, with the exception of the two in front of her: Glen "DiViNCi" Valencia Jr. and Tonya Combs. Sarton had meshed with the Orlando crew; it worked, it fit. And she wasn't willing to go back to

the empty promises of Chicago's underground. Watching Valencia and Combs — both just into their 20s — turn and walk the busy terminal en route to Florida, Sarton knew. These weren't just great friends, a cute couple or musicians with whom she did her best work, though they were certainly all of those things. They were her future, and now standing alone at the drop-off zone, she let the denial fall away until a new thought entered her mind: "I have some packing to do."

"They left on a Sunday and I was here four days later," says Sarton, four years after the fateful decision. "Gave away all my stuff, cleared up all my jobs and drove really fast."

Now 27, Sarton is the earthy den mother and silky vocalist of Orlando's Sol.illaquists of Sound, a group that includes producer Valencia and spoken-word chanteuse Combs, along with firebrand rapper Asaan Brooks, aka Swamburger.

Sarton is outspoken, but her words carry enormous weight within the group, and even when the members of Solilla (as they're known for short) are at their most excitable, she is never talked over. She's also willfully, beautifully bald. It was her presence that took a group of talented musicians experimenting at a now-defunct hippie café, Bodhisattva Social Club, and turned them into national recording artists whose debut for Epitaph Records, *As If We Existed*, will be released this month.

Drop everything

In the late '90s, Brooks was an art major and a disillusioned bedroom-recording artist going by the name Swamburger. He frequently attended open-mike nights at Chicago's Columbia College, and it was there he watched Sarton sing a prayer, a performance that changed everything for him. In Sarton, Brooks saw a movement. Stumbling back to his apartment, he made an announcement to his friends: "We have to stop what we're doing now." He convinced Sarton, a film major, to drop everything and record with him. "We were making a whole album in a week," says Brooks.

The two maintained contact when he followed his parents to Orlando, and together they organized entire hip-hop communities in the two cities, based on a life lesson Brooks learned in a peculiar Columbia elective called Philosophy of Love.

"It's funny how no one loves themselves," says Brooks, explaining his love for his music. "Loving yourself is not

egotistical. The difference between loving yourself and being too into yourself is that you isolate yourself from the rest of the world."

As Nonsense Records founder Kelly Shockley, whose label was the first to house Sol.illaquists, puts it, "Whether anybody wants to admit it or not, Swam has laid down the foundation for music in Orlando."

Brooks was reaching people, but none more so than the teenage Valencia, who for reasons only vaguely coherent began referring to himself as a "soliloquist of sound."

When Valencia hits the pads, it's not unusual for tears to hit his cheeks. Sensitive and insightful, the man who once dreamed of being an inventor loses himself utterly in his onstage antics. Valencia's compositional weapon of choice is an MPC, essentially an elaborate drum machine that can also be programmed with virtually any sound, from classical strings to movie clips, and Valencia "plays" it with intensity unrivaled in hip-hop. When Sol.illaquists hit the road last year, one blogger wrote that he was "a madman," and that he "played the MPC like Yo-Yo Ma plays the cello."

Valencia began helping at Brooks' meetings, throwing money in a collective pot intended to get everyone to Chicago where Sarton was waiting. "It was the focal point of every meeting at that point," says Valencia.

He found creative soulmates in Sarton and Brooks, a family in their movement, and most surprisingly, a wife in a diminutive, curious New Yorker who couldn't tear herself away from the group's poetry night.

Tonya Combs had to get away from Ithaca, N.Y., and massage was as good an excuse as any. By the time her friends convinced her to check out this experimental two-man show at Bodhisattva, she had focused hundreds of hours of her life at the Florida College of Natural Health learning to help others see beauty in relaxation. Her own concept of inner peace, however, was about to be turned on its head with her introduction to the world of Swamburger and DiViNCi.

Combs fell for Valencia and, on a high from her newfound cradle of friends, worked on her poetry. It wasn't long before Sarton heard her stuff and encouraged her to hit the stage. "It felt so normal for me to be up on stage with them," says Combs. "I thought, 'This feels right.'"

The fourth element

Brooks, Valencia and Combs made the rounds in Orlando in 2002, but something was missing. The final element arrived later that year in a beat-up car flying down the road toward Florida, manned by a sleep-deprived Sarton. "Orlando wasn't even a thought," says Sarton. "It could've been Wyoming, anywhere, and I would've gone. I just wanted to be around them."

"When she came down, it seemed like everybody just combined efforts," remembers Shockley. A flurry of recording followed and the now-officially monikered Sol.illaquists of Sound wrote an entire album of material in a few weeks' time. *4 Student Counsel* was pressed and printed before the team had ever performed as a unit in front of an audience, and in short order became a local word-of-mouth hit.

"We sold a lot, which was really cool because we had all just quit our jobs," says Sarton.

A free-flowing showcase for their message of love, equality and social consciousness, *Counsel* boasted Valencia's wide production range, from drum & bass broken beat to tru-skool East Coast swing and, above all, the give-and-take equilibrium of Brooks' rapid-fire rap delivery, Sarton's neo-troubadour stylings and Combs' shining vocal spirit. "I listened to it for six months straight," says Shockley.

Sol.illaquists of Sound hit the stage in the course of the next year, warming up the crowd for the national acts running through town and listening patiently as established hip-hop acts sang their praises and told Sol.illaquists what they wanted to hear.

"Cee-Lo was huge on us," says Valencia of the Gnarls Barkley frontman.

"We'd get calls from him, but that's about it," amends Brooks. "No one came through," remembers Sarton. "Not even a little."

The next year saw an album of B-sides and unreleased material, *N B Tween Worlds*, and it reflected a mounting frustration with the city they had come to call home. One such track, the uncharacteristically blunt "Orlando," left no Central Florida downtown cynosure — from Glenda Hood to TransCon — untouched. The kingdom of Mickey, however, does not take criticism lying down, and the city had its own words for the group the following year: Get out.

Homeless by default

In July 2004, one week after being named Best Hip-Hop Act by this publication, Sol.illaquists and a group of their supporters appeared before the Edgewood City Council in a failed effort to stave off eviction (see "Are we family?," July 29, 2004). They had been called on a rarely enforced city ordinance that states that more than three adults unrelated by blood, marriage or adoption cannot reside in the same house. "We found out real quick what Orlando was about," says Brooks.

At the hearing, Edgewood code enforcement officer Dick Grabowski said, "We must see that the situation is corrected, but ... I don't want to enforce this code." But the city of Edgewood did.

SOLILLA ON SOLILLA by DiVINCI

4 Student Counsel (released on Sol.illaquy Records 2002, now available through Nonsense Records or iTunes)

Definitely our most sentimental offering. No expectations, no specific theme, just a musical documentation of a family that had finally been brought together. At this point, the four of us hadn't performed together yet. We hadn't met the lion in us.

N Btween Worlds (Recorded 2000-2004, released on Nonsense Records 2005)

First it was mostly just stuff that Swam, Charles Wilson III (now Justin Timberlake's keyboardist) and I had worked on, then we incorporated some songs that Alex and I had done. It's a pretty cool look into what we were coming up with when we all first started.

Sol.illaquists Live (Nonsense Records 2005)

Definitely the most well-received album from us so far. It's a show that we performed at the Back Booth in 2003. I recorded it on a MiniDisc and we were glad to catch such a really intense performance, filled with funny moments, tears, blood and dislocated limbs.

As If We Existed (Anti-/Epitaph Records 2006)

I can't say enough of this album. We really had a great deal of time invested into learning how best each one of us

A month after the hearing and with the group still weighing their options, Hurricane Charley helped them make up their minds. "A tree actually fell on the house and smashed the studio," says Sarton. "So the whole roof of the studio caved in." They took the unsubtle hint, gathered their things and hit the road, possibly for the last time.

"We didn't have a home, so we were like, 'Let's go on a tour!'" says Sarton. Before they left they heard a message on their answering machine that changed everything.

Paul "Sage" Francis, 29, is a major player in the wave of underground rap that's taken hip-hop by storm in the past few years. He played Orlando in 2004 and was confronted backstage by a wide-eyed Valencia clutching a live CD of the Sol.illaquists' much-evolved show.

"Most demo albums are godawful," says Francis. "When I finally listened to the S.O.S. demo, I said, 'Jeez. This is really good.'" Months later he called to offer them a show: a charity event in Providence, R.I., complete with a long set and a sweet spot on the bill. They arrived without the money to get home, but by the end of a career-defining performance the group had sold every record, every T-shirt and anything else bearing their name.

"The crowd absolutely loved them," says Francis. Online magazine 4TWK.com called Sol.illaquists "a must-listen." A week and a half later, Francis asked them to open for him on his next tour.

Serving both as Francis' opening act and his backup band, Sol.illaquists of Sound poured their heart into every night and made a name for themselves nationwide. They earned rave reviews from the attending crowds and set the blogosphere on fire ("Sol.illaquists of Sound kicked my fucking ass," read one posting). They even impressed record executives.

For the record execs to impress the group wouldn't prove so easy. "On the first tour, we met the president of Epitaph [Andy Kaulkin], and we were just ourselves ... so much so that he and Swam started arguing," says Valencia. "Swam was like, 'If he's interested, he can be interested in *us*. Who *we* are.'"

Epitaph *was* interested, it turns out, and invited them to Los Angeles to talk about the future.

By this time, their hometown had come back around to Solilla. Their old landlord had even helped them secure a better house on the outskirts of Orlando.

"What's strange is when we performed Orlando together for the first time, they didn't have much of a fan base there," says Francis. "The second time was a sold-out show. They are getting the respect they deserve."

could contribute to the whole and I feel that everyone's dynamic gets to shine brighter than ever. For now, all I have to say is listen to this album!

Epitaph signed the group to a three-album deal in 2005, and this year brings the first release under that deal, *As If We Existed*.

"There is no better option for these guys," says Shockley, whose Orlando-based label is still the distributor of Solilla's early records. "I can't think of another label that

can handle them better than [Epitaph] can. They're too big for me."

As If We Existed is an epic release in every sense of the word; a historical marker in the evolution of a hip-hop band, a cinematic display of political outrage, social frustration and spiritual heartbreak. From Sarton's crushing vulnerability on "Beautiful Catastrophe" to the apocalyptic violin and Gregorian chorus of "Ur Turn," the new tracks represent just how far the foursome have come since that first good-time album four years ago.

"People who live in Orlando usually don't want to take pride in where they live until something great happens," says Shockley. He maintains that Solillaquists of Sound, in spite of all its domestic issues, will always consider this their hometown. "They would've left a long time ago if they didn't."

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