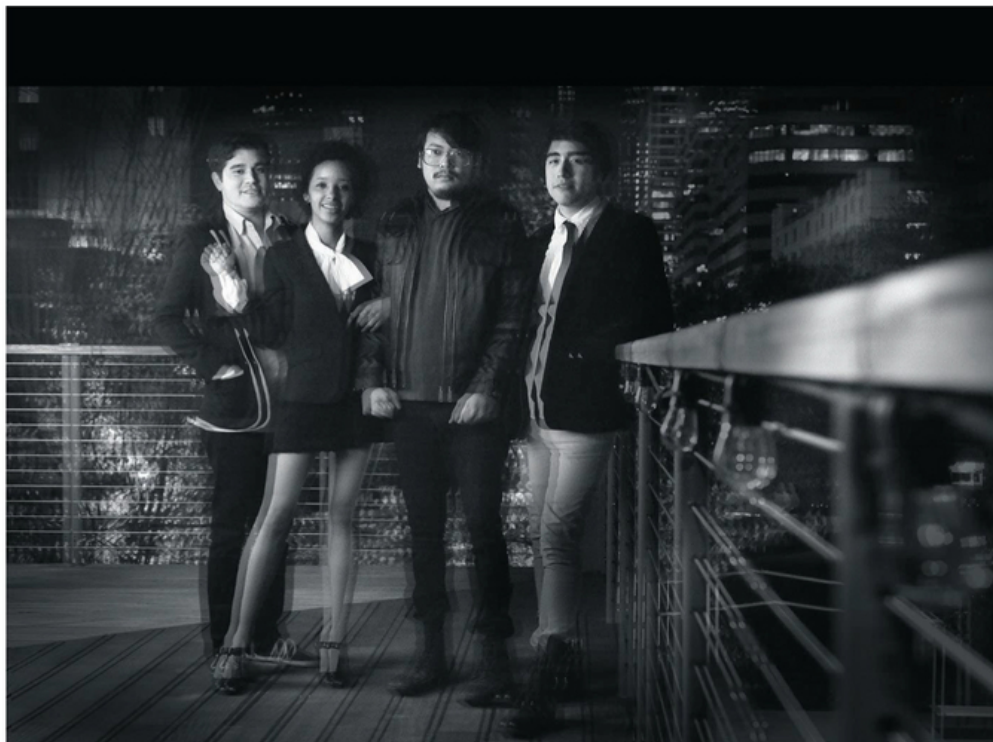


**MOVIN' ON UP**  
Justin Martinez, Asli Omar, Tom Nguyen and Justin's brother, Adam Martinez, of the Tontons are working on a new album, slated for a spring release.



## The Capitalists

**Busy, buzzy and ambitious, The Tontons are taking off.** | By Tara Seetharam | Photography by Debra Smail |

Navigating the world of indie music stardom is tricky for most emerging young musicians. Image is everything. Street cred can make or break you. And even the slightest whiff of “selling out” or going commercial can mean alienation by fans. Right?

Not if you ask the twentysomethings of art-rock, jazz-blues quartet The Tontons. The group is gobbling up fans with their effortlessly sexy live performances—anchored by the vivacious moves and lilting voice of lead singer Asli Omar, 21—and unwavering ambition to get big fast. “You know those people who try to be cool and keep their integrity and are like, ‘Oh, that’s super lame, we never want to be mainstream?’” Omar says. “If Colgate was like ‘Hey, I’m going to give you guys \$100,000 to sing while this girl brushes her teeth,’ I’d be like, sign me up right now.”

While toothpaste fame hasn’t come, the profile of Omar and bandmates—bassist Tom Nguyen, 23, guitarist Adam Martinez, 25, and drummer Justin Martinez, 19—is rising. They won *Houston Press’* Best New Act award in ’08 and played Austin’s South by Southwest music fest twice. Their song “Leon” was featured in a Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau video campaign in ’09, and now they’re working on a new album set for a release this spring. The group plays an acoustic set on March 3 at Warehouse Live before embarking on a West Coast tour.

The group says the new songs on its forthcoming record will capture its various eclectic influences, from gypsy guitar jazz to pop-driven, “Strokes-y” beats that the band hopes will bring its music to the mainstream—a move that less-savvy indie bands

might shy away from. “I don’t think I can really say anything negative about it, because we’re trying to do that,” says the lead singer, whose new lyrics at times lean to her softer side. “You can pretty much tell where I am in my life as far as relationships go, based on what I’m writing.”

Her new song “Vietnam” goes, “Day by day you know you’re doing all you can to destroy my idea of a man ... you’re half of me ... we can never never be.”

Omar acts in some ways as the big sister to the Houston-native band members, offering them her cigarette and poking them with lighthearted jabs. She draws endearingly goofy Justin out of his shell; he’s ironically the classic rocker of the bunch (check his interlocking-circle Zeppelin tattoo). She balances serious-minded Nguyen with her free spirit; the bassist is mostly quiet, but if you ask him about the TV show *Stargate SGI*, it’s hard to stop him from talking. “I like how this is the most excited you’ve been during the entire interview,” jokes Omar. (Nods to nerds can be found elsewhere in the band, too. Their name is a salute to *Empire Strikes Back*—a *tauntaun* is a giant snow lizard from the icy planet Hoth.)

Bandmates split their time between day jobs—Omar folds clothes at Ann Taylor, and Justin brews coffee at The Coffee Groundz—and hitting up fave bars like Poison Girl. Omar also dips into visual arts—slightly abstracted realism is her bag—and was even admitted to Loyola University’s art program this semester.

But she’s putting the idea on hold for now, she says. The band’s future—toothpaste or not—is too promising to postpone. ■

THE TONTONS WERE PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE GROVE