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Sonidos de Aztlán: A Historical Analysis of Chicano Music

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Dedicated to Noé Yaocoatl Montoya

Tlazocamati ometeotl

Introduction

The term Chicana/o means different things to different people. To some, it is merely another way to say Mexican-American. To others, it is an identity that exists outside of borderlines and misconceptions of race and ethnicity. For many Chicana/os, identifying with the term means identifying with their roots both as mestizos, and re-colonized peoples in the United States. As indigenous people of the Americas, we were colonized by the Spanish when they came to our land in search of resources to exploit. Over time, heritage and biological ties got mixed with theirs and that of the enslaved Africans that were brought to the Americas for slave labor, thus we became mestizos. As mestizos in North America, we were colonized again by the United States. Speaking Spanish and practicing Catholicism, both previously forced upon us by our European colonizers, was no longer acceptable. In the process of learning how to assimilate to the new world, the Chicana/o was born. "To be CHICANO is not (NOT) to hate the gabacho or the gachupín or even the pobre vendido… To be CHICANO is to love yourself, your skin, your culture, your language (Valdez 175)."

Ni de aqui ni de alla, neither from here nor from there, is a phrase commonly used by Chicana/os when asked where they come from, because it's true. Chicana/os don't truly belong to either Mexico or the United States, they exist somewhere in between, and that speaks true for their people as well as their music, art, food and traditions. In this paper I will analyze how music, specifically, has played a pivotal role in the story of the Chicano in America. How music played a part in not just providing a soundtrack for the struggle and the movement, but coexisting with it in a way that one influenced the other. The way pachucos in the 1940's invented their own slang that blended Spanish, English and Jazz idioms made its way into the

songs of Lalo Guerrero to create a new type of musical vernacular. The melding of son jarocho and rock 'n' roll in Ritchie Valens' "La Bamba" was representative of how youth could connect with their culture and traditions while still embracing the new pop culture. The smooth rhythm and vibe of songs by groups like Thee Midnighters provided the perfect music for Chicanos to cruise down Whittier Boulevard to in the 1950's and build their whole style and presence around. The farmworker's rights songs during La Huelga of the 1960's were centered around chants that became essential rally cries at every protest and United Farm Workers meeting. These songs became the precursor to the Chicano movement we still benefit from today. The styles, sounds and ideologies have all changed over the years, but they all root in the same purpose of a people searching for Aztlán, the homeland that was taken from us.

Pachuquismo: The first Chicano subculture and the zoot suit riots

One of the earliest forms of Chicano counterculture in the U.S. is that of the pachuco. The culture of the pachuco was fashion, music and lingo unique to Mexican Americans at the turn of the 20th century. The essence of pachuquismo was neither fully American nor fully Mexican, it was a blend of both cultures that first and second generations of Chicano youth who felt alienated from both countries could identify with. Pachuco youth primarily resided in border towns of California, New Mexico, Nevada and Arizona but the movement is thought to have originated in El Paso, Texas. The defining characteristic of the pachuco was the zoot suit. An oversized suit complete with baggy, loose fitting trousers hemmed with a perfect crease down the middle, fresh shined dress shoes, and sometimes a wide brimmed hat usually complete with a feather for adornment. Women wore short pencil skirts, fishnet stockings, high-heels and would often do their hair up in a high pompadour in a style known as "victory roll" (Luz 2006). The

zoot suit itself was made famous by jazz singers of the 1940's like Cab Calloway, and even made its way to Mexico by the actor/comedian/singer Tin Tan, and his use of it in his films. These kids took pride in sporting their sharp and fabric heavy garbs often as a rebellion against the wartime economy. During World War II any goods or textiles not rationed for the war was seen as wasteful, so adopting such lavish attire was seen as a strong act of defiance by both white Americans and Mexican families.

Mexican families living in the barrios of places like Los Angeles were generally very traditional, conservative and self contained, not much different from those of today (zoot suit riots 2002). The pachuco lifestyle was a way for Mexican-American youth to express themselves in a unique way. They identified as Chicanos, rather than Mexicans or Americans, *ni de aquí ni de alla.* These youth developed their own form of slang known as Caló, a blend of Spanish and English punctuated by jazz phrases and other idioms. The reason behind this being that a lot of youth didn't know how to speak proper English or Spanish due to the lack of a proper education in either language. Every article of clothing that made up the zoot suit had its own name unique to the culture. The wide brimmed hat was referred to as a *tando*, the long coat, *trapos,* and the Hollywood shiny shoes, *calcos,* while the garments themselves were referred to as *drapes.* Boys referred to their girlfriends as *huisa*, which later evolved into *heina*. A common term of endearment used amongst the youth was *ese,* a shortened way to say *ese vato* or *ese güey*, today that particular word is thought to have been adopted by Southern California street gangs to symbolize the S in *sureño*.

"Many Mexican-American kids during this period came to terms with segregation, by seeing their neighborhoods as *their* neighborhoods" (Zoot Suit Riots 2002), which was true of Mexican youth anywhere in the U.S. but in Los Angeles this created a territorial mindset when

off-duty sailors from the naval institute decided to stroll through their barrios on their way back from the bars. The assertive culture of pachuco, and pachuco adjacent, youth of course created tension between themselves and sailors preparing to head off to war as well the authorities. Taunting and racially charged exchanges often resulted in scuffles between sailors and the youth. It didn't help matters that these kids were often targeted by the Los Angeles Police Department who saw these youth as delinquents and considered pachuco youth to be street gangs, even though organized o gangs wouldn't exist for another two decades or so. This all came to a head with the Sleepy Lagoon Trial of 1942 which gave way to the infamous Zoot Suit Riots of 1943.

In August of 1942 a young man named José Díaz was stabbed to death after a fight at a party near a local swimming hole in Los Angeles known as Sleepy Lagoon, he was 22 years old. A young zoot-suiter named Hank Leyvas and some of his friends from the 38th street neighborhood arrived at the party just moments after he was killed, which resulted in the police painting the group as the culprits and Hank as the mastermind behind the murder. Hank and 21 other boys were arrested and put on trial for the murder of José Díaz as well as 8 girls who were with them that night, considered to be affiliated with the "38th street gang" as the local newspaper called them. The defendants were denied showers, haircuts and a change of clothes because the court ruled that their "delinquent" appearance was relevant to the case in question. The trial lasted for 3 months, with interrogations taking place in between hearings which often involved the use of brutal physical punishment against the youth. Hank Leyvas, who authorities considered the group's leader, received the worst of this punishment, and it didn't help that his personality was naturally defiant and insubordinate. Hank showed no respect for the guards, judge or prosecutor, because he knew that he and his cohort were being wrongfully targeted and profiled just as they had been in the street over the course of the past few years. The boys

admitted to being in a fight the night of the murder but no one confessed to Diaz's murder or gave any information including Lorena Encinas who was the only person incarcerated that actually did have information on who was responsible. On January 12th, 1943, a verdict was reached in which 17 defendants were found guilty, including Hank Leyvas who was sentenced to life in San Quentin, a maximum security prison in Northern California, while the young women were sent to a repressive reform institute known as The Ventura School for Girls (Zoot Suit Riots 2002).

The aftermath of the trial sparked outrage amongst Mexican-American youth in and around Los Angeles and gave Anglo sailors stationed in the city an excuse to paint all Mexican youth as "criminals" and "parasites" who needed to be dealt with. From June 3rd to June 8th riots in Los Angeles, spread from downtown LA to Mexican neighborhoods like Boyle Heights and others in East LA in which servicemen went on the prowl to pillage the area of pachucos armed with makeshift weapons like chains, fisticuffs and wooden sticks to beat them with. A common ritual that began to take place was the stripping of young mens zoot suit garments and burning them while servicemen took turns beating the nude youth. All the while LAPD did very little to stop the riots and in some cases even encouraged the violence, by also harassing and arresting Mexicans caught in the crossfire. However, after a few days the level of insubordination from the sailors became a serious problem due to the threat of complete disorder in the city in the midst of wartime. On June 8th, 1943 the city of Los Angeles was declared off limits to service men for a brief period of time until tensions cooled down and the wearing of zoot suits were outlawed punishable by up to 30 days in jail. The takeaway from this violent turn of events for many Chicana/o youth was that this was the price they paid for daring to express themselves. Out of the struggle to create their own identity came backlash from a country that

didn't accept them or recognize them as their own peoples. They refused to recognize their culture, their music, their language and their fashion, going so far as to incarcerate and attempt to eradicate them, a cycle that will continue to repeat itself in different forms for years to come. Fortunately the injustice was not overlooked as citizens, activists and even celebrities such as Orson Wells and Rita Hayworth formed a defense committee to work towards an appeal in an effort to get the boys released. The committee worked long and hard towards its goal, but eventually paid off and in October of 1944 the 38th street boys, including Hank Leyva, were released from prison. The girls, most of them underage, however remained wards of the state until they reached the age of 21. In a symbolic act of continued defiance and rebellion, Hank Leyvas walked out of prison that day in his zoot suit.

Lalo Guerrero: The soundtrack to the zoot suit era, jazz, rancheras, corridos y mambo

As tragic as the outcome of the pachuco era was to American history, the music of the time set the precedent for the future of Chicana/o culture for years to come. It's no secret that Chicanos have borrowed a lot of their style and aesthetic from African Americans, and pachucos of the 1940's were no exception. In addition to adopting their garments (the zoot suit) as part of their style, they were also great admirers of jazz, big band, and jump blues music. One of those pachucos included a young Cesar Chavez, who was a big fan of jazz musicians like Coleman Hawkins and Jimmy Liggins (American Masters PBS). Pachucos frequented ballrooms and dance clubs all over the country during that time including the Mambo Club in downtown Los Angeles, where one of the most versatile and legendary entertainers of all time was a regular performer.

Lalo Guerrero, a first generation Mexican American from Tucson, Arizona, is widely regarded as the “father of Chicano music” (UCSB). Over the course of seven decades Lalo wrote and recorded over six hundred songs in a wide variety of genres including rancheras, corridos, boleros, cumbias, mambos, danzon, swing, boogie, r&b, folk, children's music, comedy and rock & roll, often blending a few different genres within a single song. His composition “Vamos a Bailar", for example, is a traditional swing number that switches to danzón then back to swing, then mambo and back to swing. The same compositional technique was applied to his immensely popular song “Canción Mexicana", but instead of melding swing with different rhythms, he cycles through different forms of traditional Mexican rhythms emblematic of different regions of Mexico. I was first introduced to Lalo through a mentor and friend of mine, Noé Montoya, who spent a lot of time with Lalo towards the end of his life, assisting him in getting to and from performances and appearances. Noé shared a lot of Lalos life story and music with me, some of which I was already familiar with from the film and stage production *Zoot Suit*. “When Luis Valdez wrote the play *Zoot Suit* in the 1970’s, he asked Lalo to adapt some of his music that had been discovered on old 78-rpm records of the era” (Loza 160). With the assistance of Luis’ brother Daniel Valdez and the vocal stylings of Edward James Olmos, the production of *Zoot Suit* brought to life 4 of Lalo’s songs including “Chicas Patas Boogie”, “Vamos a Bailar”, “Marijuana Boogie” and “Los Chucos Suaves”. *Zoot Suit* is a testament to the longevity and legacy of Lalos career, in the sense that songs he composed over thirty years prior could still have such a strong impact.

Although Lalo never wore a zoot suit himself or considered himself a pachuco, those who did spend a lot of time around him and grew to admire his music. One thing that makes Lalo’s swing era music really unique was the fact that the lyrics were written in Caló, the bilingual

slang of the pachuco. The song was full of idioms and phonetic pronunciations that, at the time, only other Chicanos would understand. For example, the relaxed way of removing the "d" in words ending in *ado,* instead of saying *abusado* or *agütado*, he would pronounce it *abusa'o* and *agüta'o*. Also phrases like *muy de aquellas*, loosely meaning super cool, were 100% Chicano-isms that were written specifically for that audience to understand, which was a really special thing at the time. Bilingual lyricism is a common theme that recurs throughout Lalos discography, and throughout the discographies of many Chicano artists after him. Another example is Lalos use of Spanglish phrases like *ahí los wacho*, meaning "see you later", in his corrido "El Chicano".

Despite all of Lalo Guerreros success, in the early days of his career he experienced some drawbacks, mostly discrimination due to his ethnicity. Lalo struggled to appeal to American audiences, despite being perfectly capable of singing in English. "I don't want to sound boastful, but I could sing and play in English the popular American songs of the day as well as any Anglo person [but] they couldn't conceive of a Mexican, especially one who looks as Indian as I do (Loza 159)." Unfortunately, the racial climate of the 1930's made it nearly impossible for any brown musicians to find success singing music in English, among the many other obstacles Mexicans faced seeking success in this country. Due to this barrier, Lalo chose to revert back to singing Mexican music, the same music that he had learned growing up with his mother who taught him to sing and play guitar. Lalo spent some time performing in nightclubs and theaters in Tucson then eventually relocated to Mexico City where he had some of his songs recorded by some popular Mexican artists, some of which including "Nunca Jamas" by Los Panchos and the aforementioned "Canción Mexicana" by Lucha Villa, to name a few. Ironically, he faced similar discrimination in Mexico because they considered him a *pocho,* a Mexican-American having

some type of lack of connection to their roots, whether that be speaking poor Spanish or simply assimilating American traits. This is an unfortunate dilemma that many Chicana/os still experience to this day, though it's improved a bit as cultural exchanges between the U.S. and Mexico have changed. In a strange turn of events, some of the most successful music Lalo released in Mexico was a series of children's albums called *Las Ardillitas*, essentially the Spanish language version of Alvin and the Chipmunks. It's almost as if the more Lalo Disguised his identity, the more successful he was.

La Huelga: The Delano Grape Strike, movimiento music and El Teatro Campesino

If I could point to one moment in time where Mexican immigrants and Chicana/os unified for the greater good, it would have to be the Delano Grape Strike. The grape strike was a crucial moment in history because it was Chicana/os that helped organize Mexican immigrants to fight for their rights, one of the rare moments in history where Mexicans and Mexican-Americans worked together for the greater good. Immigrants have historically been exploited for cheap labor in this country, and Mexican as well as Filipino immigrants are no exception. In the early 1960's farm workers in California began organizing against the growers for better wages, and better working conditions that took into account basic human rights like bathroom breaks, clean water, better living conditions, and protection against harmful pesticides. Thus, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee/National Farmworkers Association (AWOC/NFWA) led by Larry Itliong was founded which led to the United Farm Workers (UFW) in 1962 founded by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Over the course of the grape strike, the union would hold rallies and protests all over farm towns in California and parts of the

Southwest in an effort to empower farmworkers and get as many people as possible to join La Causa.

Music and art was a part of this movement right from the start. Visual artists like Carlos Almaraz and Malaquias Montoya assisted in painting signs for the protesters and later murals depicting the trajectory of the strike, some of which are still standing today. Musicians were present at almost all rallies, usually with acoustic guitars in hand singing protest songs that demanded workers rights such as “No nos moveran”, “Solidaridad pa’ siempre”, “Huelga en general" and hundreds more. This genre of music which came to be known as, movimiento songs, were simple in nature and meant to provide simple enough lyrics that everyone could easily learn and sing along to similar to any chant you would hear at a protest. The stylistic format of most of these songs borrowed heavily from rancheras, corridos and boleros typical of Mariachi and Norteño groups of the time, most likely because that’s the type of music the musicians on the picket lines were most familiar with, which worked perfectly because it made it easier for farmworkers to identify with. The song “Huelga en General” for example has an anthemic chorus that goes, “Viva la huelga en el fil, viva la causa en la historia, la raza llena de gloria, la victoria va cumplir” (long live the strike in the fields, long live the cause in history, our people full of glory, victory will come true). These lyrics are taken directly from typical chants and phrases that were shouted at every rally, but when put to music, it only makes the narrative stronger. “In some instances, it’s singing that’ll give you the courage” (A song for Cesar). Music provided a sense of power and ánimo to the movement in a way that words alone couldn’t. Folk groups that formed around the writing and performance of these songs began to spring up all over the country such as Los Peludos, Los Alacranes, Los Perros del Nuevo Pueblo and the nation's first Chicano theater El Teatro Campesino.

In the same way that worker's rights songs became part of the soundtrack to the movement, a man by the name of Luis Valdez had the idea to create a theater for farmworkers to educate them in a way that hadn't been done before. Inspired by activist work done by the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Luis brought the idea to Cesar Chavez to form a theater group to perform *actos* (skits) centered around the issues plaguing the farmworkers at the time, using satirical comedy to do so, always providing a call to action. Luis took the lack of financing and time to create a farmworkers theater as an opportunity to showcase what is possible in the face of struggle and with limited resources. The aesthetic and mindset would come to be known as *rasquache,* "the utilization of available resources for syncretism, juxtaposition, and integration" (Azcona 8).

El Teatro Campesino grew with popularity as support for UFW grew, performing at meetings, rallies and fundraisers wherever the UFW was in conjunction with original music written by Luis and his brother Daniel Valdez. The song Brown Eyed Children of the Sun, off Daniel Valdez's album *Meztizo,* is a bolero that poetically and painfully details the experience of working as a small child in the fields with your family in a time before child labour laws protected migrant farmworkers, something that both Daniel and Luis experienced as children. Another teatro member named Agustin Lira, wrote "La Peregrinación", a ballad that detailed the march to Sacramento that Cesar Chavez organized which is now one of the defining moments of the farmworker movement and one of the things that led to the many victories and national recognition of the UFW. One of the most notable artists of the folk music movement that was happening at the time, Joan Baez, was an active supporter of the UFW and even recorded one of the most well known recordings of "De Colores", a traditional song that became el himno del movimiento (the hymn of the movement) sang at the end of every meeting and multiple times

throughout the march to Sacramento. It makes one wonder how well these stories of the struggles of humble people would have been remembered if it weren't for musicians and poets immortalizing them into song. "El Corrido del Bracero" by the Mexican theater group Los Mascarones for example is a song that beautifully recounts the story of the *Braceros,* migrant workers that were brought to the U.S. between the years of 1942 and 1946 with the promise of citizenship that were later exploited and taken advantage of by the agricultural and railroad industry.

The purpose of a corrido, a traditional Mexican song form, in and of itself is to tell the stories of the pueblo, their triumphs and tragedies. The nature of corridos lended itself perfectly to the farmworker struggle, by allowing musicians to capture what was happening in the form of a song, some examples being the aforementioned "Corrido del Bracero", "El corrido de Cesar Chavez", "El Corrido de Aztlan" and "El Corrido de Jesus Pelado" Rasquachi written for the Teatro production *La Carpa de Los Rasquachis* written by Luis and Daniel Valdez in 1974. *La Carpa de los Rasquachis* created a revolutionary new form of musical theater in which the corrido was the driving force behind the narrative of what was happening in the play. In La Carpa we follow Jesus Pelado, a migrant worker who experiences the entire struggle of migrating to the U.S. with little to no money, gets exploited by the growers, joins the UFW to fight for his wages, then starts a family and has children who see themselves as Mexican Americans who choose to disconnect from their roots, a story that resonated and continues to resonate with millions of Mexicans and Chicana/os in this country.

El Movimiento: Rock ‘n’ roll and social change

During the mid-1960’s, the civil rights movement was well underway with Martin Luther King organizing against segregation, and the black power movement preceding him, as well as the counterculture that formed around the protests against the Vietnam war. It seemed like revolution in the U.S. was imminent, of which the Chicano Movement sparked by the Delano Grape Strike was an active participant. Aside from the farmworkers movement, which gained several victories including passing of the Agricultural Relations Act by governor Jerry Brown in 1975, there was the student movement centered around the East LA walkouts. The walkouts were organized by students who felt that they were being discriminated against by white teachers in the Los Angeles school district and decided to boycott their classes in an effort to combat this. As public awareness of social justice issues continued to evolve, so did the music that acted as the soundtrack to the movement.

The first Chicano rockstar, Ritchie Valens broke boundaries by interpreting La Bamba, a traditional Mexican son jarocho, into rock and roll. The label was hesitant on having Ritchie sing a song in Spanish at the time, because they were concerned about people being aware of Richies Mexican heritage, hence the changing of his name from Valenzuela to Valens, this was done primarily for marketing purposes (Loza 95). Following the huge success of the song however many rock and R&B groups began to embrace their roots more and more. One of those bands being Los Lobos, who re-recorded Ritchie’s music for the 1987 film *La Bamba* (Manchado 2023). Aside from being one of the first bands to truly embrace the fusion of music with rock and roll, Los Lobos also made a conscious effort to explore their musical roots by learning the musical tradition of Son Jarocho, native to Veracruz, Mexico, and re-introducing it to an American audience, something that has continued to have an impact on cultural exchanges in the

US to this day. Los Lobos paid homage to Son Jarocho in their 1988 album *La Pistola y El Corazón,* which featured many Son Jarocho standards such as “La Guacamaya”, and “El Canelo”.

One of the most significant East LA bands of the late 1960’s, Thee Midnighters, were amongst those groups that slowly began to embrace the Chicano identity as it began to evolve. Although they never achieved huge commercial success, their massive influence in association with lowrider and “oldies” culture that continues to this day is undeniable. Known more for their slow jams like “Dreaming Casually” and “The Town I Live In”*,* Thee Midnighters also released songs that served as anthems for young os like Whittier Boulevard, named after a popular cruising spot in East Los Angeles (Loza 99), and “Chicano Power”, a common saying heard at protests of the time and the battle cry of the Brown Berets, the Chicano version of the Black Panther Party. The attire and stage presence of bands like Thee Midnighters however was still very much modeled after the Motown groups of the time, clean and conservative haircuts, tailored suits and group choreography. The bands of the Mission District in San Francisco began to change this aesthetic as the counterculture of the 1960’s and early 70’s became more accepting of different cultures and styles. Bands like Santana, Malo and WAR all began growing out their hair and sporting vibrant colored clothing including the use of dashikis which was very emblematic of the prominent Afro- influence heard in their music.

Almost all the Mission District bands were diverse in nature, often featuring members of and Afro descent, showing solidarity between the black power and Chicano power movements happening simultaneously. Another band of the same scene, Dakíla, featured an all Filipino lineup who sang in both English and Tagalog, carrying on the legacy of the Filipino Americans who were a major part of the movement back in the early 60’s. Diversity and activism were the

defining characteristics of the Mission District bands, aside from their music. The revolutionary sound of rock guitars over the top of Afro- rhythms pioneered by Carlos Santana continues to be the most commercially successful, widely accessible and what I consider to be the ultimate example of Chicano music, not just because of the sound, but because of the time period of which it represents. “The Chicano movement that is taking place within the United States at this time is unique. The wants of the Mexican American are so simple and the principle of their movement is so basic and pure that it is, in fact, the very essence of what the United states of America is all about (Loza 102)”.

Tejano: Chicanos on the other side of the border and the birth of música norteña

A lot of the primary developments that have happened in Chicano music, mainly concerning Rock and Roll and fusion, happened in or near California, but over in Texas, a different type of development was happening. If we are to consider Los Angeles as the main hub for the development of Chicano music on the West Coast, then San Antonio would be its counterpart in the Southwest. A style of music known as conjunto was born out of the fusion of German polka and traditional Mexican music. In the early 1920’s, musicians such as Narcisso Martinez, considered the father of conjunto, began picking up the accordion after being introduced to it by the large population of German immigrants in central Texas at the time (Accordion Dreams). Early pioneers of conjunto music paired the accordion with the bajo sexto, a Mexican 12-string bass guitar, to create a style of music with roots in both European and Mexican music. All around bailes and dance halls in San Antonio and other parts of Texas, musicians would perform polkas, but with a slightly more relaxed and uniquely Texan approach that allowed for dancers to shuffle their feet in a two-step feel rather than picking them up the

way the Germans did. Conjunto pioneers like Valerio Longoria, Ruben Vela and Eugenio Abrego are credited with being the first to introduce traditional Mexican song forms like rancheras, boleros and corridos to conjunto music. Eugenio Abrego in particular was forced to return back to Tamaulipas, México on the other side of the border where he started the group Los Alegres de Beltrán with other musicians migrating between Texas and Northern Mexico, Tomás Ortiz and Ramiro Cavazas (Aguirre 21). This migration back and forth between the Texas and Mexico border inspired many corridos detailing the struggles of the *inmigrante* that were played by conjuntos in various cantinas in the borderlands.

One of the most notable names of early conjunto music in Texas is Flaco Jimenez, who began blending elements of country and zydeco to give conjunto a new southern twang that went on to adopt the label of Tex-Mex. By the 1970's, the experimental nature of Flaco Jimenez's music continued to develop with groups like Little Joe y La Familia and Freddy Fender doing things like adding full horn sections to their bands, incorporating the use of the electric guitars and synthesizers that took the focus away from the accordion as the central instrument, and singing in English, which made the music completely distinct from "traditional" conjunto or música norteña which was the branch of conjunto music that had taken on it's own life in Mexico.

Mexican audiences have historically always had a hard time accepting things that appear to be too "Americanized" as something that's part of their culture. It was for this reason that, despite its growing popularity, Tejano wasn't able to break out of its regional market into the mainstream or into the Mexican and American media. The sound of Tex-Mex may have become somewhat of a bland/commercial sound, like in the case of Little Joe y La Familia, but that sound was often accompanied by lyrics that spoke of the mistreatment of immigrants and

Chicanos by border patrol officers that still persists to this day. In Deborah Pacini Hernandez's book "Oye Como Va!" She outlines how the Mexican media of the time, including large scale media outlets like Univision, Fonovisa and Sony Mexico, had little to no interest in supporting or promoting Tejano music. "Abraham Quintanilla pointed to the impact of competition, but especially the protectionist impact practices of the Mexican music industry, which refused to give the same level of airplay in Mexico to Tejano acts that Mexican acts enjoyed in Texas (Hernanez 151).

This stigma was challenged following the success of the "Queen of Tejano" Selena Quintanilla. Selena and her siblings began playing music at a very young age under the guidance and management of her father Abrahm Quintanilla and signed her first record deal with EMI at the age of 17. The Quintanilla siblings were more interested in singing and performing English-language pop music, not even knowing how to speak Spanish, but their father Abrahm strongly advised them against it based on prior bad experiences with his former group Los Dinos (Music USA). Between the years of 1985 and 1995 the sound of Tejano evolved away from the rural and humble sound of accordion-centric conjunto music, adopting a new sound and aesthetic that was more in line with mainstream pop and rock in order to connect with the younger generation. Instead of dressing like cowboys and singing about things associated with the working-class lifestyle, artists began wearing glittery and colorful outfits and singing love songs. The crossover appeal and success of Selena elevated the Tejano music scene to new heights. Groups like Mazz, Grupo Limite and La Mafia exploded onto the scene, selling records and touring on the same level as a lot of popular rock bands of the time, all thanks in part to the chart topping success of Selena. Most of Selena's hits, including "La Carcacha", "Amor Prohibido" and "Si Una Vez", just to name a few, were all notably cumbias, a -American dance rhythm used

in a variety of genres. Audiences resonated more with these songs, written primarily by Selena's brother A.B. Quintanilla, over her more *Tex-Mex* flavored songs rooted in polka and conjunto. This was due primarily to cumbia's massively universal appeal. Selena also recorded a lot of Mariachi and Mariachi-fusion, produced and written by her brother AB along with her final recordings of English language R&B songs which were meant to be her major crossover into the mainstream, but even today, her cumbias are her most well known songs. This is true not only of Selena's music, but of all the Tejano artists that were blowing up in light of her success, all of them prioritized making Tejano style cumbias over anything else. In an interview with major label producer Cameron Randle he states "The cumbia is an entry… [I]t's not necessarily required for the Tejano world. It *is* required to get beyond Texas… Cumbia's what opened the door for Selena… And it's considered the musical passport to America" (Hernandez 123).

Tragically, Selena's career was cut short in the midst of her peak when she was killed by the president of her fan club and manager of her newly opened clothing boutiques, Yolanda Saldivar, over a dispute of Yolanda embezzling money from the business (Candiotti 1995). The death of Selena was a shock to not just the Tejano music scene, but to all her beloved fans around the world. Unfortunately, this marked the beginning of the end for the Tejano music explosion as without its breakout star, artists struggle to maintain the limelight of the mainstream media. Tejano's inability to be marketed outside of Texas combined with competition from the growing popularity of Norteño artists like Los Tigres del Norte and major labels dropping their Tejano acts, caused it to fall from grace. Some of Tejano's biggest stars like Emilio Navaira pivoted towards the country music scene, somewhat abandoning their Tejano roots in favor of success in the English-language market. A.B. Quintanilla re-focused his attention on his newly formed group Kumbia Kings which aimed at developing a new sound that fused cumbia with elements

of hip-hop, reggae and pop that also made his Tejano roots almost unrecognizable. Tejano went from having major label support, its own annual award show and a category in the Grammys to becoming a niche subgenre that most people don't even know exist. It's easy to overlook Tejano as something relatively insignificant to the evolution of music, something I myself been guilty of in the past, but in taking a closer look, it's clear that the musical and cultural developments that have taken place over the past hundred years in the borderlands of Texas have a legacy that will be present for generations to come.

The Chicanx Renaissance: Narcocorridos and chipster nostalgia

Tejano's time in the limelight has come and gone, but currently, it feels like we're experiencing somewhat of a resurgence of the Tejano sound. Grupo Frontera, from Edinburg, Texas, is currently one of the biggest names in music, most notably for their cumbias which are reminiscent of the sound popularized by groups like Intocable and Bobby Pulido, but with a modern twist. Their many collaborations with superstars like Bad Bunny, Carin León and Fuerza Regida have brought the Tejano cumbia back to the forefront of mainstream music in a way that hasn't been seen since Selena's rise to fame in the 90's. Some other notable artists embracing this modern take on the Tejano sound include Estevie from Phoenix, Arizona, Grupo Secretto from McAllen, Texas and Obzesion from Houston, who I believe sparked this resurgence in 2021 with their viral hit "Mi Trokita Cumbia".

In my opinion, there are a few factors that are contributing to the current renaissance of this new style of Tejano music. First, mediums that didn't exist in the 90's, mainly social media, have created a space for not just Tejano music, but all music to find the specific audiences they're marketing towards. No longer due artists have to rely on labels, tv, radio and other

traditional forms of media to promote their music, because it's easier than ever to release music independently and have the right audience find it through social media and streaming services like Spotify. Second, Grupo Frontera and the aforementioned artists are not being marketed as Tejano artists, nor do they embrace that label. Instead, Frontera and their peers reside within the category of pop and música regional Mexicana which is more visible in the mainstream than it's ever been. If you take a look at the related artists section of Grupo Fronteras profile, which is usually a good way to get a sense of the music scene an artist belongs to, aside from Bobby Pulido, there are no other Tejano artists, instead we see names like Natanael Cano, Gabito Ballesteros, and Luis R Conriquez. All of which belong to the new wave of regional Mexican music which doesn't necessarily have a clear label, but most people currently refer to it as corridos tumbados.

Around 2010 a few compilation albums under the name *Movimiento Alterado* were released by the label Twiins Culiacan, based out of Los Angeles, California. The compilations were filled with corridos detailing accounts of murders, drug smuggling and other crimes executed by Mexican drug lords. The most notable of which was a song called *"*Los Sanguinarios del M1" which caught a lot of people's attention with its hyper violent lyrics and aggressively loud and in your face fusion of banda and música norteña. The opening line of Los Sanguinarios is enough to demand the attention of the listener; "Un cuerno de chivo, bazooka en la nuca, volando cabeza a quien se atraviesa, somos sanguinarios, locos bien ondeados, nos gusta matar" which translates to "An AK47 and Bazooka on my neck, cross my path and I'll chop your head off, we are bloodthirsty crazy and we like to kill." This genre of music came to be known as narcocorridos, which translates to drug ballads. "They're like journalism put to song — telling stories of drug lords, arrests, shootouts, daring operations and betrayals" (Burnett 2009). The

concept of the narcocorrido was nothing new in 2010, artists like Chalino Sanchez and Los Tigres del Norte have been writing and performing corridos about drug cartels since the 1980's. What was different about the artists of Movimiento Alterado compared to the previous generations narcocorridos, was that some criticized it to be a glorification of the violence and crime of the Mexican drug war rather than storytelling (Narco Cultura 2014). The controversy surrounding this music amidst the tightening border policies in light of the drug war taking place in places like Juarez, caused it to receive a lot of media attention both positive and negative, including conservative politicians using it as a reason to reinforce stereotypes of Mexicans coming into this country to traffic drugs and crime. Omar and Adolfo Valenzuela, the twins behind the Twiins Culiacan label, chose to base their operation out of Los Angeles, because the very real accounts being sung about in the narcocorridos were, and still are, prohibited in many parts of Mexico (Vice 2014). Their presence in Los Angeles inspired local Chicanos like Edgar Quintero, writer of the aforementioned hit "Los Sanguinarios", to become a major player in the writing on composing of narcocorridos despite having basically no ties to the Sinaloa drug cartel. The often fictional depictions of the narco lifestyle unfortunately led to many real world consequences like the assassinations of artists like Valentin Elizalde and Jenni Rivera, just to name a few, as well as the ongoing death threats issued to narcocorrido singers performing in Mexico that continues to this day.

Musically, the entire genre was instrumental in pioneering the use of ensembles of different instrumentation like banda, norteño and sierreño, play call and response within a single song, something that hadn't really been done before, but today is very common. The musicianship and arrangements were a lot more advanced than their predecessors, where most songs featured a lot more syncopation, rhythmic complexities and chord progressions that veered

away from the traditional I IV V format. I would argue that a lot of this was borrowed from tejano bands like Intocable, which was composed of very technical and Julliard level musicians. I would also argue that the feral and intense new energy of the movimiento alterado was heavily influenced by groups like Los Inquietos and Exterminador who had been infusing their música norteña with the aggressive nature of punk and metal years before.

This style of reporting tales of crime and violence through song, while embodying and glorifying the aesthetics and lifestyle of those committing said crimes has more in common with gangster rap than it does with traditional Mexican music. Over time, narcocorrido artists in Los Angeles and other parts of the U.S. further embraced their similarities to gangster rap in a few different ways. Around 2016 the Los Angeles based group Legado 7 released their song "El Afro" which was a slight deviation from the alterado groups that were still popular at the time. Mainly that the song had nothing to do with violence and trafficking drugs, but everything to do with weed culture. Legado 7 dubbed "El Afro" and the rest of the music they were making at the time as a new genre called corridos verdes, slightly relaxed Mexican music about smoking marijuana and the California lifestyle. This change in tone from the previous hyper-violence of the alterado movement to corridos verdes was parallel to the shift that happened between the abrasive gangster rap of Ice-T and NWA towards the smooth and more laid-back g-funk of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg that had happened just a decade before. Legado 7 even went as far as to pay tribute to the Dr. Dre albums *The Chronic* and *The Chronic 2001* on their album cover for *100% Corridos Verdes (En Vivo)* and *4-20-20.* Groups like Arsenal Efectivo and Fuerza Regida are credited with being the first to move away from wearing *trajes* (matching suits) to simply more like East-LA cholos, tall tees, gold chains, baggy shorts and high socks. This paradigm shift is most apparent in the music video for "Lolo Felix" which is full of things symbolic of

Chicano culture in Los Angeles, palm trees, low-riders, smoking weed, and hanging out on the porches in the neighborhood. The lyrics of the song are also very emblematic of culture that's being represented here "Es California, el terreno de su infancia, estado de los Chicanos, donde cholos tienen fama/This is California, land of his childhood, state of the Chicanos, where cholos have the fame."

This new movement, spearheaded by the label Rancho Humilde founded by Los Angeles native Jimmy Humilde, completely took over the world of regional Mexicana almost overnight. The Rancho Humilde artists did two things in the mid-2010's that contributed to their success and changed the musical landscape. It established Southern California as the new hub for regional Mexican music, where previously the Mexican media conglomerates like Univision had a stranglehold on the industry, something the Tejano world was unable to accomplish years before. By not working exclusively with radio or TV and doing all their promotion through social media, Rancho Humilde found the perfect workaround to grow all their artists and take over the market (Suarez 2020). The popularity of artists like Junior H and Natanael Cano also marked the end of banda and norteño being the primary genres of regional Mexicano. Sierreño, which consists of an ensemble of 12-string guitars and a selection of either upright acoustic or electric bass and vocalists, carved out a significant space in regional Mexicano. Part of this was the influence the late Ariel Camacho had on young musicians in the early 2010's.

Ariel had a style of insightful songwriting and virtuoso guitar playing that inspired a lot of young Chicanos to pick up 12-string guitars and learn the style he had popularized. One of those being Kristopher Nava of the band T3r Elemento. T3r Elemento was among many of the artists during this time changing the sound of música regional by taking elements of a traditional corrido but adding a fresh sounds and ideas to the mix, sometimes mixing English phrases and

collaborating with rappers to appeal more to the younger generation who traditionally saw corridos as “old man music.” In their song “Ojitos de Conejo”, T3r Elemento showcases their ability to write bilingual lyrics that challenge the strict nature of “traditional” corridos, “Take it out then, al gallito ponle lumbre, con el humito que rebota en mi cabeza I want to travel a las nubes.” Some other young musicians inspired by Ariel Camachos guitar playing and style were Natanael Cano and Junior H both of which are the pioneers of the genre known as corridos tumbados. Today, most people refer to any modern style of Mexican music as corridos tumbados, which isn’t necessarily correct, but it is a testament to the genre's influence.

The elements of the corrido tumbado are sierreño instrumentation, hooks, melodies and vocal delivery in the style of trap and reggaeton, and songs primarily in a minor key with a sort of laid-back, or *tumbado* sensibility. One could consider the song “Disfruto lo Malo” as the corridos tumbados anthem, which is how a lot of fans were introduced to the genre in the same way that “Los Sanguinarios” had done in 2010. Today the genre is continuing to evolve and branch off into various sub-genres throughout the US and Mexico. The song “Ella Baila Sola” by Peso Pluma and Eslabón Armado released in 2023, made history as the first song in the genre to be placed on the US Billboard Hot 100, hitting number 4 and number 1 on the US Hot Songs (Variety 2023). This success has projected Peso Pluma to absolute stardom, becoming a household name in the same vein as Beyonce and Taylor Swift. The spotlight on Peso Pluma has opened the door for artists like Fuerza Regida and Junior H to operate on the level of pop stars. It also made the sierreño/banda hybrid sound of acoustic guitars with charchetas and trombone the current sound dominating the airwaves. Unfortunately, despite Latinos gaining so much recognition and representation in mainstream media, the same struggles we’ve been facing with immigration reform and border politics surrounding narco violence and drug trafficking. I think

artists like Peso Pluma do a great job of documenting the world of the drug cartels and the culture surrounding it from the perspective of the people that are exposed to it everyday, but there's not much they do in an effort to work towards positive change, in the way that musicians of the original Chicano movement did in the 60's and 70's.

Alongside the evolution of regional Mexicano becoming a Chicano artform, a movement that transcended genre and challenged cultural norms began to take place. In the late 90's a band named Ozomatli created a fusion of music that mirrored the uniqueness of WAR and Tower of Power but with a new sound. Ozomatli's blend of hip-hop, reggae, cumbia, rock and other rhythms created a new fusion that cemented them as another flagship band of the Chicano legacy. In a lot of ways, Ozomatli was essentially the Los Lobos and/or WAR of their generation, each member was diverse in ethnicity, they pioneered a new way to fuse different types of Latin music with popular American music, they dove deep into their roots to re-introduce semi-forgotten musical traditions to a new audience, and, as young activists and U.S. State Department Cultural Ambassadors, they've used their platform to address many social issues of local, national and international importance (Kennedy Center 2015) .

Their success opened the doors for a new generation of Chicano artists of all different genres and backgrounds. Grupo Fantasma from Austin, Texas experienced a decent level of success with a similar sound and format as Ozomatli, diverse band members and Afro- fusion with a primary focus on Cumbia and Reggae. In San Diego, B-Side Players (formerly known as Maiz), applied righteous philosophy and imagery of Aztec culture to their -Reggae fusion, marking them as legends of the San Diego reggae scene. In San Francisco, La Plebe dominated the punk-rock scene by adding mariachi trumpets to their band, to create a unique breed of Chicano punk in the same way that Dropkick Murphys and Flogging Molly had done with their

Irish roots. In Los Angeles several groups like Very Be Careful and Buyepongo created a cumbia scene that embraced traditional Colombian cumbia and vallenato, but with a subtle Chicano feel. Indie artist Cuco, from Hawthorne, California began self-producing bilingual love songs in a style he called dream-pop which inspired tons of kids of all nationalities to create music from their bedrooms in a similar style. La Santa Cecilia was among many groups that followed in the footsteps of bands like Ozomatli and Los Lobos where they chose to fuse a variety of genres like cumbia, bolero, tex-mex, dueto, son jarocho and mariachi, but in a way that paid homage to legends of Mexican music.

A lot of bands of this new era of Chicano music have their music and aesthetics primarily rooted in nostalgia. Between the mid 2010's to now, a lot of pop-culture marketing has been geared towards millennial nostalgia, of which Chicanos are no exception. Independent brands like FB County, Mi Vida, Hija de Tu Madre and Suavecito have all done a great job at selling products that remind millennials of their childhood and, in some cases, of the Chicano golden age of which they never got to experience. The same goes for a lot of Chicano owned Mexican restaurants and taquerias that appeared over the last 10 years in major city neighborhoods that used to be considered "dangerous" and "low-income." This phenomenon is often jokingly referred to as "chipster", meaning Chicano-Hipster.

If I had to point to one artist that represents the wave of chipster culture, especially in Los Angeles, it would be Chicano Batman. LA residents Chicano Batman, captivated audiences with their blend of vintage soul with jazz and psychedelic rock. What attracted me, and a lot of others, to their music during their rise to fame was how much they reminded me of 60's and 70's grupero bands like Los Freddys and Grupo Yndio, not just with the ever present sound of the drawbar organ, but the way they dressed in matching vintage suits and bowties. This was music I

heard a lot in the house as I was growing up, which made me connect to Chicano Batman in a way that couldn't with bands like Ozomatli, who, despite their talent and great songwriting, didn't provoke my nostalgia in that way. Although their sound has evolved to a more modern and experimental style over years, Chicano Batman indirectly sparked a new musical movement seeking to re-create soul music of the 1960's as authentically as possible. The movement, which is still a relatively recent phenomenon is referred to by many as "souldies", pioneered by bands like Durand Jones and the Indications, Los Yesterdays and Thee Sacred Souls. The goal of this musical phenomenon is basically to pick up where Thee Midnighters left off, the same style of fashion, music and art of the time is paid tribute to as authentic as possible. Most musicians of this new wave have been very vocal about addressing social issues plaguing Chicanos and Mexican immigrants today, including the attempted removal of DACA (deferred action of childhood arrival), the harassment and legalization of street vendors, and the recent law passed by Florida governor Ron DeSantis enforcing penalties for employing "illegal" immigrants (staff 2023). A popular social media page rooted in modern day Chicano culture, Foos Gone Wild, whose primary focus is making comedy skits, music, clothing and events, has been relatively active in fundraising for their local community and street vendor rights. In 2021 they organized a community buyout of a San Diego street vendor who was being harassed by local college students, and partnered with Local Hearts Foundation to purchase holiday meals for low income families (Foos Gone Wild 2021). As the culture continues to develop, so will the music and my prediction is that it will always serve as the soundtrack to our constant fight for equality and representation.

Conclusion

Today, the term Chicano is seldom used and a lot of the newer generation doesn't seem to quite understand what it once meant, and that's okay (Loran Maxwell 2023). It's up to every generation to write their own story and decide what are the things that they identify with and what makes them unique to the previous generation. What makes me proud to see is that today's youth is not at all afraid of embracing their roots and upbringing. From reading all this history it's easy to imagine that Chicano culture was so heavily in the zeitgeist that it was "cool" for kids to be Mexican or Chicano, but in reality, the stigma of being a descendant of Mexican immigrants has been relatively persistent up until recently. In the words of Jimmy Humilde, "For a long time, it was very embarrassing for Chicanos, for Mexican American kids that grew up here in the U.S. to listen to Spanish music… Now you're considered a cool kid" (Suarez 2020). When I was growing up, a lot of kids my age were embarrassed for others to know that they spoke Spanish, that their parents worked in the fields, that Mexican music was listened to in the home. It's hard to pinpoint where the strange sense of shame stems from, but I always felt this pressure to assimilate. Either you hung out with the Mexican kids and did Mexican things or you hung out with the Americanized kids and did American things, there was no real in-between, at least not where I grew up, and I went to school where more than half the population was o. However, today, it seems like everyone wants to be o, and one of the driving forces behind the "trend" of being o is music. The new generation of regional Mexican artists embracing Hip-Hop culture and urban fashion, led to the Eslabon Armado and Peso Pluma hitting number 1 on the billboard charts here in the U.S, the first ever regional Mexican artists to do so. English language pop stars like Drake and Justin Bieber now have records with Reggaeton artists hoping to ride the o wave of hits. Bad Bunny was the number 1 streaming artist in the world for two years in a

row despite not having any songs in English or having to compromise anything about this culture. Legacy artists Shakira and Jennifer Lopez headlined one of the most viewed Super Bowl Halftime Shows of all time in 2020. Los Bukis, a legendary Mexican grupera band, is set to become the first band to headline an all Spanish language residency in Las Vegas this year. We've come a long way as a people in terms of representation, and it's really exciting to see. Steven Cesar Azcona stated in his dissertation how part of the goal of Chicano music is the tool we use to represent ourselves, "sitting in between Mexico and the U.S., what Chicanos do with the forms, genres, and styles of popular culture emanation from all sides is emblematic of their cultural struggle to see themselves in the world" (Azcona 5). However, the spotlight on Chicanos as cultural ambassadors has not necessarily put the same spotlight on the people's ongoing struggles with inequality. Over the past few years, as os have gained more recognition in mainstream media the U.S. has also undergone further militarization of the southern border, heightened criminalization of undocumented workers, continuing xenophobia varying from state to state. My hope is that as society begins to embrace our heritage and culture they don't forget our struggle, and recognize that we deserve human rights and equity just as much as acceptance and understanding.

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