



# Tin Tan

## Mexico's First Postmodern Icon<sup>1</sup>

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To the memory of Carlos Monsiváis, friend and mentor,  
who had the foresight to interpret Tin Tan as the first  
Mexican of the twentieth-first century.

**T**he year 2015 marked the centennial of the legendary iconic figure Germán Genaro Cipriano Gómez Valdés Castillo, better known as Germán “Tin Tan” Valdés. He is without a doubt one of the most revered celebrities of the glorious Golden Age of Mexico’s cinema, beginning in the late 1930s and ending in the early 1960s, and is certainly acclaimed as one of the greatest comedians and entertainers of all time. His distinguished career includes over 100 films; 11 record albums; 2 short subjects; 3 Walt Disney voice dubs; and hundreds of sketches and performances in theatres and night clubs.<sup>3</sup>

As expected, in his centennial year, a wide array of activities honoring him and his legacy were held in Mexico, including lectures and round-table discussions, pictorial exhibitions, a year-long festival of his entire filmography, short documentaries about his life, and scholarly and popular writings about him, including a personal memoir, a book written by his daughter Rosalía Valdés.<sup>4</sup> There are certainly plenty of reasons for all the attention and recognition that has come his way. Like his fellow actor from Mexico’s Golden Age, the legendary Pedro Infante, Tin Tan has gained much more popularity and acclaim as time goes by. In fact, he has become a truly *bona fide* icon of film and popular culture in Mexico and abroad.<sup>5</sup>

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Photos courtesy of the author.



Still from the film *Some Dead Make No Noise* (1946).



Still from the film *The King of the Hood* (1949).

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he was clearly a cultural novelty.**

But, despite everything that has been written and filmed about him, one essential dimension of his very unique talent and transcendental contributions has only been dealt with very superficially. This brings me to the central idea of this article: that Tin Tan was not only an actor who dressed as a pachuco (a zoot suiter) and spoke Spanglish, but was clearly culturally unique and ahead of his time.<sup>6</sup>

Tin Tan has been labeled the classic pachuco in Mexico; the focus, then, has been almost exclusively on his use of a mixture of English and Spanish, and certainly on his attire: a broad-brimmed hat, drape pants that ballooned out at the knee and were closely tapered at the ankle, an oversized jacket, and, on occasion, a gold or silver watch chain hanging from his pocket. His audiences and critics did not grasp the true, complex significance of *pachuquismo* as a social movement and cultural practice of the borderlands. Writing on pachucos, historian Luis Alvarez states that they embrace an “approach to life that helped them claim dignity in a society that routinely dehumanized them. . . . Their cultural practices, including choices in fashion, music, and dance, claimed honor and the refusal to accept humiliation and a refusal to conform.”<sup>7</sup>

Following along with this hypothesis, I would say that Tin Tan was in fact a pioneer who very creatively captured the rich culture of the U.S.-Mexico border (*la cultura fronteriza*) and served as a bridge to, and an interpreter of, Chicano culture for Mexico. He was particularly sensitive to Chicano (Mexican-American) youth culture and made it his own. From his earliest sketches, performances, and films, Tin Tan expounded and popularized *pachuquismo* in its truest form starting with *El hijo desobediente* (The Disobedient Son) (1945). He clearly understood the real meaning and symbolic nature of *pachuquismo* as part of the youth rebellion and search for dignity and identity for Chicanos and other minorities of color in the United States. That is particularly remarkable considering that in his time, *pachuquismo* was considered a special affront to many sectors of U.S. society who viewed such manifestations as defiantly

“Anti-American.” Institutions, like the police, the armed forces, and even the courts, in an attempt to eradicate *pachuquismo* unleashed violence and confrontations against pachucos wherever they were found, from California to New York, with total disregard for their civil rights.<sup>8</sup>

**THE EARLY YEARS OF GERMÁN VALDÉS  
AND THE EMERGENCE OF TIN TAN**

Germán Valdés was born in Mexico City in 1915. When he was 12, his family moved and settled in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, when his father, a customs agent, was transferred there. He thus spent many of his formative years on the border. In fact, Ciudad Juárez is the sister city of El Paso, Texas, and, according to scholars, the cradle of *pachuquismo* and the zoot-suiters.<sup>9</sup> From early adolescence on, Germán Valdés familiarized himself with both cities’ Mexican *barrios*, the two largest interrelated bilingual/bicultural neighborhoods along the U.S.-Mexico border. That facilitated his exposure and affinity to Chicano youth culture. According to his brother, comedian Manuel “Loco” Valdés, the most significant geographical spaces in his youth were the twin cities of El Paso/Ciudad Juárez and Los Angeles, California.<sup>10</sup> From all these interactions, he learned firsthand from Chicanos/Mexicanos their history, life stories, and issues, and became most sensitive to their plight in the United States. In those decades, U.S. society was totally unequal and segregated into a two-tier system, one for the Anglo-Saxon population and another for people of color like Mexicans/Chicanos. Germán Valdés vividly saw and understood how Chicanos were treated as second-class citizens. He saw that segregation, systematic discrimination, police violence, racial prejudices, economic oppression, and outright racism were the order of the day in the United States. Mexicans were kept in “their place” and would continue to fulfill their designated role as cheap labor with few to no civil rights, and had few avenues for social mobility. The young Germán Valdés

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embellished pachuco culture. The dress, mannerisms, forms of expression, humor, dance and music, the sense of identity, and ultimately the psyche of Chicano youth of the time became an essential part of his being and expressive discourse. About these experiences of Valdés, the late acclaimed writer Carlos Monsiváis wrote,

In addition to spending over a decade in this setting [the border], Tin Tan expanded his cultural horizons by making several trips in the United States, from San Francisco to Laredo. He genuinely became a fellow pachuco in the Mexican/Chicano barrios of those cities. By his own account, he made many close Chicano friends. This experience facilitated having a firsthand experience of the Chicano community in the entire Southwest. Thus, he learned to appreciate Chicano culture and society as no other Mexican celebrity of his time.<sup>11</sup>

After anchoring the popular radio show *El Barco del Amor* (Love Boat) in Ciudad Juárez, portraying Pachuco Topillo Tapas, the young Germán Valdés was hired by the artistic troupe of impresarios Jorge Maulmer and Paco Miller, which toured and performed in various U.S. and Mexican cities. In his early stage appearances, Germán Valdés played a pachuco in all of his sketches. As his popularity grew, his manager gave him a shorter nickname connected to his musical and comedic skills: Tin Tan.

As the years went by, Germán Valdés did not change his pachuco persona, which went with him in theatrical performances and his first films. This brought him great success. Amazingly for his time, Tin Tan's performances exemplified great solidarity with his Chicano *compañeros*. He did not fuel or emphasize the oppressive or downtrodden condition of the Chicano community but rather publicized and highlighted the attributes of its rich culture and lifestyle. Viewers will never find a demeaning or degrading joke or sketch at the expense of Chicanos in his films and performances—in fact, totally the opposite.

In his typical insightful and erudite manner, Monsiváis acknowledged this novel and unique aspect of Germán Valdés's self. He further claimed that Tin Tan was “the first Mexican of the twenty-first century,”<sup>12</sup> precisely because of his bold and ageless artistic repertoire and his usage of both languages and cultural patterns; he would therefore precede globalization and postmodern practices in every way.

### **GOING AGAINST THE TIDE**

Tin Tan certainly faced criticism from those who ignored or misunderstood the plight of their compatriots in the United States. Negative stereotypes were constantly reinforced not only by filmmakers but by writers, journalists, and the media. “We don't serve pachucos here,” said Mario Moreno, Cantinflas, in his film, *Si yo fuera diputado* (1952) (If I Were a Congressman). This statement reflected the derogatory view held by important segments of the population in Mexico at the time.<sup>13</sup>



Still from the film *The Same Music as Always* (1956).



Still from the film *Musician, Poet, and Madman* (1947).

## As the years went by, Germán Valdés did not change his pachuco persona, which accompanied him in theater performances and in his first films.

In fact, the images of the Chicano in the Mexican cinema of those decades were incredibly inaccurate and full of stereotypes, embodying negative images and messages about them. This is the case of films like *El hombre sin patria* (1922) (Man without a Homeland), *La China Hilaria* (Hilaria the Chinawoman) (1938), *Adiós mi chaparrita* (Goodbye My Dear Shorty) (1939), *Primero soy mexicano* (I'm Mexican First and Foremost) (1950), *Soy mexicano de acá de este lado* (I'm Mexican from This Side of the Border) (1951), and many others.<sup>14</sup> The essential cultural traits of Chicano society such as language patterns, attire, music, artistic motifs, etc., were never appropriately represented or understood in Mexico.

These views have their origins in the first decades of the twentieth century, at the height of Mexican immigration to the United States. A common term widely used in Mexico about their compatriots was *pocho* (an Anglicized Mexican) assuming —falsely— that they consciously assimilated into U.S. society at the expense of their Mexican roots and culture.<sup>15</sup> Later on, the term *pocho* became synonymous with pachuco.<sup>16</sup>

Unquestionably, the most emblematic, influential, and harsh pronouncement on this theme came from Nobel-winning author Octavio Paz in his widely read and acclaimed book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. In the introductory chapter, “Pachucos and Other Extremes,” Paz offers his personal interpretation and perceptions of pachuco/Chicano culture and being:

When I arrived in the United States, I lived for a while in Los Angeles, a city inhabited by over a million persons of Mexican origin. . . . At first sight, the visitor is surprised . . . by the city's vaguely Mexican atmosphere. . . . This Mexicanism . . . floats in the air because it never mixes or unites with the other world. . . . Something of the same sort characterizes the Mexicans you see in the streets . . .; they feel ashamed of their origins . . .; their sensibilities are like a pendulum that has lost its reason. . . . This spiritual condition has given birth to a type known as the

pachuco. . . . The pachuco has lost his whole inheritance, language, religion, customs, beliefs . . .; the pachuco is an impassive and sinister clown whose purpose is to cause terror instead of laughter . . .; the pachuco is impassive and contemptuous allowing all these contradictory impressions to accumulate around him until finally he sees them explode. . . . And then . . . he becomes his true self, his supremely naked self, as a pariah, a man who belongs nowhere. . . . The pachuco tries to enter North American society . . . but he impedes his own efforts. . . . The pachuco does not affirm or defend anything except his exasperated will-not-to-be. I am convinced that his hybrid language and behavior reflect an oscillation between two irreducible worlds —the North American and the Mexican— which he (the pachuco) vainly hopes to reconcile and conquer.<sup>17</sup>

Octavio Paz was the best known interpreter of such attitudes, but certainly not the only one in Mexico who shared such views. They were common in the country's popular and academic writings.

Thus, what is so commendable and gratifying in the case of Tin Tan is that, although he undoubtedly heard demeaning academic and popular statements about *pochos/pachucos*, and saw Mexican films containing derogatory images of Chicanos/Mexicanos, he not only did not adhere to such views but in his routines, sketches, films, and stage performances offered and presented a totally opposite —and alternative— representation of the Chicano. He proudly dressed as a pachuco, and stood alone defying all negative conventions of the time. That was the case of his early films, all directed by Humberto Gómez Landero: *El hijo desobediente* (The Disobedient Son) (1945), *Con la música por dentro* (With the Music Inside) (1946), *Hay muertos que no hacen ruido* (Some Dead Make No Noise) (1946), *El niño perdido* (The Lost Child) (1947), and *Músico, poeta y loco* (Musician, Poet, and Madman) (1947).<sup>18</sup> In later films like the classic *Calabacitas tiernas* (Tender Pumpkins) and others, he would also incorporate aspects of *pachuquismo*,

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### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

After examining the origins of his artistic career, it becomes clear that Germán Valdés, Tin Tan, as a postmodern representative, provided a revisionist portrayal of Chicano culture, its artifacts, and its discursive expressions. He specifically highlighted and validated the practices and representations of the popular culture of Chicano youth. Moreover, he made this culture visible in Mexico City and other parts of the country, as well as to Spanish-speaking audiences everywhere, in his performances and in several of his films.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, he contributed to forcefully opposing negative views among Mexicans about Chicanos, becoming a seminal bridge and a beacon of light in Chicano-Mexican relations. Thus, not only Mexicans but Chicanos should recognize and admire this pioneering work. Tin Tan, in fact, was the first major crossover icon figure of Mexico, and more than anyone in the artistic world of the Mexico of his time, he displayed a remarkable sensitivity and constant admiration for the Chicano experience and cultural practices, becoming their best advocate in Mexico. **MM**

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This article owes much to both the late Carlos Monsiváis, who brought the topic to my attention, and to Alejandro Pelayo, who prodded me to complete the research and present it at Mexico's National Cinematheque.
- <sup>2</sup> See the 2005 documentary *Ni muy muy, ni tan tan, simplemente Tin Tan*, directed by Manuel Márquez.
- <sup>3</sup> Rafael Aviña, "Tin Tan. 'El Rey del Tíbiri Tábara,'" *Somos. Cómicos Inolvidables del Cine Mexicano*, year 8, no. 8, August 1997, pp. 22-28.
- <sup>4</sup> Rosalía Valdés, *Tin Tan. Todo por amor* (Mexico City: Conaculta/La Caja de Cerillos, 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> David R. Maciel, "The Glorious Golden Age of Mexican Cinema," unpublished paper, 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> José Andrés Niquert. *Tin Tan y su Trompabulario* (Mexico City: Ediciones Estrada Monroy, 2013), pp. 13-16.
- <sup>7</sup> Luis Álvarez, *The Power of the Zoot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 83.
- <sup>8</sup> For an insightful and extremely well-researched book of the systematic harassment and brutality directed at pachucos, see Mauricio Mazón, *The Zoot Suit Rioters. The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984); and an outstanding book chapter: Luis Alvarez, "Zoot Violence on the Home Front: Race, Riots, and Youth Culture during World War II," in Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, ed., *Mexican Americans and World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 141-177.
- <sup>9</sup> Eduardo Obregón, *Murder at Sleepy Lagoon. Zoot Suits, Race and Riots in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 126-145.
- <sup>10</sup> Cited in Rafael Aviña, "La cultura del pachuco," *Somos* year 11, no. 205, March 1, 2001, pp. 32-39.
- <sup>11</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, "Tin Tan. El pachuco singular," *Intermedios* no. 4, 1992, pp. 34-37.
- <sup>12</sup> See the 2005 documentary *Ni muy muy, ni tan tan, simplemente Tin Tan*, directed by Manuel Márquez.
- <sup>13</sup> David R. Maciel, *El bandolero, el pocho y la raza. Imágenes cinematográficas del chicano* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores/Conaculta, 2000), pp. 84-85.
- <sup>14</sup> David Maciel, "Los desarraigados: los chicanos vistos por el cine mexicano," Ignacio Durán et al., *México-Estados Unidos. Encuentros y desencuentros en el cine* (Mexico City: Filmoteca-UNAM/IMCINE/CISAN-UNAM, 1996) pp. 165-189.
- <sup>15</sup> José Manuel Valenzuela Arce, *Nosotros. Arte, cultura e identidad en la frontera norte* (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2013), pp. 13-25.
- <sup>16</sup> Susan Marie Green, "Zoot Suiters Past and Present," Ph.D. Diss. (University of Minnesota, 1997).
- <sup>17</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), pp. 12-18.
- <sup>18</sup> Emilio García Riera, *Las películas de Tin Tan* (Mexico City: Cineteca Nacional, 1998).
- <sup>19</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, "The Culture of the Frontier. The Mexican Side," Stanley R. Ross, ed., *Views across the Border* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), pp. 63-64.



Still from the film *News Report* (1953).