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Changing the World
The Stories of Four Members of the "Avándaro Nation"

The word "*avándaro*" is from the Purembe language (or Purépecha, as it is known colloquially); it means "place of dreams" or "place of the clouds." This is the name of the area in the State of Mexico where young people camping out founded what was then called the "Avándaro Nation," asking for peace and love. Later, a mall was built with luxury shops selling motorboats, motorcycles, and race cars. Today, no one walks there anymore; all you see is a parade of luxury cars. The music you hear is completely different from the good rock played there almost five decades ago. The hired guns, now called "escort details," wander around and remind us of the "Judas" (judicial police) of times gone by. Some even look like agents from the now defunct Crime Prevention Investigations Department (DIPD).

There, very few people —or no one— seem to remember, and much less celebrate, that September 11, but in 1971, a unique event in the history of Mexico was held, congregating a huge number of young people: The Rock and Rolling Festival.

An enormous number of "nobodies" came out on the street, young people who only then became visible. Rock was new, liberating, loud. The music managed to bring

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Photos by Sergio García, taken from the video *Avándaro*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdEaip0c9jQ

together the youth that had broken apart after the June 10, 1971 massacre.

At a time like that, an ideology and an emotional response converged, but the important part was the response. The rest is words, theories that can be critiqued. What was irrefutable was the horde of young people who came on foot from everywhere just to be there. It was an unconscious movement born of a growing rebellion that combined with and was due to the music because the music represented them; not because of the language, but because of its strength, capable of penetrating directly to the heart and the mind without any kind of explanation in between.

After Avándaro, rock died in Mexico. It was more dangerous to be a trafficker of vinyl records than of hard drugs, weapons, or people.

The banned music went to what were called "funky holes," and the audience changed radically.

This article is based on the experiences of Maricruz Patiño, Bernardo Perezverdía, Gordon Ross, and Antonio Mendiola, residents of Valle de Bravo, whom we would like to thank for their collaboration.

Rock Has Been My Religion, Bernardo Perezverdía

"Rock has been my religion. I'm sure it saved my life. If rock and roll hadn't existed, I would've been a real delinquent," says Bernardo, the youngest of five children born into a conservative family "with eighteenth-century and Porfirio Díaz-era values."

> I studied middle school with the Silesians. I had been expelled from a different school, and to discipline me, they put me into a boarding school with them. That changed my life forever. Until I got there, I had been one of the true faithful. The education was Pavlovian and very, very repressive: they tortured us; they left us outside at night. You ended up very injured emotionally. The priests told me that my behavior had condemned me to Hell; so then I started doing really weird stuff because I didn't care anymore. To the point that the first time I took LSD was there. Rejected by my family, humiliated by the priests, I needed something to hold on to, and I liked rock from the very first bar I heard. At boarding school, I would hide to listen to Capital Radio, covering myself with the pillow so they couldn't see me. It was horrible. I had a poster of Dylan under my desk's glass and when the father found out that I wanted to be like Bob, I was grounded for a month.
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> People started to play good rock here in Mexico, and there were several places that used to be called "cafés-concert" that were closed down just after the Avándaro festival, on September 14, 1971, even though they only sold milk shakes and coffee. The strongest thing that you could get was a double espresso or a Coca-Cola with lots of lemon sherbet. Among these cafés were the A Plein Soleil (In the Scorching Sun); the 2 + 2; La Rana Sabia (The Wise Frog); but there were a bunch.

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Bernardo used to go often to Los Globos (The Balloons), on South Insurgentes Avenue across from the Hotel of Mexico (today, the World Trade Center), because you could dance there. Groups like Tequila, Bandido, and Peace and Love played there.

> There were very good groups, particularly the ones from Tijuana, who brought the black influence and music back with them from San Francisco. That's where Santana left from to go to San Francisco, leaving behind Javier Bátiz who, romantically, wanted to save national rock and roll. Because being a rocker in Mexico is like being a democrat at election time. It's just not possible.

We Opened an Immense Door, Maricruz Patiño

Poet Maricruz Patiño, who began her philosophy studies at the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters in 1968, says,

> I was a young girl from the educated middle class. We were going through a period of transition because the traditional Mexico we had been raised in mixed together with all the

international influence, and rock united everybody. It united the youth. That meant a change in values and principles: the hippies preached freedom, peace, and love; the surrealists, all power to the imagination. Maybe it was all a little Utopian, but you have to have Utopias because if you don't, there's no horizon to head for. We didn't manage to free ourselves completely, but we did open a huge door. The conquest of freedom had to include a time for reflecting, for assimilating just exactly what freedom is.

Then, she says, came the Avándaro happening.

Actually, the rock music accompanied a car race but wasn't the main event. The organizers estimated that a maximum of about a thousand people would attend, but thousands and thousands and thousands of young people turned out. It happened without anyone planning it that way because the promoters just wanted to organize a nice little party for young kids with their cars in a place where the police wouldn't fuck them over for staging drag races.

Who Went to the Festival?

"I did!" says Bernardo, delighted,

and they kicked me out of the La Salle school for being a bad influence on the other students, since I also sneaked out to go. My parents wouldn't let me go. My room had a balcony facing a little porch, so I jumped to the fence, got out on the roof of the big door to the place, and scarpered. My pal was waiting for me and we left.

My life-long buddies are my friends because of music; we would form our own groups and get together to play. We'd come to Avándaro often. The electricity would go out all day long and there was no TV, no anything. And we'd go with bongo drums, maracas, guitars, and books . . . and candles because the electricity would go out. That's what we'd do. We lent each other books and records. I heard about Avándaro on the radio and because I was addicted to the Hip 70 shop. On South Insurgentes Avenue there was an ice rink where I used to go to skate with my buddies. The Dug Dugs would play there; most of the groups that went to Avándaro played there. Outside was Hip 70 and they sold posters and records, the best records. It was a very special place for me, where people who knew about rock got together; it was an underground culture. There was the music that everybody knew about: the Beatles and what you could hear on the radio. But there was also the Cream and very dark groups that never got any airtime on any radio. At Hip 70, I bought my 25-peso ticket and my T-shirt (which somebody stole from me when I came to live in Valle del Bravo).

We were a pretty large group of friends. We left around five in the morning on a Friday in a caravan. Around 10 or 15 cars. On the way, we picked people up and gave them a ride because lots were going on foot. They had set up a Red Cross station next to the Avándaro church, and on that same street, near the center divider, were all the cars that were going to be in the race.

There were people of all colors, from kids from very poor backgrounds to people from Las Lomas. They came from Tijuana and also from Mérida, but, even though it was very mixed, you could see the social differences. We had a tent where we put our food. We'd get lost and find each other again. Nobody stole our stuff.

You felt very safe; it was like a brotherhood: peace and love. And it rained and rained, and we wrapped up in sheets of plastic. I didn't sleep either of the two nights I was there. Suddenly, somebody would pass around a bottle or a joint; you'd open a can of tuna and you'd give him a spoon, and he'd stand staring at you because everybody was starving. . . . You had to "pass it around" and at the end, you only got a spoonful out of your can. When somebody fainted or got too high, they'd pass him or her over the crowd toward the Red Cross.

Some people stole ears of corn and potatoes from the nearby fields to cook them on campfires. The townspeople peeked out of their balconies and threw us fruit; they brought out jugs of water, or even just offered us the garden hose, because we were all dehydrated. The food, the taco stands, the corner stores, everything ran out of everything. The state government sent food, but they didn't give it to us.

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Setting Up the Stage, Antonio Mendiola

"The stage was up front," remembers Antonio Mendiola, who lives very close to where the concert was held.

> From the *tecalli* [the security booth] you turn right, and where the road ends, you turn right again toward the golf club. At that time, there was a field, a very large esplanade; that's where the festival was held. I have a friend named Armando Molina. He was in charge of coordinating the musicians who would be playing at Avándaro. Before the festival, I went with him to look for the groups and hire them, and to the radio stations to promote it. We set up the stage, the sound towers. We promoted the concert on Telesistema Mexicano and on the radio; we took the groups' records to them. and they broadcast them. The tickets sold out. We expected about 12 000 people, but many, many more came. The groups that I remember were La Revolución de Emiliano Zapata, La Tribu (The Tribe), Love Army, Peace and Love, Bandido (Bandit), Tinta Blanca (White Ink), Dug Dug's, Epílogo, La División del Norte (The Northern Division), and Three Souls, which closed the concert as dawn was breaking.

Maricruz Patiño was also a brigade member and the only one in her family who didn't go to the October 2 demonstration because her mother locked her in her bedroom. She was in a group called Like Old Friends, "a real musical promise," according to *México canta*, one of the few magazines that published articles on rock. There were four of them in the group; they had won a contest, recorded a single, and had been playing together for a year when they went to Avándaro.

Maricruz remembers,

> I told my parents, "We're going to sing at Avándaro."
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> "Over my dead body," said my mother.
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> My dad said, "We have to go to Valle [de Bravo] this week anyway." Because we had a house there. "But you're not going to Avándaro."
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> So then, as soon as we got out of the car in front of the house, my sister and I took off running to Avándaro. My mom was really worried and sent my brothers to catch up with us, but they just stayed all night at the festival, too. I was wearing some leather shorts and Federica boots; and it was raining; it was horrendously muddy, and those boots were really heavy . . . and I couldn't take them off.
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> I remember when we were on our way from Mexico City, we gave a group of kids from Tijuana a ride. They had left three months before. From the day the announcement was made that there was going to be that concert, we all thought about Woodstock and that all the new groups would be there, enthusiastically received by all the youth. Because it was Mexican rock. We went around the paths in Avándaro and thousands and thousands of young people were on their best behavior: not even anyone pushing. And if you happened to step on somebody because he was just lying there, gassed up to his eyeballs, you'd say, "Gee, brother. Sorry." And from down there on the ground, you'd hear the answer: "No fucking problem, kid."
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> When the naked women appeared, everybody got up and they started pinching their butts, but it went no further than that. And the music . . . those of us who were there, the last thing we heard was the music. You're with the people around you and they're passing around the joint; that's what's going on. Yes, we were all facing the stage and watching, but an awful lot was going on in the audience: there were the people who had put up a tent and they were fucking in there and

you could hear them shouting, and all that in the middle of the rain and a field of mud . . . but we didn't care. We were playing one of our songs called "Martha."

And Maricruz emphasizes,

> The 1970s were precisely the time when Mexican rockers were making the genre our own. Up until then, people had the idea that rock had been born in English, and if you sang in another language, it ruined it. But there was a group from Yucatán called Los Fenders who sang rock in Mayan. So, we started getting the idea of assimilating it as a genre, making it our own, and expressing it in our language. It's like what happened with Spanish: in our country we used to speak other languages, and when we were conquered, they imposed Spanish. It took us centuries to assimilate it to be able to express the indigenous or mestizo soul in a borrowed language. Maybe it wasn't conscious, but it happened; and a revolution was happening, and young people were part of that moment. So, the world connection was through the Avándaro happening.

We Didn't Know What It Was All About, But We Said, "Ok, Let's Go," Gordon Ross

A university production of the rock opera *Tommy* debuted in Avándaro, directed by Eduardo Ruiz Saviñón and produced by the Tenase brothers. Gordon Ross, a ceramicist now living in Valle de Bravo, who was studying communications at the time at the UNAM School of Political Science, tells us about his experience:

> By chance, I went to the home of José Antonio Guzmán, the musical director. I saw that he had the score of *Tommy* and said, "I can read this." He was looking for people who could play the music for the piece and he made an appointment for me to go the next day to a rehearsal. We were a very curious mix of 10 musicians: rockers and people from the conservatory. And we rehearsed every day. The dancers and the actors worked at the UNAM School of Architecture, and we'd get together there in the mornings. Little by little, the production was taking shape. We were pretty far along when they told us we were invited to a festival in Avándaro. We didn't know what it was all about, but we said, "Great. Let's go."
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> The UNAM rented a house in Avándaro and Tena got a bus for transport. The house is still there; it's pretty big: everybody fit. Avándaro was a fucking great forest. Almost the whole group arrived on Tuesday. On Wednesday, we went out really early to where the festival was going to be. The whole structure was set up, and there were already a ton of people there. We watched as the place filled up with people. They brought in a monster electric generator, and we were able to rehearse on Friday. But the whole cast wasn't there. The lead actor, who thought he was really important, didn't want to arrive until the last minute . . . . and he never made it: he got stuck in traffic. So, Lalo Ruiz Saviñón had to pay the part of Tommy.

Avándaro proved that Mexican youth was alive, open, eager to change history. Latin America's hippies were the guerrillas of the Cuban Revolution who defeated the United States.

I was doing my military service. In a division with really hard training. I had started High School No. 1 in 1968 and was very active in the student movement; that's why at the time I took the militia very seriously. I remember that the colonel who commanded my group said, "Listen, I have something I have to do and I have to miss [practice]." Nobody knew what he was going to do or what was going on, but he gave me leave. . . . The next Sunday, when I got there, they arrested me demanding how I had dared go to "that." Soldiers are tough.

We were going to play on Saturday when the sun came out. We had everything ready so that the moment it peeped over the horizon, we would play the first chord of the overture and wake everybody up. That night, the rock groups started arriving, and when they found out we had a house and equipment, we organized a huge jam session. One group of dancers got lost in the woods and didn't turn up until after midnight. We all woke up at 5 a.m. and went over to the stage. When we got there, it was already taken over by the army. They were watching everything. We got there and we couldn't tune up because the instruments were all adjusted at I-don't-know-what voltage and the electricity there operated on another; so the organ couldn't give us the note and the engineers hadn't set up our monitors, so we couldn't hear each other.

There were four towers with these humongous speakers, and I was playing the guitar to try to tune it, but you couldn't hear anything. So, in the end, of course, there was no way we were going to start playing at six in the morning like we had planned. We started at one . . . and the river of people kept coming. When the music started, something beautiful and magical happened. The forum was about half full, but people kept arriving. . . . We played. I could never hear myself, but everybody loved it.

For me, Avándaro, being with everybody there and all, it was great; but it was also very painful because three months before, on June 10, they had beaten the shit out of us in Mexico City. And so the fiesta was a little macabre: the helicopter kept circling, the Coca-Cola ad in the background; these were things that, to my mind, were really fucked up. The crowd was from everywhere, but mainly from the poor neighborhoods in Mexico City. They were all really great. The atmosphere was respectful, but apolitical. The group I was with was also apolitical because we [political people] were always a minority.

What Did the Avándaro Happening Show?

Avándaro was very important because it proved that Mexican youth was alive, open, eager to change history. Latin America's hippies were the guerrillas of the Cuban Revolution who defeated the United States. That was a precedent that had weight; that is why these Mexican youths believed they could change the world. And there were also the U.S. American youths who burned their draft cards, protesting the war in Vietnam. Also, the men were letting their hair grow long, and the women were taking contraceptive pills. The feeling was that they were changing the world, that things were going to be different.

At Avándaro, the kids felt very safe because they knew that their equals were not going to betray them; nobody cared if you were a kid from wealthy Las Lomas or a kid from down-and-out Tepito: they were all young people. Everybody took care of everybody else; and the girls —and a lot of them were naked— nobody bothered them. Nobody. It was all like a dream or Paradise, like something that doesn't exist but there, it did exist. So, they thought, "Yes, we can change the world." And who knows what happened, but neoliberalism came with the next generation."

"Later they invited me to go sing at Rock sobre Ruedas," says Maricruz Patiño.

> We'd go in a stake-bed truck customized so that when you opened it up, we could play right there. It was a great fiesta. Whenever the cops could come, people would tell us from way in the back, and by the time the officers managed to make their way through, the truck had already closed up, we were leaving, and the people in the audience were watching out for us. In fact, one day we also went to play and raise hell outside of Los Pinos [presidential residence].

"Rock came to an end, and disco music started up," concludes Bernardo, "but I decided to go to the bar León and listen to chachachá and salsa." VM