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“South of the Border (Down Mexico Way)” The Musical Comings and Goings Between Mexico and the United States¹

While we may trace the musical relationship between Mexico and the United States back to colonial times, when exchanges took place between once borderless geographical spaces—whose subsequent boundaries remained blurry once they did come into existence—today I will observe the more recent relationships established as of the twentieth century.² These musical intersections and exchanges unfolded between industrialized, media-heavy, and urbanized spaces.³

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The emergence of recorded sound in the late nineteenth century, and the surge of two great record labels, RCA Victor and Columbia Records, impacted both the production of records and of record players. Novelty music recorded in the United States reached Mexico and especially the upper classes that had access to it. Over the first quarter of the twentieth century, technological innovation coexisted with the publication of sheet music, which not only helped promote the songs but also swiftly increased their popularity. Whether at social gatherings, family get togethers, dances, revue theaters, or world cinema screenings, sheet music was essential to musical accompaniment. A lot of the sheet music brought in popular

songs from abroad, especially from the United States, and helped spread them across Mexico.

One major shift in music came with the spawning of commercial radio in Mexico in 1923 and the subsequent surge of radio receivers, which were becoming more and more accessible — while record players remained limited to privileged homes and spaces.

In Mexico, a number of genres matured on the radio by basically emulating the programming broadcasted by their US counterparts: radio drama, political messaging, and news, but also live music broadcasts and, eventually, programming on sporting events and bullfighting.

At least in Mexico City, certain radio stations aired programs with music in English, such as “Your Hit Parade.” The program successfully launched in the United States in 1935 and was later recorded for other target countries, such as Mexico, keeping the public up to speed with the most popular American songs.

In the late 1930s, Ken Smith hosted the program “La hora americana” on XEBZ (660 AM), presenting the most popular songs on U.S. radio.

New radio stations thus began to crop up, many focusing on English-language music from the United States. We should highlight the importance of Radio Capital XEL 1260 AM, which broadcasted the US hit parade for many years, with the 100 most popular songs aired every 31st of December.

Film was key to the dissemination of music, too. Before television, the only way to see performers was to attend live shows at night clubs and revue theaters or to go to the movies. With huge movie theaters, the film-going experience was fundamental to everyday entertainment. In these films, movie stars sang, and singers acted. Those with multiple talents stood out the most. Films with music idols like Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, and Doris Day, among others, could also be enjoyed in Mexico.

In the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, which mainly unfolded in the 1940s and '50s, U.S. music permeated many forms of expression. As in the United States, great orchestras and crooners proliferated in Mexico, too, and even though they sang in Spanish, they sought to emulate the lead singers of big-band music.

The local big-band repertoire in Mexico included popular rhythms akin to the ones playing in the United States at the time. A musical bridge would connect Mexico City, New York, and Havana, with fads, songs, and dance moves

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circulating from one place to another. Quintessentially, we might look to Germán Valdés, also known as Tin Tan, who often made appearances in movies, dancing the swing and singing in English and especially in Spanglish for his classical interpretation of the pachuco. Meanwhile, Mario Moreno, also known as Cantinflas, danced the swing with an American tourist in the film *El portero* (Dir. Miguel M. Delgado, 1950), accompanied by a mariachi band in the “El Tenampa” cantina located in Plaza Garibaldi.

In general, Mexican films would include an orchestra and a trending singer who would perform original pieces and, less frequently, top hits translated from English.

One moment that I find especially interesting in the Mexico-US musical relationship takes place in the emblematic box-office success *A.T.M. ¡A toda máquina!* (1951), directed by Ismael Rodríguez. In the film, at a cabaret of sorts, Pedro Infante sings Consuelito Velázquez’s renowned hit “Bésame mucho” (1940), but in English. Accompanied by the orchestra, he sports a suit and bowtie in the style of a true crooner. As he sings, the women in the audience cry “Sinatra!” much like the teeny boppers who would fall all over Frank. At the end of his performance, Infante is surrounded by the teeny boppers, just as Sinatra often found himself.

Likewise, with revue theaters, cabarets, and night clubs, American singers started making a splash in Mexico City. The radio, record sales, films, newspapers, and specialized magazines would keep the Mexican public abreast of American hits.

In the early 1950s, jazz ensembles also proliferated, with musicians making incursions into this completely American genre that ended up playing an important part in Mexican films. The bands led by Juan García Esquivel, Héctor Hallal “El Árabe,” Mario Patrón, “Chilo” Morán, and Tino Contreras, among others, played jazz, as did other large orchestras such as those led by Luis Arcaraz and Pablo Beltrán Ruiz.

By the mid-1950s, rock and roll, whose rhythm emanated from the United States, shook the world, and

Mexico felt it, too. Rock became the rhythm of youth, sparking significant changes in lifestyles, belief systems, and dancing. The cultural and generational gap between the adult world and youths took hold, and music became a way to express one's identity. The song "Rock around the Clock," by Bill Haley & his Comets, which opened the film *The Blackboard Jungle* (Dir. Richard Brooks, 1954), along with Elvis Presley's smashing success, were two elements that gave rock and roll the greatest musical impact beyond U.S. borders. Presley became particularly famous after his first recordings at RCA Victor in 1956.

In Mexico, the big orchestras and jazz ensembles started to include rock and roll in their repertoires. It was Pablo Beltrán Ruiz who recorded the first instrumental rock and roll in Mexico in 1956, which he coined as "Mexican Rock and Roll."

Meanwhile, Gloria Ríos, an actress and vedette born in San Antonio, Texas, who came to Mexico to work in the film industry, stood as the first official rock and roll singer in Mexico. When rock and roll began to make its mark, she incorporated it in her performances, dancing and singing in a mix of Spanish and English. She was known as the "Queen of Rock and Roll," with her first rock recording in Mexico taking place in 1957. She was generally accompanied by the jazz ensembles led by Hector Hallal and later Mario Patrón, with whom she saw great professional success.

It was through film that rock and roll first reached Mexico. Many movies familiarized audiences with the genre, especially films for young people. We might highlight *Los chiflados del rock and roll* (Dir. José Díaz Morales, 1957), in which even traditional, adult singers like Pedro Vargas, Luis Aguilar, and Agustín Lara succumbed to the rock and roll trend. Critics were scandalized, decrying that these singers and composers of Mexican music had abandoned their values.

Yet the screening of U.S. films with young rock and roll performers in Mexico was a resounding success, inspiring people to seek out the dance moves and performances of their true American idols. We might especially note the incident that unfolded at the screening of *King Creole* (Dir. Michael Curtiz, 1958), with Elvis Presley, at the "Las Américas" movie theater. People were so excited to see the King of Rock and Roll perform his smash hits that they started dancing, even removing some of the seats to make room. As a result, Presley's films were banned in Mexico and

rock and roll was demonized as a bad and foreign influence on youth.

We should note that, at the time, Mexico was experiencing critical cultural polarization, with the proliferation of media, articles, and lifestyles imported from the north opening the floodgates of ever-sought-after "modernity," clashing with the highly traditional and conservative society that sought to preserve its moral codes. Rock and roll was part of this imported modernity, despite its tug-of-war with tradition and what was considered authentically Mexican.

By 1959, thanks to the inevitable success of rock and roll in the United States and many parts of the world, record companies in Mexico set out to record some of the youth bands that had begun to crop up a few years back. Young people who would play at parties and school gatherings started gaining traction at revue theaters and in emergent television programming. At the same time, certain radio stations with programming in English, which aired music hits from the United States, made space for these new groups that yearned to play rock and roll.

Most of the band names were in English, with the songs in English, too, but record companies requested that the songs be translated to Spanish. Singing in English limited comprehension to just a small sector of the audience. Furthermore, a government rule allowed just a certain percentage of songs to be aired in other languages. Thus, by the early 1960s, what came to be known as the golden age of rock-in-Spanish took off, though most of the songs were covers of U.S. hits.⁴ Thus, on the radio, one could listen to original songs in English but also to Spanish-language versions interpreted by Mexican groups and solo singers.

Another way of keeping up to speed with U.S. hits in Mexico was to read the popularity lists published in newspapers and magazines more-or-less regularly, with the most constant being *Notitas musicales*, which printed a list of the most popular songs in Mexico and the United States every month. This small-sized magazine published

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lyrics, too, which made it easier for readers to learn the songs.

I believe this to be the moment of highest musical confluence between the two countries, marking a clear phenomenon of appropriation and resignification as people yearned to embrace and experience the youthful modernity that had been imported to Mexico. In the early 1960s, a new rhythm from the United States started to make its mark in popularity listings: the twist, which was immediately incorporated in Mexican repertoires and recordings, but also in Mexican films, as people would dance the twist on screen, too.

The popular Mexican actor Cantinflas danced to Bill Haley & his Comets' "Florida Twist" in the film *El extra* (Dir. Miguel M. Delgado, 1962). By then, Bill Haley had actually moved to Mexico. Likewise, Tin Tan and Resortes danced the twist in *Pilotos de la muerte* (Dir. Chano Urueta, 1962).

The formula of translating U.S. hits and then having local groups and solo singers reinterpret them persisted up until the mid-1960s, by which the emergence of more complex lyrics and musical genres put a brake on the translation trend.

By the early 1960s, many original bands had cropped up in Mexico, some with their own songs and names in English, but after the legendary Avándaro festival of 1971, rock and roll's presence waned and became marginalized.

Though certain radio stations would continue to broadcast English-language music that was trending in the United States, disco was likely the most influential genre of the 1960s, bolstered by film and the discos that proliferated across Mexico, where people basically listened to imported music that had been recorded in the United States. Notable disco musicians flocked to Mexico to perform at night clubs.

Later, the emergence of the television channel MTV in 1981 revamped the impactful presence of U.S. American music in Mexico. Many musicians who had only been "imagined" through radio, recorded music, and publications up to that point would become real through the music videos that aired on television.

As part of the new opening to North America espoused by NAFTA, which transformed the commercial and cultural relationship between Mexico, Canada, and the United States, then department chief of Mexico City, Manuel Camacho Solís (1988-1993) fully authorized concerts in Mexico City, most of which would be rock and roll per-

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formances. Up until that point, concerts had been subject to prohibitions, censorship, and other limitations, but this all changed when Mexico became a destination for U.S. tours. From then on, copious concerts and festivals ripened into a fruitful and permanent musical exchange between the two countries.

Today, the musical relationship between Mexico and the United States has reached new heights. Many Mexican musicians have moved to the United States, either temporarily or permanently. Furthermore, the constant tours and presentations for Mexican and Latin American publics are still on the rise, with avid audience members seeking entertainment with roots akin to their own.

Likewise, many artists' children have been born in the United States and now seek to build their own musical careers. These youths are fostering a new identity, forged by their roots but also by their musical expressions.

To conclude, I would like to mention the popular style known as Regional Mexican (Reg Mex), which is actually not a genre with ties to Mexico and its regions. With a myriad of subgenres, this musical construct is a product of an active imaginary on both sides of the border, though it is most popular among migrants with Mexican roots in the United States. Reg Mex is a quest for one's origins rooted in a nostalgic idealization of true Mexican identity, one that's seemingly far-off, close as it may be. **MM**

Notes

- 1 "South of the Border (down Mexico Way)," a song by Jimmy Kennedy and Michael Carr (1939), became a classical standard of popular music, with dozens of English and even Spanish versions becoming hits, as with Enrique Guzmán's "Al sur de la frontera."
- 2 In this article, I mention some of the events and situations that I deem significant to the musical relationship between the two countries.
- 3 Music in the two countries' rural areas would require a different kind of analysis and methodological approach.
- 4 The presence of British performers like Cliff Richards, and of multiple popular songs from Italy, which seemed easier to translate to the Spanish, are also worth mentioning, though U.S. rock and roll was the most popular.