Music in Mexico

Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

On April 30, 2010, Chicago’s House of Blues became a niche of Mexican musical culture as a great crowd, primarily Mexicans and Mexican Americans, gathered to fervently applaud and sing along with Lila Downs. Lila appeared, wearing high-heeled tall boots, a waistband over-knee skirt, a tube top beautifully decorated with Oaxaca-style embroidery, and a white shawl resembling the wings of a sparrow, to passionately sing Tomás Méndez’s classic ranchera song “Cucurrucú paloma” (Coo Coo Dove); it was clear then that this was going to be an extraordinary evening. The crowd, mesmerized, almost hypnotized by Lila’s beautiful, expressive voice, enjoyed her rendition of rancheras, huapangos, boleros, corridos, and sones, including “Arenita azul” (Blue Little Sand), with a powerful percussive beat that invited everyone to dance. Her soulful versions, in Spanish, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Nahuatl languages, of classic Oaxacan songs like “La llorona” (The Weeping Woman), “La zandunga,” and “Simuna” (Simona) brought nostalgic tears to the many Oaxaqueños (from Oaxaca state in Southern Mexico) in the audience. However, her wonderful medley of Woody Guthrie’s classics “Pastures of Plenty” and “This Land Is Your Land,” reinvented with cumbia and hip-hop touches, brought down the house, the crowd screaming and singing, accompanying Lila’s performance.

Lila Downs’s concert at the House of Blues was no ordinary performance. Occurring in Chicago, with its large Mexican and Mexican American communities, during the heated national debate about immigration and Arizona’s SB 1070 law; Lila’s “Mexicanized” renditions of Guthrie’s classic odes to the working classes strongly resonated with this audience. Guthrie’s “Pastures of Plenty” (1941) chronicles the experience of migrant workers going to California and Arizona to harvest crops while living “on the cities’ edges.” In the present anti-immigration context, Downs’s appropriation of the song was a statement of how Mexican migrants and Mexican American workers embody the powerful tale that connects U.S. identity to immigration, hard work, and determination.
I also think that Downs' concert reflects the ways in which the wonderful kaleidoscope of contemporary Mexican culture is developed in complex dialogues that transcend Mexico's political borders. Lila's singing in multiple languages spoke to the multi-ethnic character of Mexico, for it is home to more than 60 indigenous ethnic groups with their own languages. And her engaging interpretation of "Arenita azul," a traditional chilena from the Costa Chica region in Oaxaca and Guerrero, reminds us of Mexico's forgotten Afro-Mexican population. The African presence, dating to the 16th century when it numbered roughly a half-million, was neglected during the re-imagings of the Mexican nation, even though smaller groups of Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African Americans kept migrating to Mexico until the end of the 19th and sometimes through the 20th century. Mexico's European heritage is also diverse, and although most Europeans arrived from Spain during colonial times, many ethnicities and cultures have immigrated through Mexico's history, including Germans, Italians, French, as well as Chinese, Japanese, Jews, and Arabs. Figure 1.1 offers a map of Mexico that shows the location of the main cities and cultural areas discussed in the book.

Lila's repertory—traditional genres, jazz, and hip-hop—speaks to the wide variety of experiences and aspirations of Mexico's people. The history of some of these songs shows how powerful media shaped symbols of Mexican music and popular culture and its representation throughout the world. In the 1965 film Cucurrucucú paloma, singer Lola Beltrán introduced the song "Cucurrucucú paloma," and with the help of Latin America's influential radio and TV networks, XEW and Televisa, made it and herself into icons of Mexican ranchera and mariachi music.

The three issues I have mentioned in relation to Lila Downs' concert in Chicago—ethnicity and the place of indigeneity among symbols of Mexican identity, the role of migration and diaspora in determining Mexican culture, and the power of the media in shaping its national and international representations—are the central themes for discussion of Mexican music in this book. Figure 1.2 shows Lila Downs performing at Chicago's Congress Theater.

FIGURE 1.1. Map of Mexico.

FIGURE 1.2. Lila Downs performing at Chicago's Congress Theater. (© Oliver Gillinson. Used by permission of Oliver Gillinson, 2012)
ETHNIC IDENTITY AND MUSIC IN MÉXICO

Lila Downs was born in Tlaixaco, Oaxaca, the daughter of a Scottish American father and a Mixtec Indian mother. She grew up a multicultural child traveling back and forth between Mexico and the United States and negotiating the intricacies of crossing the borders between mainstream Mexican and indigenous cultures. Lila experienced both the benefits of living in many cultures and the shortcomings of not being fully accepted in any of them; to mainstream Mexicans she was an Indian, to Americans she was Mexican, and to indigenous Oaxacans she was mestizo (person of mixed ancestry) or just American. As a member of Mixtec and Trique communities she experienced the discrimination and disrespect suffered by indigenous people in Mexico. Her choice of songs and language celebrate the many cultures she claims as her own and substantiates the many hardships that come with crossing borders.

The mainstream American belief that links Mexicans and their culture to indigeneity is not only the result of American constructions of difference but is also a response to Mexico’s conflicted relationship with its own indigenous population. The country celebrates such a population in textbooks but neglects it in everyday life. Throughout Mexican history numerous political projects have attempted to use indigenous cultures as banners of Mexican identity. The first theme I use to explore music in Mexico concerns the relationship between music and different constructions of ethnic identity in the country. Formulated simply, Mexico’s troubled legacy with its indigenous past has shaped the representation of the country and its culture.

Although interest in indigenous communities among Mexican intellectuals persisted from the late 19th century, it was after the Mexican revolution (1910–21), particularly during the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, that a political project called indigenismo attempted to make indigenous cultures the source of a unified Mexican identity. This project encouraged artists to base their contemporary art on pre-Columbian forms, images, and sounds. For plastic artists this was not problematic given that pre-Columbian paintings, architecture, and ceramics, still survive and could be taken as models. It proved more difficult for musicians since most indigenous musical practices in Mexico are strongly influenced by European (mostly Spanish) and African musics. As scholars like Marina Alonso Bolaños argue, indigenous music had to be imagined and invented both in the modernist concert music of composers like Manuel M. Ponce, Carlos Chávez, or Daniel Ayala and in the stylized versions of folk musics produced by state-sponsored organizations like the Departamento de Bellas Artes (Fine Arts Department) or the Ballet Folklórico de México (Alonso Bolaños 2008). The stylistic character, social role, instrumental lineup, and even repertory of most current musical practices in rural Mexico were determined by how the indigenista project reconstructed them to make them symbols of the heritage of the nation-state. This official celebration of indigeneity was defined in relation to the political goals of the nation but was accompanied by a striking neglect, marginalization, and contempt toward indigenous peoples and their living culture.

As a result of these policies, today there are two contrasting and coexisting notions of indigeneity in Mexico: an imaginary one, in which being indigenous is a source of pride in the splendor of pre-Columbian civilizations, and the real one that identifies contemporary indigenous people and their culture as “backward,” marginal, and a source of embarrassment.

Through the 20th century, indigenismo shared the spotlight in Mexican cultural politics with an idea of mestizaje (racial and cultural mixing) that privileges the mixing of European and indigenous cultures as the root of Mexican identity. This notion of mestizaje as a celebratory concept was loosely based on the spirit of José Vasconcelos’s renowned La raza cósmica (1925). In his book, Vasconcelos advanced the idea that Hispanic America’s raza de bronce (bronce race; a combination of all the world’s races and cultures mixing in the continent) had the spiritual mission of establishing a true universal and cosmopolitan civilization. As a national cultural project, mestizaje lost its cosmopolitan basis and the catholicity of Vasconcelos’s ideas and focused on the claim that Mexico’s local raza de bronce resulted only from Spanish and indigenous mixing. Despite the shift from indigenous to mestizo culture, indigeneity remained a central theme in the national discourse of mestizaje and the new mestizo nation’s claims to authenticity as it established an apparent difference between Mexico and other North American and Caribbean nations and laid the “moral” claim to lands of pre-Columbian civilizations for the Mexican nation-state.

Although this construction of identity authenticated Mexico as a unique mestizo nation due to its strong “roots” in an indigenous pre-Columbian past, it also helped render invisible the country’s black heritage, as Africa had no place in this dichotomous understanding of national identity. As a result, indigenismo and mestizaje as cultural politics reduced blackness in Mexico to sporadic and isolated moments in the country’s history. The power and influence of these ideologies was such that even today one often hears Mexicans saying that “there are no
blacks in Mexico and explaining instances of blackness as coping from the Caribbean, particularly Cuba.

The study of indigenous musics falls outside the focus of this book, although the contradictions in Mexico's idea of indigeneity are certainly of concern to us. Examining these contradictions offers a chance to understand numerous traditional folk and popular musics and the meaning of their continuity or revival both in contemporary Mexico and among Mexican Americans. This theme allows for a study of the racial and ethnic tensions surrounding the production, consumption, circulation, and regulation of music and music-related practices.

MUSIC, MIGRATION, AND DIASPORA IN MEXICO

Lila Downs's Chicago House of Blues concert indicates the importance of migration in contemporary Mexican culture. Her appropriation and transformation of Woody Guthrie's songs into symbols of the Mexican and Mexican American migratory experience show how music crosses cultural and geographic borders, becoming meaningful for people who live in conditions very different from those of the ones who produced it. This is one of the powers of music; it has the ability to be adopted, adapted, transformed, and made meaningful in various individual and collective spaces, histories, and circumstances. If specific songs are transformed through these cultural crossings, migrating musical genres also become something different as they cross borders and encounter different realities. The migration and diaspora of people and their cultures are fundamental in the creation of musical traditions. Paying attention to these forces is the goal of the second theme I have chosen in this volume; expressed simply, most musical genres in contemporary Mexico are the result of migration.

This notion may be evident in genres recently popularized throughout Mexico but not so obvious for older practices considered traditionally Mexican. Indeed, the economic success of documented and undocumented working-class Mexican immigrants to the United States in the last 30 years has dramatically affected mainstream Mexican popular culture. Just as race and ethnicity are central to my first theme, class issues are essential to my second. Most undocumented Mexican immigrants come to the United States not to live on welfare but to work, and work very hard, helping the United States economy by investing, consuming goods and services, increasing productivity, paying taxes, and contributing to Social Security, Medicare, and other public services even though they cannot receive these benefits due to their migratory status.

These migrants are also essential to the Mexican economy. Between 2000 and 2003, remittances from Mexican emigrants ranged between 10% and 35% of the country's gross domestic product. The economic power of this once-neglected sector of Mexico's population also translates into cultural capital as their cultural taste has also been incorporated into the Mexican mainstream.

The continuous filtration into the country's media of the kinds of music preferred by these emigrants has radically changed the Mexican popular music landscape since the 1990s. The popularization of musical genres and practices like banda, norteña, onda grupera, and more recently pasito duranguense, which entered the country's mainstream media during that decade, is a transnational phenomenon by which we can examine class tensions that surround music making in Mexico. Furthermore, understanding the flow of these transnational contemporary phenomena as part of larger globalization processes also helps us appreciate traditional Mexican musics as the outcome of different types of historical migratory flows and exchanges.

If this somewhat recent emigration has been fundamental in redefining popular music in Mexico in the last 20 years, the country's long history of immigration has also played a major role in shaping traditional regional folk musics. The history of Mexico, its people, and its culture is one of transnational crossings, contacts, and transculturation since the 16th century that developed these new musical forms that we recognize as Mexican. The shaping of these cultural formations was not harmonious but resulted from numerous historical power struggles based on racial, ethnic, class, and epistemological differences; the dynamics of these uneven encounters are fundamental in understanding contemporary Mexican culture.

The term "transculturation" was coined by Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz in an attempt to explain that cultural encounters are complex processes; when cultures meet, they are changed and transformed into new hybrid forms. Music offers a unique venue for exploring these processes since musical style is a prime example of these cultural negotiations. The musical genres I discuss are perfect cases for understanding the transculturation they have undergone as they have traveled with immigrants to Mexico throughout its history, moving outside the country with the powerful Mexican entertainment industry or with Mexican migrants going back and forth between Mexico and the United States. It is precisely because they are the result of diasporic flows, migrations, contacts, and processes of transculturation that are articulated locally,
that traditional Mexican musics are very important depositories of local cultural capital.

MEDIA AND MUSIC IN MEXICO

Earlier I described “Cucurucucú paloma” as one of the most famous songs of the ranchera music repertoire, and a very good example of the power of the Mexican media to shape and circulate musical culture within and outside the country. One could argue that ranchera music as we know it today, one of the musical styles most closely associated with the mariachi ensemble, is largely an invention of the Mexican film and radio industries, later solidified by Mexico’s powerful TV industry. Great Mexican ranchera music singers, from Tito Guizar to Lola Beltrán, were also stars of comedia ranchera (ranch play, a Mexican film genre featuring ranchera music). Mid-century Mexico’s film and radio industries were critical in the development of ranchera music and mariachi as symbols of the nation and vehicles for the popularization of singer/actors. The third theme I have chosen to guide our exploration of music in Mexico takes this as a point of departure and can be expressed simply: the TV, radio, and film industries of Mexico have played a powerful role in developing a sense of Mexican music within Mexico and abroad.

Because Mexican culture is largely unknown or misrepresented in everyday U.S. life, most Americans are unaware of the power of Mexico’s entertainment industry. Mexico is the largest music market in Latin America and the eighth largest in the world, testimony to the fundamental role of the media in shaping a culture of cosmopolitan aspirations nationally and internationally. In addition to its contemporary importance, historically the powerful Mexican entertainment industry has been instrumental in the dissemination of Mexican music and culture throughout Latin America, sometimes to the detriment of local music scenes and traditions. By heavily promoting and selling their popular culture through soap operas and comic and entertainment TV shows, Mexico has arguably been the “cultural imperialist” of Hispanic Latin America. For instance, Siempre en Domingo, a weekly musical revue produced by Televisa and hosted by Raúl Velasco from 1969 to 1998, reached an audience of about 420 million television viewers; appearing on this show became a must for musicians and singers from all over Latin America and Spain who were trying to achieve success in the Spanish-language music market.

The Mexican radio industry developed with the government’s authorization, growing from four commercial broadcasting stations in 1923 to nineteen in 1929. But when Emilio Azcárraga founded XEW “La Voz de la América Latina desde México” (The Voice of Latin American from Mexico) in 1930, Mexico established the foundation of the broadcasting system that came to dominate Latin American airwaves throughout the 20th century. Azcárraga’s affiliation with American networks RCA, NBC, and CBS through the 1940s enabled him to launch a broadcasting empire that controlled almost half the radio stations in Mexico and distributed programming to the Dominican Republic, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay. Complying with early nationalist cultural policies of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Public Education) but also as a strategy to remain independent from his United States associates, Azcárraga designed a unique programming of Mexican music and developed a market that only his broadcasting empire could satisfy (Hayes 2000).

During the 1940s, the Mexican film industry grew strong taking advantage of the vacuum left in Latin America by a U.S. industry focused on local markets and propaganda movies during World War II. Known as the Época de Oro (Golden Age) of Mexican cinema, it is characterized by the ubiquitous presence of Mexican music traditions in comedias rancheras films, the most privileged genre being canción ranchera and its mariachi ensemble. Mariachi became the Mexican symbol it is today largely because of the dynamics between the film and radio industries in those years, an alliance that allowed these industries to support but also to reinvent each other’s products.

Media played an essential role in developing icons of national belonging during the consolidation of Mexico’s post-revolutionary regime (1930–60), and it has also provided new ones from a transnational perspective today. The banda craze of the 1990s owes much to the powerful Mexican American media’s ability to influence local broadcasting networks in Mexico and affected the popularization of dance genres like pasito duranguense and quebradita among Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

The three themes that guide this study of music in Mexico are related. The Mexican media were a powerful force in propagating indigenismo and mestizaje among the country’s population throughout the 20th century. Further, the transnational experience of Mexican emigrants permitted the media to profit from the commercialization of the musical genres and styles they preferred. The daily life experiences of multicultural migrants forces us to rethink the problematic class and ethnic discourses about Mexicans and Mexican culture both in Mexico and the
The Transnational Resurgence of *Son Jarocho*

It is a typical cold and cloudy morning in late November in Chicago. I have difficulty walking on 18th Street as snow and ice have covered the sidewalks, giving the city the distinctive look it will have for the next few months. I turn onto Racine and immediately spot the entrance of Casa Aztlán. I open the door into the lobby where children and their parents are shedding their coats, scarves, and gloves. They then move into the hall and sit in a circle as Raul begins strumming chords on his *requinto jarocho* and Gina sings a children’s song that introduces each child by name. Everyone sings and rhythmically claps as Raul and Gina are slowly joined by other members of Jarochianos, the Chicago-based *son jarocho* youth group. Once the musicians have set the pace of their music they switch to traditional *son jarocho*. The children are invited to step on the *tarima* (wooden dance box) in the middle of the circle and join the performance with their own *zapateado* (heel dancing). The collective performance climaxes with “La bamba,” arguably the most famous *son jarocho* song. “Para bailar la bamba se necesita una poca de gracia / una poca de gracia pa’ ti y pa’ mi / ¡Ay! ¡Arriba y arriba!” (To dance la bamba you need a little bit of grace / a little bit of grace for you and for me / Ay! Higher and higher!). It is wonderful to hear this warm music played with such passion in the middle of the Midwest winter, and even more so to see the youngsters attending the workshop give it a new life so far away from Veracruz where it originated centuries ago.

This workshop, *Son Chiquitos* (a wordplay that can be translated either as Little Ones *Son* or They Are Little Ones), is led by Raul Fernandez and Gina Gamboa, the founders of Jarochianos, a group aimed at disseminating *son jarocho* music among Latino youth in the United States. Finally, cosmopolitanism, understood as the aspirations of individuals to be part of communities that transcend their locality, is a concept that links all three themes together. Cosmopolitanism helps us understand how contemporary genres like *balada*, rock, and *canto nuevo* are reinvented and made meaningful in a variety of contemporary geographic contexts. It also explains the processes of appropriation of genres and styles like *bolero* and *norteña*. Understanding how historical processes of globalization intersect aspirations and desires for cosmopolitan belonging provides a theoretical space in which the three themes overlap. This offers new ways to examine and interpret the power of Mexican musical practices beyond the geographic boundaries of particular ethnic formations or even the Mexican nation-state.