

Protest Music in the Latino Community

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For purposes of this essay, protest music is defined as songs that have a political or social message to convey, generally from a *leftist or progressive* perspective, and that address a number of themes, including: pride in one’s cultural or ethnic identity; group solidarity; unionism and worker solidarity; descriptions of heroic deeds by great or controversial men and women; the fight for social justice; the struggle for freedom and equality; challenges to the authority of the State or its representatives or other members of the power structure; calls to social or political action; and songs about change and its impact on specific communities.

The roots of what we know as “protest music” in the Western world go back many centuries. This type of music has also existed throughout the history of the United States and in countries throughout Latin America, particularly Mexico and Chile. It became very popular in the 20th century, and in the U.S. was frequently performed in the first half of the century at labor rallies and leftist gatherings and later, in the 1960s, at folk festivals and anti-war rallies and marches. Popular American performers included Woody Guthrie, the Almanac Singers, Pete Seeger and the Weavers, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton and many others. In Mexico and other parts of Latin America, it has manifested itself in the form of corridos and other musical forms such as cuecas. Singers and songwriters from Latin America, particularly in the late sixties and throughout the seventies were considered part of a genre called “*la nueva cancion*”. Performers like Violeta Parra, Victor Jara, Silvio Rodriguez, Oscar Chavez, Mercedes Sosa, Amparo Ochoa, and Pablo Milanés were very popular and quite prolific. Much of the music was written to protest the domination of the United States influence throughout Latin America and in protest of the proliferation of right-wing dictatorships in places like Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador and Argentina.

Turning to music within the Latino community in the United States, and more specifically to the music and history of the Mexican American community, it is important to note that the Mexican American War was a war of conquest. The United States, in its lust for land and power, and with the doctrine of Manifest Destiny guiding it, manipulated events and created the conditions for war against Mexico in a conflict that lasted from 1846 to 1848. Mexico lost the war and as a result, turned over a huge chunk of its northern territory, including California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, parts of Utah, Nevada, Colorado and Kansas to the United States.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo spelled out the conditions for peace between the two countries. Those of Mexican descent were told they could “return to Mexico” or stay. Those who chose to stay in the U.S., including many whose families had been in the region for many generations, were granted full rights as citizens and a right to their property. However, Anglo American newcomers to this region didn’t treat Mexicans who remained here and who immigrated later, well at all. There were conflicts from the beginning, especially in places like California, where gold had been “discovered”, and in Texas, where there was a great deal of animosity between Anglos and Mexicans, and where the Texas Rangers terrorized the Mexican populace in its quest to steal land and consolidate power for the Anglo newcomers. More often than not, throughout

the Southwest, Mexicans were robbed of their property, discriminated against in the workplace, segregated in housing and in the schools, and falsely accused of crimes they did not commit. Some of them, however fought back, and turned to getting revenge, and were thus referred to as “bandidos” or outlaws, because they challenged the unjust American power structure and its institutions.

Two of the most legendary “bandidos” were Joaquin Murrieta and Gregorio Cortez. Murrieta was from Sonora, and like many others seeking a quick fortune went to California during the California Gold Rush . There are various versions of the story of his life and deeds, most of which were pure fiction, but at one point, almost every murder or crime committed in California in the in the early 1850s was attributed to him or his gang. Over time, he has become a folk hero in the Mexican American community, and the song, “El Corrido de Joaquin Murrieta” is one of many versions of his story. The song was recorded in the 1930s by the group “Los Madrugadores,” but was banned in various places including mining camps and radio stations, for fear that it would incite violence and further the resentment of the Mexican American population toward the dominant Anglo society. There are at least two recordings of this song still available, including the one recorded by Los Madrugadores, and another recorded on the cd, *Heroes and Horses: Corridos from the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands*. Lydia Mendoza also recorded the song.

Gregorio Cortez was another figure in Mexican American history who was falsely accused of a crime he did not commit, and who fought back and challenged the authorities. His story takes place in Texas in the early 1900s, and a corrido about him was also written and sung in the thirties. Dr. Americo Paredes’ book “*With His Pistol In His Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero*” is about the story of Gregorio Cortez and the various corridos that exist about him. While these two corridos could be considered some of the first and best known early Chicano “protest songs,” there are others such as Elias Baca’s corrido, “Que Viva La Nacion”, about the Ludlow Massacre that took place in Colorado in 1914.

From the beginning of the 20th century up until the thirties, there were high rates of immigration from Mexico to the US. There were several reasons for this, including the fact that “cheap” labor was needed in American mines, railroads and fields. The Mexican Revolution also forced many individuals and families to flee the violence and upheaval that existed throughout the decades between 1910 and 1930. As a result, cities like Los Angeles, Phoenix, San Antonio and Tucson experienced significant increases in the numbers of Mexicans residing there. Still, the plight of most Mexican Americans continued to be one of poverty and hard work. While there were a few who held professional positions or owned businesses, most Mexican Americans worked as miners, farmworkers, domestics, dishwashers and in other low paying jobs. During the Great Depression, many Mexicans in the US were “re-patriated”, but during World War II, they were encouraged to return, as braceros, for example, to work the fields, as there were labor shortages due to the war. Over time, songs have been recorded by various groups, including the aforementioned “Los Madrugadores” and other conjuntos, many from Texas, that describe the plight of the Mexican American working class during the first half of the twentieth century. Many of these recordings are now rare and out of print, but some are available on the Arhoolie record label and in archives such as the *Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings* at UCLA. Maria Herrera Sobek’s book, *Northward Bound*,

The Mexican Immigrant Experience in Ballad and Song, and Manuel H. Pena's **The Texas Mexican Conjunto: History of Mexican Working Class Music**, also provide many examples of such songs. Lalo Guerrero, who will be discussed in more detail shortly, also wrote a number of songs about the plight of the Mexican American, including "El Lavaplatos" and others about el "pachuquismo" in the 1940s. While some of these weren't necessarily "protest" songs per se, they did celebrate a subculture within the Mexican American community that was definitely outside the mainstream and considered "dangerous" by American law enforcement and the media.

During World War II, thousands of young Mexican American men enlisted or were drafted into the armed services. Many received medals of honor, expressing their patriotism and bravery on the front lines of battle. Upon returning to the US, some formed organizations such as the American GI Forum and the League of United Latin American Citizens, to fight for equal rights in employment, education and housing, as discrimination against Mexicans and other minorities was still a common practice throughout the country. Life for those working the fields of California and other states of the union was particularly hard. American folksingers like Woody Guthrie helped to spread the word of the plight of the farm laborer by composing and performing songs such as Pastures of Plenty, Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos Canyon) and Ramblin' Round. Politically, the country was in the midst of the "red scare" or the McCarthy era, and anyone expressing solidarity with unions or leftist politics was considered a communist. However, change was in the air, and the country finally began to tackle the issues of segregation and discrimination, with significant court cases such as Brown vs. the Board of Education, ending discrimination in schooling based on skin color.

The 1960s brought a great deal more social change to many communities in the U.S. The African American community, led by leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., was at the forefront of the struggle for equal rights. Protest music played a huge role in keeping people's spirits up, as marchers and protesters were beaten and jailed for trying to exert their rights to vote, for example. There are many, many great protest songs that emerged from the civil rights struggle. Some were borrowed from the Black church, while others were written by young singer-songwriters such as Bob Dylan. Some songs, such as We Shall Overcome, were later translated into Spanish, and sung in other social movements.

It wasn't long before other ethnic and "minority" communities began to also protest the social conditions in which they found themselves. American Indians, women and homosexuals were all beginning to assert their rights. This struggle for self determination and social justice also included the Latino community. In California, for example, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta worked together to unionize Mexican American farm workers, some of the nation's poorest citizens, whose wages and working conditions were abysmal, and whose mortality rates were high. In the early days of the farm worker struggle, Chavez's and Huerta's efforts were less than fruitful, but within a few years, the UFW, or United Farmworkers Union, became a force to be reckoned with, and support for the UFW reached the highest levels of political influence. Along the way, in order to help educate the farm workers about their plight and about the need to organize into a union, an old form of street theater called commedia del' arte was revived and el Teatro Campesino was born. This group of actors and musicians would perform short improvised "skits" at rallies that would emphasize the need for organizing and solidarity, and

would typically include caricatures of the bosses and the workers. They were intended to raise political and social awareness and to make people laugh, and indeed, were quite effective.

Coupled with the skits were songs performed by members of the theater group and others. Many of the songs performed at the time can be found on an album called "Huelga En General: Songs of the United Farm Workers". Included are tunes like *Solidaridad Para Siempre*, a Spanish version of the union song *Solidarity Forever* and *De Colores*, which became known as the "anthem" of the farm worker movement. Daniel Valdez and Agustin Lira, two of the original members of *Teatro Campesino*, were two the better known singers of the movement. Daniel Valdez's album "Mestizo" is considered a classic, and includes a variety of songs that address the issue of ethnic identity and the farmworker struggle. Agustin Lira has also issued several albums about the farm worker struggle and other issues.

Many of the songs that were performed at this time by both the *Teatro Campesino* and others were updated versions of corridos from the time of the Mexican Revolution or other popular Mexican songs. Others were original compositions, and included corridos about specific events, such as *El Corrido de Delano*, by Lalo Guerrero, about the strike and march from Delano to Sacramento. Still others were about people like Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and Juan De La Cruz, a farm worker who was murdered by thugs while picketing in 1973. There are at least four different versions of *El Corrido de Cesar Chavez*, for example, and at least two about Dolores Huerta. Another album that needs mentioning is called "Si Se Puede", produced in the mid-seventies by members of *Los Lobos* and some of their musical friends, it also contains a number of memorable songs, including *El Corrido de Dolores Huerta*, *Chicanita de Aztlan*, and *Telingo Lingo*.

There don't really exist any folk or popular musicians within the Chicano or Latino community that are known exclusively as "protest singers". Rather, many different singers or groups have at one time or another recorded protest songs. Two singers, however, do stand out from this time period. They are Joan Baez and Lalo Guerrero. Baez, who is half Scottish and half Mexican, was known in the sixties as the "queen of folk music". She began her career singing English and American folk music, but would within a few years become best known for her interpretations of Bob Dylan songs and for her stance against the Viet Nam War and her belief in non-violence. She marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. and was a constant presence at anti-war rallies and other political events. She contributed to the farmworker struggle, often performing for free at benefits and rallies. In 1971, she recorded Woody Guthrie's song, *Deportee* and in 1974 sang Guthrie's *Pastures of Plenty* for the soundtrack to the UFW documentary, *Fighting For Our Lives*. She also sang in Phoenix in 1972 for Cesar Chavez when he broke one of his many lengthy fasts. In 1974, she recorded the album *Gracias a la Vida*, an all-Spanish album of mostly political songs, including *No Nos Moveran*, *Las Madres Cansadas*, *De Colores* and *Guantanamo*. It became a huge success throughout Latin America. Her original composition, *Juan De La Cruz*, appeared in the magazine, *Sing Out*, but was not available as a record until many years after it was written.

Lalo Guerrero, a native of Tucson, Arizona, started his career in the thirties as a member of a trio called *Los Carlitas*. He moved in the thirties to California and eventually opened his own restaurant in East Los Angeles called *Lalo's*, which featured his versatile and talented dance

band. He was a prolific performer and songwriter. Some of his best known songs include *La Cancion Mexicana* and *Nunca Jamas*, both of which were recorded by some of the most popular and talented singers of Mexico. In the forties, he wrote a series of songs about pachucos and pachuco culture, peppering the songs with *calo'*, a unique language created by pachucos. During the sixties and seventies, he wrote a number of parodies, such as *Tacos For Two*, *I Left My Car In San Francisco*, *Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Busboys*, and many others. He also wrote more serious songs, including *El Corrido de Delano*, *El Corrido de Cesar Chavez*, *Barrio Viejo*, *No Chicanos on TV*, *Homenaje a Ruben Salazar*, *The Battlecry of the Chicano* and others. Guerrero was known as the Father of Chicano music and was honored by President Bill Clinton with the Presidential Medal of Freedom Award.

Along with the farm worker movement, the sixties also saw the rise of the Chicano movement. Throughout the Southwest, there were efforts to raise awareness of the plight of the Mexican American people, and leaders like Corky Gonzales, Reies Lopez Tijerina and Jose Angel Gutierrez all provided a focus for the Chicano people, whether it be on politics, the struggle to re-claim land, or the fight against police brutality and discrimination. In California, there was a great deal of student unrest and protests against the war in Viet Nam. During the Chicano Moratorium, popular journalist Ruben Salazar was killed by a stray bullet that hit him while he was sitting in a bar during the the rally that took place.

Along with all of these events there occurred what might be called a cultural renaissance among the Mexican American people. Suddenly, there were poets, actors, muralists, novelists, and musicians who were expressing in one way or another their pride in being "Chicano". Bands like Santana, El Chicano and Malo became quite popular and played music that expressed their pride in being "raza" or "brown". Songs written to express such pride include tunes like "Yo Soy Chicano", "La Bamba Chicana", "Don't Put Me Down If I'm Brown" "America de Los Indios" and others. From the sixties forward, various musical groups and individual performers, such as Dr. Loco's Rockin' Jalapeno Band, out of San Francisco, and El Vez, included many such songs in their recordings and concerts.

The seventies saw an increase in the formation of Teatros throughout the Southwest. Typically, these groups followed the model provided by El Teatro Campesino, and included musical compositions in their plays and performances. In Tucson, El Teatro Libertad, expanded its repertoire by addressing issues taking place in Latin America, and began to include some of the songs from the nueva cancion movement, including tunes like *No Basta Rezar*, *Plegaria de Un Labrador*, *Juan Sin Tierra*, *Cuando Tenga La Tierra* and many others that helped to convey a sense of solidarity among Latinos both within the United States and beyond. When the Pinochet regime overthrew Chile in the mid-70s and folksinger Victor Jara was murdered, his songs began to be sung more widely. Joan Baez, for example, included his song, *Te Recuerdo Amanda*, and Violeta Parra's song, *Gracias a La Vida* on her album *Gracias A La Vida*. She visited Latin America in the late 70's and was not allowed to sing in Argentina, for fear of inciting riots. Mercedes Sosa, another well loved singer, was exiled from Argentina, but her music was played and performed throughout the Latin world.

The eighties started with the successful overthrow of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua and the start of the Reagan administration's efforts to dismantle the Nicaraguan revolution through the

funding of the Contras. Conflict in El Salvador was also a huge issue, and many Chicano singers and teatro groups performed songs and skits about the struggle against American imperialism in the region. Thousands of refugees from El Salvador came to the U.S. in search of sanctuary, and there were many in the Chicano community who aided them.

Immigration has been a big issue in American life for a long time, but immigration policy became a major concern in the 1990s and through the 2000s. Many musical performers, such as Lila Downs, Santana, Los Cuatro Vientos, Tish Hinojosa, Mana and El Vez have recorded and sung songs about the plight of immigrants from Mexico and Latin America. For example, El Vez, known for his parodies of Elvis Presley songs, recorded a song called Immigration Time, sung to the tune of the Elvis song, Suspicious Minds, that is both poignant and funny at the same time. His recording of Aztlan on the album Graciasland also speaks of this issue and is a brilliant song about the plight of the Chicano in modern society. Santana's inclusion of the song Migra on his incredibly successful album, Supernatural, was surely a bold move that sent a strong message to the country that immigration was an issue that needed to be solved. More recently, groups like Ozomatli and Los Mocosos, and Pistolera have recorded very politically conscious music, fusing rap with rock and world music.

In conclusion, "protest music", while not a major genre, has and will continue to have a place in Latino culture. It is mostly issue based, and serves an important function—to not only entertain, but to raise awareness and inspire action among the community.

Further Reading

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