





# NUESTRA MÚSICA

## Music in Latino Culture

DANIEL SHEEHY



Over forty million people of Hispanic descent make the United States their home. One out of eight Americans uses such labels as *hispano*, *Latino*, *tejano*, *Chicano*, *mexicano*, *Nuyorican*, *Cuban*, *nuevomexicano*, *salvadoreño*, and *colombiano* to point to their Spanish-speaking heritage in Latin America or the United States. Front-page news proclaims Hispanics the largest minority group and the fastest-growing segment of the population, having more than doubled since 1980 and accounted for half the total population growth since 2001. In the past decade, the highest rates of Hispanic growth have been not in California, Texas, New York, Miami, Chicago, and other long-time Latino strongholds, but in states such as Arkansas, Indiana, Michigan, North Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Hand in hand with the burgeoning Latino population has come an equal infusion of Latino music, usually called *música latina* in the windows and bins of record stores.

If you are not Latino but have ever moved to the rhythm of salsa music, sung “Cielito Lindo” (“*Ay, ay ay ay, canta y no llores*”), seen the film *Buena Vista Social Club*, heard pop singer Linda Ronstadt’s concerts of Mexican *ranchera* music, enjoyed the late Tito Puente’s Latin jazz, or taken a salsa aerobics class, you have experienced the major impact of Latino music that has spread through the electronic media and pop culture. But *música latina*’s presence in the English-speaking media only hints at the real explosion of the music in the United States and its importance in the lives of Latinos. In the United States, a “parallel universe” of Latino performance exists alongside the English-dominant mainstream. The creation of the Latin Grammys in 2000 marked the new, permanent prominence of Latin music on the North American scene. Latin divisions of the major record labels (e.g., Sony Discos and EMI Latin) have tapped the buying power of Hispanic listeners, estimated at \$580 billion in 2002 and projected to be \$926 billion by 2007. U.S.-based Spanish-language television networks Univisión and Telemundo bring musical programming from the United States and Latin America into the homes of millions of viewers. Spanish-language stations claim increasing space on

(Facing page) In the rural community of Malaga in California’s San Joaquin Valley, mariachi musicians accompany a procession celebrating the feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Photo by Eric Paul Zamora, courtesy Amy Kitchener

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AM and FM radio dials, with the Hispanic Radio Network, the nonprofit satellite Radio Bilingüe, XM satellite-radio Spanish channels, and other national broadcasters heard by millions of people over hundreds of stations. Concerts promoted entirely to Spanish-speaking audiences attract audiences in the tens of thousands. The Latin music and media industries are a powerful presence in American life, and their influence is increasing.

But if you look beyond the glitzy veil of pop culture, you will find something much grander—dozens of musical styles from many cultures; music played for religious ceremonies, in the privacy of homes, at birthdays, weddings, Latin American independence days, and many other community occasions; music made by and for young Latinos; music recalled by older generations; music that represents generations-old heritage; and music that speaks to the changing panorama of contemporary American life. A close-up view of music in the lives of individuals and communities reveals rich details about the role and importance of music in Latino life. When professional Broadway theater musician Juan Gutiérrez moved to New York from Puerto Rico, for example, he looked for other musicians from the New York barrio. Revisiting the roots of the percussive sounds of Puerto Rican *plena*, he was buoyed by the joy and relief of “finding

himself” and connecting with his cultural “home,” as well as by the engaging aesthetic and challenge of the music itself. He abandoned the Broadway-show orchestra pits and organized Los Pleneros de la 21, a groundbreaking group that served as the model for dozens of others, from the East Coast to Chicago to Texas.

The sounds of *música latina* and the voices of musicians themselves help us understand the struggles, aspirations, and joys of Latinos in the process of making the United States their home. Nati Cano tells another of these stories. A pioneering mariachi musician in the United States since the 1960s, Cano speaks of his life’s work in music as a struggle against the class bias he experienced in Mexico and the racial prejudice he felt in the United States. He remembers being on tour in Lubbock, Texas, in 1965, where a restaurant waiter told him, “Look buddy, we don’t serve Mexicans.” It reminded him of the painful time when, as a young boy, he would play mariachi music with his father to support the family, and a sign at the entrance of a local bar said:

WOMEN, MEN IN UNIFORM,  
SHOE-SHINE BOYS, STREET  
VENDORS, MARIACHIS,  
AND DOGS NOT ALLOWED.

At the hotel that night, he recalled he could not sleep, and he told a friend, “‘You know what? One day I’m going to have a place. It’s going to be a place where people of all colors will go, of all flavors, from all countries will come to see us.’ And that day, La Fonda was born.” Nati Cano’s efforts to instill the highest performance standards in his Mariachi Los Camperos have opened the doors of the most prestigious concert halls in the United States and Mexico, and his Los Angeles restaurant, La Fonda de Los Camperos, attracts people “of all flavors” and has been a model for other mariachi dinner restaurants in the Southwest.

Nati Cano warms up backstage at Radio Bilingüe’s ¡Viva El Mariachi! Festival in Fresno, California.

Photo by Daniel Sheehy







Members of the Latino community in Manassas, Virginia, applaud the mariachi musicians during a Mass celebrating the feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Photo by Charles Weber

## MUSIC AND U.S. LATINO IDENTITY: LA MÚSICA ES MI BANDERA

ENRIQUE LAMADRID

Like the spices and salsas that bring our senses to life and remind us who we are, music is a staple of our daily existence, as essential as bread, tortillas, plantains, potatoes, and beans and rice. In the plethora of sounds that advanced technological societies serve up to us, we choose what we hear, just as we choose what we eat. We remember where we come from by listening and savoring our roots, the rhythms and melodies that our families give us. We realize where we are by turning on the radio, by opening our ears and hearts to what surrounds us. As the Puerto Rican and Cuban musicians say in New York City, "*La música es mi bandera*," music is my flag.

My own corner of the Hispanic world is New Mexico, with its deserts and mountains and valleys. Here the oldest music is also the most cherished. The *alabado* hymns, from the 16th century, are sung on holy days by entire communities in solemn antiphony. The ancient stories unfold as the communal choruses answer. Melodies vary from valley to valley. You can tell where someone is from by how they sing. In the north, *alabados* are stylized with melismatic flourishes. Across the mountains on the plains, the same lyrics are sung plain and unembellished, with melodies and tempos that wander like the wind.

Secular music celebrated by the same communities also has many layers. *Corrido* ballads memorialize historic episodes. The *canción* or lyrical song, with its expressions of love and life and death, is accompanied by *ranchera* and mariachi music. Although brought to the northlands by radio, film, and records, this music becomes New Mexican in its

arrangements, which favor trumpets and saxophones over the accordions of Texas. Unlike the Top 40 or hit parade, heritage music tends to be intergenerational in appeal. The newest music on the radio often features traditional *corridos* and folk songs such as *relaciones*, the satirical songs of children.

Our cultural past and present is embedded in our music. The old *indita* songs emulate the melodic scales of our Native American neighbors. The melodies of the traditional *matachines* dance contain the rhythms of the *son*, our living contact with pan-African culture. Recently, the South American *cumbia* has increased that presence, penetrating the *ranchera* sensibility with its exotic rapture. The intercultural experience of daily life in the United States is also saturated by mainstream popular musics, from country to rock, pop, and hip-hop. Our own artists adapt them with bilingual lyrics and an intercultural aesthetic. The Chicano list of oldies also includes bebop classics and '50s rock and roll.

Musical tastes vary by generation, by class, by occupation, and by rural or urban settings. Just as everywhere else in America, members of the same family are both united and divided by their musical preferences. One of the truest measures of the health of our musical identity comes from the comparison of what we consume to what we produce. Singing it makes it more truly ours. The music we most identify with, the songs that most lift our spirits, tell us most about who we are. Varied and multicolored, "*La música es nuestra bandera*," music is our banner, our joy, our soul.

The many layers of musical culture in New Mexico have always fascinated Enrique Lamadrid, who teaches folklore in the Spanish & Portuguese Department of the University of New Mexico.





Karol Aurora de Jesús Reyes records for Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in Puerto Nuevo, Puerto Rico. Photo by Daniel Sheehy

Like Cano, Roberto Martínez, a veteran singer, guitarist, and composer from Albuquerque, New Mexico, saw in his own New Mexican Hispanic traditional music a way to strengthen the social struggle against racism. When, during the 1960s, discrimination in his workplace shocked and outraged him, one of the ways he fought back was by writing and recording *corridos* (narrative ballads) that enshrined important events of Hispanic New Mexico. One was the “Corrido of Daniel Fernández” that recounted how, during the Vietnam War, Fernández threw himself on a live grenade to save the lives of his buddies.

Many grassroots Latino musical traditions have enjoyed a resurgence among young people in recent decades, and with this self-confidence in musical roots have come new social and creative aspirations. When 16-year-old Karol Aurora de Jesús Reyes was asked in 2002 what future she dreamed of for *música jíbara*—the centuries-old Puerto Rican string, percussion, and vocal music that she sings—she answered, “MTV. Los Grammys. I love MTV.” Little did she know that the recording she helped make that year, *Jíbaro Hasta el Hueso: Mountain Music of Puerto Rico by Ecos de Borinquen*, would be nominated for a Grammy in the Best Traditional World Music Album category. Her fellow Puerto Rican Héctor “Tito” Matos is one of the most creative of the younger *plena* musicians and a strong proponent of the value of being grounded in one’s

heritage: “I think that there is no way to create if you don’t have the roots.... I think that the creative thing is just something that happens, you know? I intend to be creative, but it’s not that I plan it. It’s like I feel that I have enough information on the pattern, on the tradition, and that gives me the opportunity to build on it.” For many Latinos young and old, the joy of music-making is a life-transforming passion that can become a career as well. When professional maraca player Omar Fandiño of Colombia was 12 years old, he discovered his life’s calling in the driving *joropo* rhythms of *música llanera*, the harp, guitar, maraca, and vocal music of the Orinoco plains: “It’s part of my life, I think I breathe *joropo*.”

As with other cultural minority groups in the multicultural United States, Latino communities have often used music to express themselves in the public commons—civic celebrations, ethnic festivals, cultural education programs, and political events, for example. Many kinds of music that were historically intended for private occasions—such as for social dancing or for religious devotion—take on new meaning as they are moved into the public realm in order to send a message of identity: “We are Dominican” (or Mexican, or Cuban, or Puerto Rican, and so forth). Some musical styles, forms, and repertoires have deep, “core-culture” associations and/or “stage performance value” to please broad audiences with a strong stamp of cultural identity. These become



symbols, aimed either at a new, broader audience or at the same community audience but with the new purpose of coining group identity. This transition to a new role has raised important concerns among performers and communities. Often, when the symbolic value of a music or dance form is amplified, it may displace the culturally internal roles and meanings that gave the music life and social relevance in the first place.

When Afro-Cuban drummer, singer, and spiritual leader Felipe García Villamil came to the United States, he was asked to perform his private ritual music for general American audiences. He took on the challenge of demystifying for and instilling in others an appreciation of the cultural importance of the music, dance, symbols, and customs of his *lucumí*, *palo*, and *abakuá* traditions. To do this, he crafted performances that balanced the sharing of public knowledge of his religion with the need to maintain the secrecy of certain elements intended only for the initiated. In the North American context, García accepted the value of his tradition as a public, symbolic representation of Afro-Cuban culture, while at the same time keeping its spiritual integrity. Karol Aurora de Jesús Reyes is unreserved about the capacity of her *música jíbara* to proudly represent her culture without artistic compromise: "It will make us shine before the world, and then people will hear the music and say, 'Look, that is the music from Puerto Rico.'" She brims with pride in her music.

Tito Matos has shown the creative potential in the *panderetas* in Puerto Rican *plena* music. Photo by Daniel Sheehy



## VAMOS A BAILAR: LET'S DANCE!

OLGA NÁJERA-RAMÍREZ

Dance forms an integral part of Latino cultures, occupying a special place as popular entertainment, in religious ceremonies, and as an expression of national pride. It is also vibrant and dynamic, shaped by the same processes of hybridization and transculturation that have continued to redefine culture, society, politics, and identity in the Americas since the colonial period.

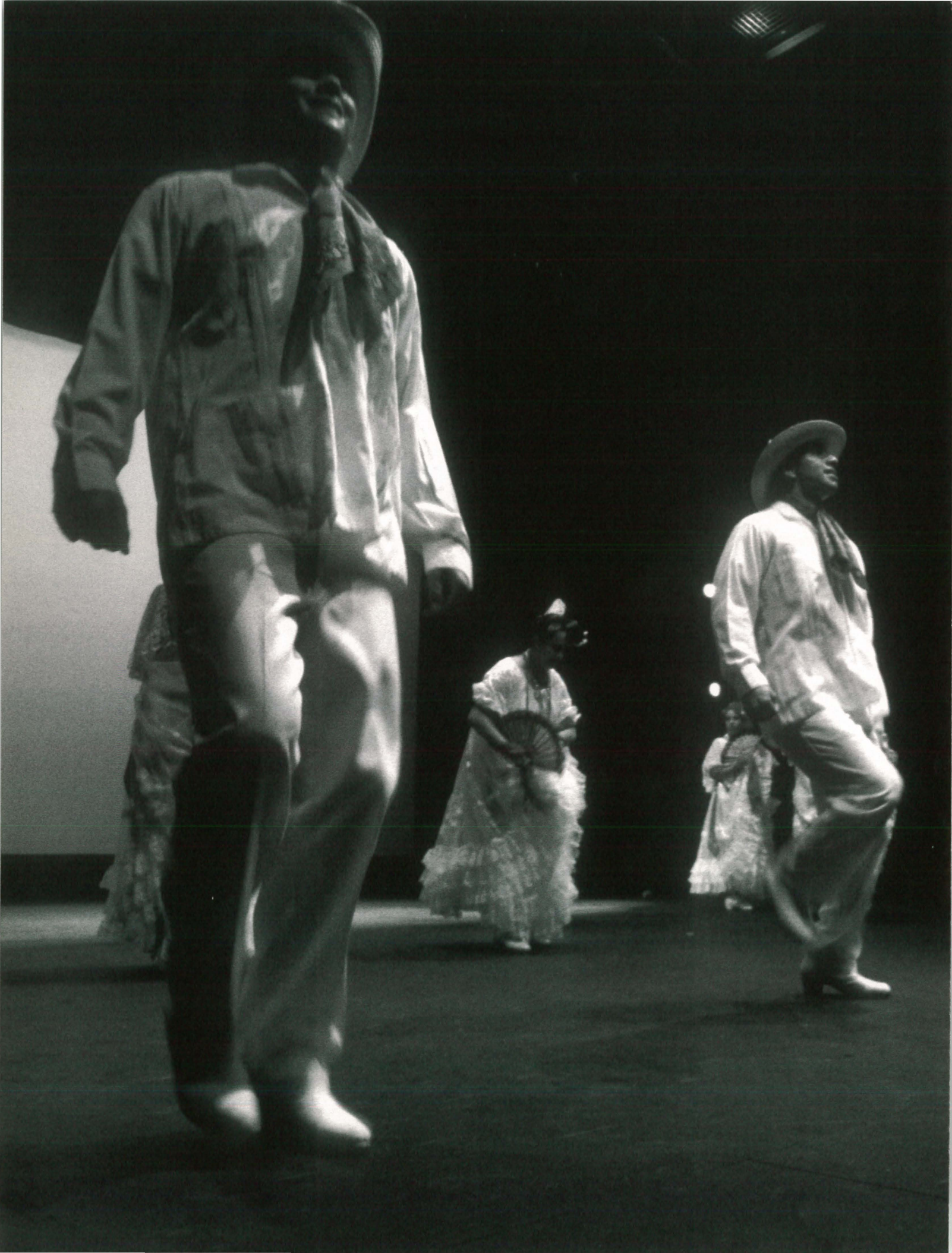
In Spanish, "dance" is translated as both *danza* and *baile*. Technically, there is no difference between these terms, but in vernacular speech, *danza* often refers to ritual dance that is rooted in indigenous practice. During the process of colonization, *danza* gradually fused indigenous and Euro-Christian beliefs and practices. Today, *danza* continues to be performed throughout the Americas. Some of the best-known *danzas* include *la danza de moros y cristianos*, *la danza de los matachines*, and *la danza de la conquista*. Despite the broad variation in names and its syncretic nature, *danza* is almost always associated with "lo indio" or indigenism.

*Baile* refers to secular, social dance performed by couples at parties, commercial dance halls, and nightclubs. Waves of European immigrants brought popular ballroom dances, such as the polka, the waltz, and the *habanera*, that contributed to the development of mestizo regional dances. African-based traditions also sparked the creation of new song and dance styles. The *cumbia*, for example, emerged from the African-based traditions of coastal Colombia to become a favorite pan-American dance and musical style now played by regional ensembles such as the *chanchona* from El Salvador and the *mariachi* from Mexico. *Bailes folclóricos* represent another type of popular dance. Stylized and choreographed for staged presentations, *bailes folclóricos* promote national pride, cultural heritage, and tourism.

Today, globalization has increased the movement of peoples and cultures within and across national borders. As a result, regional dances are becoming more widely known beyond their place of origin. Localized traditions from Latin America are springing up in new cultural environments throughout the United States. Although dance is continually changing in form, function, style, and context, it remains one of the most important and widespread expressive forms in Latino cultures.

Olga Nájera-Ramírez, professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, received her Ph.D. from the University of Texas in Austin. Author of books and producer of an award-winning video, she has concentrated on documenting and critically examining expressive culture among Mexicans in both Mexico and the United States.







At the same time that forms of music (and dance) have become vehicles for creating social identity, they have also become means for creating a new sense of community. Music in any society is a social magnet, a way of bringing people together, the major attraction at a myriad of social events. But among Latinos in the United States, this role has been expanded and its importance heightened. Music has become a primary vehicle for reuniting people who share a similar background and recreating their lost sense of community—especially for a dispersed immigrant Latino community, or for a Latino minority culture living among people of other cultural backgrounds who speak languages other than Spanish. The rhythms of pan-Latin popular singers like Marc Anthony, the late Celia Cruz, or Los Tigres de Norte playing salsa, *merengue*, or *polca norteña* attract throngs of Spanish-speaking Latinos of many backgrounds to nightclubs and dance halls throughout the United States. In the daytime, audience members might work in a warehouse, a construction company, or an office that calls for interacting in a different language or communication style. But at the nightclub, dance hall, or the stadium concert, they are Latino and can do their Latino way of dancing, of speaking, and of interacting, with the freedom of not having to think about it. Music-making—both its sounds and its occasions—is paramount in creating community. From the pop culture experience has emerged a growing pan-Latino identity that combines various Latinos' backgrounds with a sense of common difference from the "Anglo" mainstream.

Another way music creates community in the United States is Latinas' use of public performance as a social forum in which to forge new gender roles for women within Latino culture—a reshaping of their community. All-female mariachi ensembles such as Las Reynas de Los Angeles and Mariachi Mujer Dos Mil of California have successfully challenged the male gender domination of that musical tradition and profession. Likewise, all-female salsa orchestras and salsa superstars such as Celia Cruz have carved out new or expanded roles and greater space for women musicians in the professional realm.

Music can also re-create a sense of community for Latinos in the United States using core ingredients from life "back home." The marimba, ever-present in Guatemalan life, brings expatriates and their children together in the United States when it plays popular melodies from "back home" at Guatemalan community weddings, birthdays, and dances. And it only takes a few staccato notes from the accordion-driven *conjunto* from Texas to flip on an internal switch of Texas-Mexican identity, as the listener begins to move with the sliding step of the *tejano* polka and yearn for the social surroundings of a dance hall.

Music has many places in Latino cultural and social life, but, put simply, music is one of the essential ingredients for anyone to live a normal, satisfying life. In its rich cultural diversity and engaging social complexity, *música latina* gives voice to the cultures, struggles, issues, hopes, and joys of all people called "Latino."

*Dr. Daniel Sheehy is an ethnomusicologist, curator, musician, and director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, the national museum's nonprofit record label. He has authored and edited numerous publications on Latin American music, as well as produced concerts, tours, and recordings of musicians from Latin America and the United States.*

(Facing page) Dance can be a form of music-making. For example, in the fandango of southern Veracruz, dancers' *zapateado* (rigorous footwork) creates a percussive sound that complements the other instruments in the ensemble. Photo by Jon Kersey, courtesy Olga Nájera-Ramírez

Master accordionist Eva Ybarra has earned her place in *conjunto* music, which she describes as a "man's world."

Photo by Michael Young, courtesy Cathy Ragland





## THE LATINO MUSIC PROJECT

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival program *Nuestra Música: Music in Latino Culture* showcases the experience of Latino music and dance, using it as a way into a variety of complex cultural and social issues. As music helps us understand the broader social experience, so the social and cultural contexts help us understand the music. This is what the living, thought-provoking, engaging Smithsonian Folklife Festival does: it gives voice to communities and cultures from around the globe, and it gives space to the performance of their defining forms of expression. An exhibition that would do justice even in a minimal way to the scope, complexity, and beauty of Latino musical life could never be contained in a single year's Festival program. Consequently, the program will embrace an unprecedented four consecutive years of the Festival, with each year shaped by a special theme highlighting a coherent constellation of issues in Latino music and culture.

The program's overarching title, *Nuestra Música: Music in Latino Culture*, points to the two conceptual pillars that support the four-year project: understanding *música latina* in its broader cultural life as a way of realizing its rich potential for public engagement and education; and exploring the power of music in Latino cultures as an index or coin of cultural identity. The more we grasp the deeper significance embodied in the phrase *nuestra música*—"our music"—the more we will understand the cross-cultural, cross-generational, gendered complexity of the "we" in the "*nuestra*" and the meaning-laden, diverse, engaging beauty of the "*música*."

*Nuestra Música: Music in Latino Culture* is a signature component of a larger Latino Music Project conceived by the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. In 2001, the non-profit record label, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a division of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, launched its Latino Music

Recording Initiative, entitled *Tradiciones/Traditions*, to expand Latino music holdings, to publish and disseminate new recordings, and to create a Web site offering bilingual educational materials. To date, eleven recordings have been published—two of them nominated for Grammys—presenting music from over twenty musical traditions (see the list on the next page), and reaching millions of listeners through radio airplay and the distribution of recordings.

The 2004 Festival program lays out the themes of the years to follow: *Vamos a Bailar: Latino Dance Music—Dancing Community*; *Raíces y Ramas/Roots and Branches: Continuity and Creativity in Latino Music*; and *¡Somos Latinos! Music and Latino Identity*. The program will explore the historical roots and development of Latino cultures in the United States, contemporary social issues articulated in music and dance, and the role the music industry plays in the continuity and transformation of Latino musical tradition. Thematic threads, artist input, and evaluation of the pilot Festival year will contribute to the elaboration of the themes highlighted in the Festivals for 2005, 2006, and 2007.

The future promises a major and growing presence for Latino cultures in the United States. But social, cultural, and language barriers have sometimes caused public understanding of, and engagement with, Latino culture to lag behind this development. The *Nuestra Música: Music in Latino Culture* Festival program, and the Latino Music Project in general, are highly visible, national steps toward remedying this communication gap. Through engaging, participatory presentations of music and dance from many Latino cultural backgrounds, *Nuestra Música* will open an important door to the public understanding of the diversity, heritage, and hopes of Latinos in the United States and abroad. Our goal is to expand social understanding and exchange, and what better place to start than music? In an age of globalization, music presents a unique opportunity to build bridges and strengthen cross-cultural understanding.





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Felipe García Villamil shows a beaded ritual bottle that he himself decorated.  
*Photo courtesy Felipe and Valeria García Villamil*

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For more information and other selections see:  
[www.folkways.si.edu](http://www.folkways.si.edu).

