



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

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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.