



# Latino Chicago

CONVERGING CULTURES

Juan Días

Bop-bop boo-boo-boom bap-bap-bap traka-traka-track, dun-dun! It is 8 p.m. on a Thursday night in Chicago and you are walking down Division Street. You hear the sound of *bomba* drums and chanting coming from a storefront in a hundred-year-old building, a three-flat with bay windows, trimmed with ornate brown limestone moldings and other architectural features characteristic of the period when the former Czech dwellers of the neighborhood built it. Today's residents call the street "Paseo Boricua" (Puerto Rican Promenade). Inside, a crowd of fifty people enjoy a *bombazo* (a Puerto Rican *bomba* jam-session). The walls are decorated with a Puerto Rican flag, a map of the province of Mayagüez, a portrait of Pedro Flores, two güiros and a cuatro. As three drummers

improvise, dancers from the audience take turns interacting with the drums. You can tell the dancers are regulars because they know exactly what to do. A couple of parents have brought their kids along, hoping that the experience will help them keep a connection to their cultural roots. Outside the circle, two college students who are not Puerto Rican are visiting for the first time. They wear hip-hop clothes, and are trying to decide when is the right time to jump in and try those cool moves. At one point, the master drummer gets up with an almost regal authority and takes a turn at dancing. Gracefully, he shows everyone that this is not just a pastime, but also something to take seriously and do well, because there is a responsibility to maintain this tradition. Outside, a food vendor on a wheeled cart waits for the end of the event and a chance to sell her steamed Mexican tamales, *atole champurrado*, and fried *churritos* when the crowd lets out.



(Top) Roberto Ferreyra, director of Nahui Ollin, performs in La Peña program at the Old Town School of Folk Music in 1999. Photo courtesy Nahui Ollin/Son Tarima

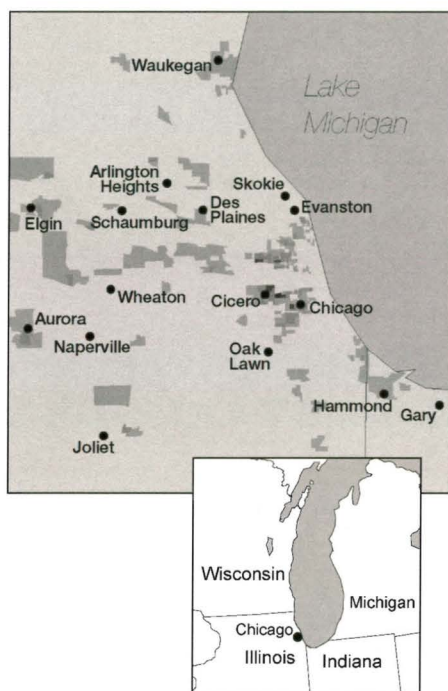
(Left) Carlos "Caribe" Ruiz, founder of the Puerto Rican Congress of Mutual Aid, leads the first Puerto Rican Parade in 1966. Photo courtesy Puerto Rican Congress of Mutual Aid

(Right) Young people are a vital force in the Chicago Latino community. Photo © 2006 Jon Lowenstein









(Upper) In 2004, Latinos were almost 20% of the Metropolitan Chicago population. Map shows census tracts with more than 10% Latino population.

Chicago has one of the largest and most diverse Latino communities in the nation, with a rich history and a thriving artistic life; yet this population remains one of the least known to the rest of the United States. Latino Chicago is a multinational, multicultural community. The largest population is Mexicans, followed by Puerto Ricans, then Guatemalans. Smaller groups from the Caribbean and Central and South America include Ecuadorans, Colombians, Cubans, Peruvians, Salvadorans, and Chileans. A small group of Belizeans and Brazilians also consider themselves part of the community. Metropolitan Chicago has the third largest Latino population in the U.S. and the second largest Mexican immigrant population (Los Angeles is first). One often hears that the term Latino gained currency in the 1970s, and Chicago may well have been the site (Padilla 1985). In the past 35 years, the region's Latino population has grown to 1.6 million, accounting for 96 percent of the total population growth. Latinos fuel the local economy with 20 billion dollars in household income per year, lead in filling positions in the job market, and have accounted for 38 percent of Chicago's total homeowner growth (Ready and Brown-Gort 2005). Latino Chicago is a complex and diverse community; it has a character unlike Latino Los Angeles, Miami, New York or Houston, and yet, the stories of its people can resonate with the experiences of anyone anywhere.

In partnership with the Old Town School of Folk Music, the Smithsonian Institution launched a research project in the spring of 2005. Twenty local researchers explored various aspects of Latino folklife in Chicago, recording the stories of artists and organizations, documenting special events and parades, foodways, and more. Two large questions guided the researchers: How do the arts shape, and how are they shaped by, community and identity? And, what characterizes Chicago's Latino community as unique and distinct from other Latino communities elsewhere? There were many answers and perspectives, varying with cultural backgrounds, experiences, and personal preferences. Most importantly, these questions have led to a cultural dialogue, one that will continue during the 40th Smithsonian Folklife Festival when many of these artists come to share their lives and experiences with the public on the National Mall.

Diversity among Latinos was one of the themes that emerged in many of our conversations with artists. David Hernández, a Puerto Rican poet and resident of Chicago since the 1950s, once thought about moving to New York, but decided against it. Throughout his career, Chicago has been an inspiration for many of his poems, and he felt that Chicago was the right place for his poetry to continue to develop. Hernández explains:

Chicago's Latino community is much prettier than either coast! The term Latino, I believe, originated here. In New York, you primarily have Puerto Ricans, and then you have Dominicans and so forth; in California, you primarily have Mexicans and a scattering of others. But here we have everybody.... That's what's unique about this city. If you go to Latino art shows, you will see something from Colombia, Puerto Rico, Mexico and all of that in the same show; that's what makes it really rich.

Arturo Velásquez, long-time resident and the first Mexican jukebox distributor, describes how, after his father first came to the Heartland to work for the steel mills in 1925, he developed a profitable enterprise by catering on the one hand to the diversity of Latinos in Chicago and on the other to the strong bond that these communities maintain with their music traditions. He remembers:

My mother put a little restaurant behind a pool hall. At that time, the industry of the jukeboxes was just starting. The manufacturers gave me credit to buy the jukeboxes because we had no money. I dedicated myself to the Mexican locations. I would cater to the music that I knew they liked. They came from different states and every state has a style. It seems like mariachi music is still in the main market. Mexicans still have the country in their heart. Even if every state has its own unique style, the *ranchera* music will never die. The tejano with the accordion came in much later from Texas and from northern Mexico, like Monterrey, San Luis Potosí.... Later on came the Cuban style of music—Pérez Prado. As other people start coming into the Chicago area—Cubans, Puerto Ricans—they have their own style. In today's market you have Latinos, which is everybody from South America, Central America, and Mexico.



In the 1920s, Cirilio López formed the Banda Mexicana of South Chicago. Mr. López fled religious persecution in Mexico during the Cristero War. Photo courtesy Rita Arias Jirasek and Carlos Tortolero



Historically, Chicago's Latino community dates back to the nineteenth century, when the city began to establish its reputation as the center of the Industrial Heartland, with railroads, stockyards, steel mills, and other industries that drew the earliest Mexican immigrants to these job opportunities. Artistically, music followed these early immigrants. There are early photographs of Latino ensembles, and Hispanic surnames appear on the credits



Music has always been an important part of the Mexican community's cultural life. A young men's musical group organized by Guadalupe Vera performs at a community event around 1917. Photo courtesy Rita Arias Jirasek and Carlos Tortolero

of early 78-rpm recordings made in Chicago beginning in the 1920s. Singer Silvano R. Ramos, for example, had 15 recording sessions in Chicago for the Victor label between 1927 and 1931, suggesting that he may have been living in the city. The city has always been a "gigging" town attracting musicians who have made history from the earliest days of recorded jazz and electric blues through world-renowned polka, gospel, R&B, "techno" house music, and now to Chicago's homegrown popular Mexican dance style called *pasito duranguense*. Today, Chicago has hundreds of Latino music and dance groups, including over 30 mariachi bands, dozens of dance *bandas*, family or church-based folkloric dance groups, and scores of musicians working in clubs and restaurants who offer entertainment seven days a week.

For many Latino families, folk dance becomes a means of staying in touch with traditions from the homeland and keeping the nuclear family together. Henry Roa was one of the instrumental figures in the founding of Chicago's Mexican Folkloric Dance Company 24 years ago. His grandmother came over from Mexico in about 1918, and he was "born in a boxcar" in the railroad yards of Joliet, Illinois. He explains, "I knew nothing about Mexico, nothing at all. I was just like everybody else, American," until the Hawthorne Heritage and Culture Club at the Western Electric plant where he worked asked him to perform something "Spanish" with his daughter for their program. This awakened an interest in his cultural heritage and he looked for a Mexican dance teacher. He found Ofelia Solano-Guevara, a math teacher at Benito Juárez High School in the Pilsen neighborhood, who danced with a local troupe called Alma de México, directed by José Ovalle. Ofelia also organized an all-girls dance group called Nuevo Ideal. Roa helped bring the two groups together in 1982 to form the Dance Company, which is open to all: "There is no audition. People find out by word of mouth or through the telephone book. No one gets turned away. Most start when they are six years old or so.... Most are Mexican, half born in Chicago, half are immigrants."

In Latino Chicago, community and identity often provide a context to institutions centered on the performing and visual arts. Carmen A. Mejía, dancer and co-founder of the folk dance group Perú Profundo, finds that in the cultures of Peru, there can be little separation between dance and community. By teaching dance in Chicago, Perú Profundo also teaches about the roots of Peruvian



Puerto Rican muralist Gamaliel Ramírez's mural "La Familia" reflects South Chicago's multicultural population. Gamaliel was one of the co-founders of El Taller, an artist collective offering free silk-screen, music, dance, mural, and poetry workshops to the community from 1970 to 1980. Photo courtesy Gamaliel Ramírez, Smithsonian Institution

traditions and their role in the local community: "Our goal is to maintain the roots. The group members use this group to identify themselves as Peruvians.... If you don't maintain your roots, if you can't identify with them, then you don't know your own self, and you don't know the country where you were born."

Diversity is key to community organization and shaping of identity. In Latino Chicago many types of diversity come into play—ethnic, national, regional, and generational. Some organizations are more inclusive of diverse groups and form international, multigenerational, or multiregional groups; others focus on preservation and assemble specialized groups who champion a single form. Besides music and dance, other artists are equally active in theater, poetry and spoken word, film, and graphic and mural arts. Latino art is found in formal and informal settings from Roberto Matta's oil paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago to the bar-hopping conjunto norteño on 26th Street.

Gamaliel Ramírez, a Puerto Rican muralist and a poet, was a leader in cultural activism in the Lincoln Park neighborhood during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. At that time, this was a Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood surrounded by Italians and Germans. Ramírez was co-founder of El Taller, an artist collective that offered free silk-screening, music, dance, mural, and poetry workshops to the community. "El Taller was one of the first Latino organizations for the arts in the United States. There were always some Mexicans and some Puerto Ricans who didn't want to come together. But we persisted, Cuban artists, Mexican artists, Puerto Rican artists.... When we get together we share experiences and we talk about Latino wisdom. We gained consciousness at the same time; we all became artists about the same time." The muralist movement in Chicago Latino neighborhoods became a new voice for expressing not only connections to traditional culture but also social commentaries on the Chicago Latino experience. He says:



Starting with respect, murals make a very important contribution to the culture of the community and the history, and to define the history as it is now. A lot of people think that “American” is already set, that it is the way it is, but this is not true... A mural gets people in the community to think about what is artistic. It becomes like a poem, like a song, it is like the newspaper, it is talking to them. That’s why everybody wants murals now, because there are some issues that we deal with every day, but we can’t get them across. When you make a large painting somehow it gets the message across.

Traditional arts are an affirmation of identity, and they play an important role in the immigration experience. Many Latino immigrants who did not practice traditional arts in their native home take them up in the U.S. and devote a great deal of time and effort to them. Aníbal Bellido, a Peruvian guitarist who plays every week at a *peña* organized at the Taste of Peru, a Peruvian restaurant in Chicago’s north side, was not always involved in traditional

music. He recalls: “Here is where I learned to play *música criolla*, the folk music of Peru. Before, I played tropical, international music, but living away from one’s country, one feels the melancholy—then I realized there were no criollo guitar players.”

Tito Rodríguez is a Puerto Rican dancer and percussionist, artistic director of AfriCaribe, and one of the most influential people in the 1980s revival of the *bomba* and *plena* in Chicago. He also had an epiphany as a result of an immigrant experience, when he found himself in a situation where he felt the responsibility to step up and represent his culture:

A classmate, who is Mexican, asked me about the discovery of Puerto Rico, and I couldn’t remember the date for my life. And then he asked, “Does Puerto Rico have a national anthem?” And I say, “Yes.” And he says, “What is it?” And I freaked out, totally blank. And I felt so embarrassed. You’re just arriving from the island and not knowing these things. And I ran into the bathroom, I started crying... It was a rude awakening for me. After that, I promised myself that I would be the best Puerto Rican ever. I would read as much as I could and find out everything about Puerto Rico, so next time somebody would ask me a question about Puerto Rico, I would know the answer. I think that many Puerto Ricans in the United States when they go through a process like that ... it just brings up a very sentimental point. It’s like somebody has taken a bandage off your eyes... I think that’s very important because it allows people to begin a process of self-discovery.

A couple dances to the rhythms of Trío Perú at a *peña* at the Taste of Peru Restaurant. Photo © 2006 Jon Lowenstein





Jorge Rodríguez and Tito Rodríguez with AfriCaribe improvise together on the *pandero quinto*, or hand drum. Photo © 2006 Jon Lowenstein

Tito Rodríguez created AfriCaribe, an academy and performance group of traditional Caribbean dance and drumming, to “rescue the history of the community through culture.” As a high school teacher, Tito uses music to teach Puerto Rican history:

The whole intention of AfriCaribe is to develop cultural workers so they continue teaching this to other people. I started teaching *bomba* to teach kids about the history of Puerto Rico. I brought in popular songs from Puerto Rico that were done to *bomba* rhythms in different styles. In addition, we had agreed that they were to teach me about their experience, so they got into hip-hop and they would write raps about their experiences.... These performances were so emotional, because the different generations of Puerto Ricans are often so disconnected from each other’s reality. These kids brought up in the United States often lack family cohesion and community.

Another way to affirm ethnic identity is to establish community organizations. Nilda Ruiz Pauley, a Puerto Rican schoolteacher, came to

Chicago from New York as a little girl in the early 1950s. Her father, Carlos “Caribe” Ruiz, a professional dancer, organized the Puerto Rican Congress of Mutual Aid, one of the first Puerto Rican cultural and sports organizations in Chicago. At a time when Latino communities, despite their multiple national origins and identities, were all considered the same, the Puerto Rican Congress gained the recognition of the mayor of Chicago for Puerto Ricans as a distinct culture. “Many people thought the Puerto Ricans were Mexicans,” she recalls. “That was a big thing in those days, understanding the differences between the Mexican culture and the Puerto Rican culture. It was not to alienate, but enlighten. And Caribe did this with music and dance, because Mexican music and dances are so different from the Caribbean.”

Some elders in the Latino community worry that Latino traditions are disappearing among new generations born in the U.S. and in the face of mass media. However, the evidence does not support their apprehension. Many young Latino artists are proud of their heritage and continue to express their Latino identity, often with a new inflection.



Don Evoua, a Guatemalan rap artist, interacts with mass media culture every day, yet his art filters this experience through his own lens and creates something new, original, and true to his identity. The *reggaetón* musicians of Chicago cite a variety of influences. On the one hand, many musicians admire the breath control of Eminem or the beats of Wu Tang Clan.



Don Evoua and Casino, artists with the Latino hip-hop crew The Essence, rap in the studio. Photo by Juan Dies, Smithsonian Institution

But on the other hand, someone like Don Evoua is also interested in taking *reggaetón* back to its Latino roots by invoking more sounds of the clave and marimba: “They call it Spanish hip-hop, *reggaetón*, hip-hop. But I just call it music, man, and to me, music is universal love—it’s hip-hop, and Spanish hip-hop, and *reggaetón* all mixed together. The second album I’m working on right now, I’m incorporating a lot of sounds from Latin America, like the Peruvian flute, and from my country *la marimba*.”

In a city like Chicago, mass media become an important part of the local culture. With a presence in print, radio, and TV, Latinos have created a forum for the discussion of their

identity. Jorge Valdivia is a Mexican arts administrator who was until recently the station manager of Radio Arte, WRTE 90.5 FM, a radio station operated by youth under the auspices of Chicago’s Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, the largest Latino cultural institution in the country. Valdivia is well aware of the community-building power of a radio station. Radio Arte is an important space for community-centered programming, including oral histories, popular and traditional music, politics, news, information, and current events. Valdivia recalls how the organization went from playing “cool rock *en español*” to a “program that trains youth to become communicators, to mobilize and talk about issues.” He explains, “When you are behind the mike, you can do one of two things: You can go on the air and say nothing in 15 seconds, or you can go on the air and you can speak about who you are as a young person, as a Latino, as an immigrant. And that carries so much power in it. When you speak about your experiences, other people identify with you, and that’s how communities are built.”

In Chicago, strong communities have indeed formed. Despite a recent trend where new immigrants arrive directly in the suburbs and rural areas across the Heartland, Chicago’s Latino neighborhoods continue to be ports of entry where many new arrivals can feel right at home. Businesses in these neighborhoods thrive because they do not cater only to the needs of the local neighborhood; they are specialty supply centers for a large community across the Midwest. Grocery stores, music, entertainment, clothing, and bridal shops line commercial strips that extend for miles.

Because there is such strong neighborhood identity and presence, it is possible for individuals

to remain close to their traditions, food, music, language, religion, and other practices for their whole lives. However, those who leave the relative familiarity of the neighborhood and interact with people from other cultures can also explore multiple identities and add to the diversity of the community. Coya Paz, an actress and founder of Teatro Luna, prizes these multiple identities: "We get a lot of mix—one of the great things about Chicago and the group.... We have people coming up to us all the time who identify with hyphenated identities. 'I'm Blaxican too, I'm a PuertoMalan.' In the group we used to have a PinoRican, a Filipino Puerto Rican, a Russiadoran."

Professional musicians who work with various clienteles find that in a diverse community they must command a broad repertoire to appeal to a broader audience and increase their job opportunities. Nelson Sosa, known as the godfather of *peñas* in Chicago, came to Chicago in 1983 from Chile to sing for the Época Quinta Latin Jazz Band at a club called La Sirena. When he arrived, his repertoire

was South American folk music. In his new surroundings, he had to learn Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban songs: "I try to play songs that really represent my audience." When Época Quinta dissolved, he found a job by convincing restaurant owners to let him start a *peña* series. A *peña* is an intimate gathering for sharing music with friends, often with guest artists and sing-alongs. In Latin America—especially in Chile—*peñas* were seminal in the folk revival of the 1960s. Sosa did this successfully and started a new trend that continues. Some of the more popular *peñas* in Chicago today include the Old Town School of Folk Music, El Ñandú, La Décima Musa, Taste of Peru, Fiesta Mexicana, and La Peña Restaurant.

Musicians in larger communities, particularly the Mexican community, can specialize in a particular regional style (or set of styles) and find enough work to stay busy and in demand. Víctor Pichardo, artistic director of Sones de México Ensemble, opened a new niche for Mexican music in Chicago in the early 1990s by playing traditional music



Members of Teatro Luna, an all-women Latina theater company founded in 1990, explore Latina identity and bring music and drama together in performance. Photo courtesy Teatro Luna, Smithsonian Institution



from different regions of Mexico grounded in deep knowledge of their style and authentic instrumentation. He explains:

The son is a generic name for a music style. We can find it all over Mexico, in different regions—*son planeco*, *son jarocho*, *son de Tierra Caliente*. . . Sones de México tries to represent each region. When we play *son jarocho*, we play the harp, the jarana, and the *requinto*; we play huapango with the violin and *huapanguera* guitar, and we play norteño with the accordion and the *bajo sexto*. We also play the saxophone, clarinet, and trumpet, in a more Caribbean style.

What Sones de México does with traditional music, the band Ansiedad does with pop dance music. They are also Mexican, and they ride the wave of the radio-friendly *banda* music, which can be heard on car stereos, in stores and restaurants, and seemingly anywhere

there are young Mexicans, any day of the week. Within this specialized style, there is a diverse repertoire to please different tastes. Simplicio Román, originally from Guerrero, Mexico, learned to play music in Chicago while he was a student at Benito Juárez High School, where Víctor Pichardo taught a mariachi class. Simplicio and his brothers formed the band Ansiedad to play for Chicago's diverse Mexican community. Their repertoire includes *música ranchera*, *cumbias*, and *música tropical*—a little bit of everything. Simplicio explains: "If we play for a 15th birthday party, or a wedding, we play everything from a *pasito duranguense*, to a polka with accordion, and then some *cumbias*—something romantic, calm, and then something *zapateado*. . . If they ask for a *bachata*, a salsa, we will play it, but we will transform it into our style."

Among the genres Ansiedad plays is the *pasito duranguense*, a style of music and dance that evolved in Chicago and has gained such

Originally from a village near Chichicastenango in Guatemala, master musician Carlos Mejía has brought the tradition of marimba music to youth in Chicago who have studied with him. "I grew up around it—marimba music—and played it since I was little." Photo by Juan Dies, Smithsonian Institution



popularity that it is now emulated by people in Mexico. This is a remarkable phenomenon, since the more common trend is for most popular music styles to originate in Mexico. The style is rooted in traditional brass orchestra music dating back to the nineteenth century, but it is now played by smaller groups of four to six musicians who are able to reproduce the sound of large brass sections with electronic keyboards and synthesizers.

Wherever you are in Chicago's Latino neighborhoods, you encounter a rich multisensory experience that is also highly localized, rooted in the ethnic and regional identities that define this diverse community. Heading west from the corner of 18th Street and Blue Island in the Pilsen neighborhood you enter a piece of Mexico (indeed, parts of all Mexico), run by Mexicans and catering to more than a million Mexicans who live in the Chicago area or travel there for supplies. Further west stands the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, the largest Latino cultural center in the nation. Food vendors on the street and an assortment of cafes and restaurants provide the foods of home: such regional Mexican dishes as *birria* (goat stew) cooked in the style of Ocotlán, Jalisco, or home-made *enchiladas potosinas* so good that some visitors from Mexico have taken them back to San Luis Potosí. Stand on Division Street and California Avenue, just twenty blocks north, and walk into Humboldt Park. You know you are in a Puerto Rican neighborhood because you just walked under a forty-foot-high iron gate in the shape of the Puerto Rican flag. In the park you may stumble into a softball game with the San Lorenzo team, run into an impromptu *corrida* (street jam session) featuring assorted Puerto Rican percussion, or stop for a plate of *cuchifrito* at one of the *cocineros* (food stands) that are built inside mobile homes around the park. Guatemalans, Peruvians, Ecuadorans, or Colombians also have their own neighborhoods—each unique, but all animated by the sound of *nuestra música*, the music of Chicago's thriving and vibrant Latino communities. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival offers all an opportunity to enjoy these diverse traditions.

#### JUAN DÍES

*Juan Díes is a musician, producer, and arts administrator in Chicago. Executive Director of Chicago's Sonos de México Ensemble, he also serves on boards, panels for state and national granting agencies, and in numerous advisory capacities. Raised in Mexico, he came to the United States at the age of 18. He majored in Anthropology and Music at Earlham College and received his M.A. in Ethnomusicology at Indiana University.*

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