

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Previously Published Works

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“Viva Tirado”

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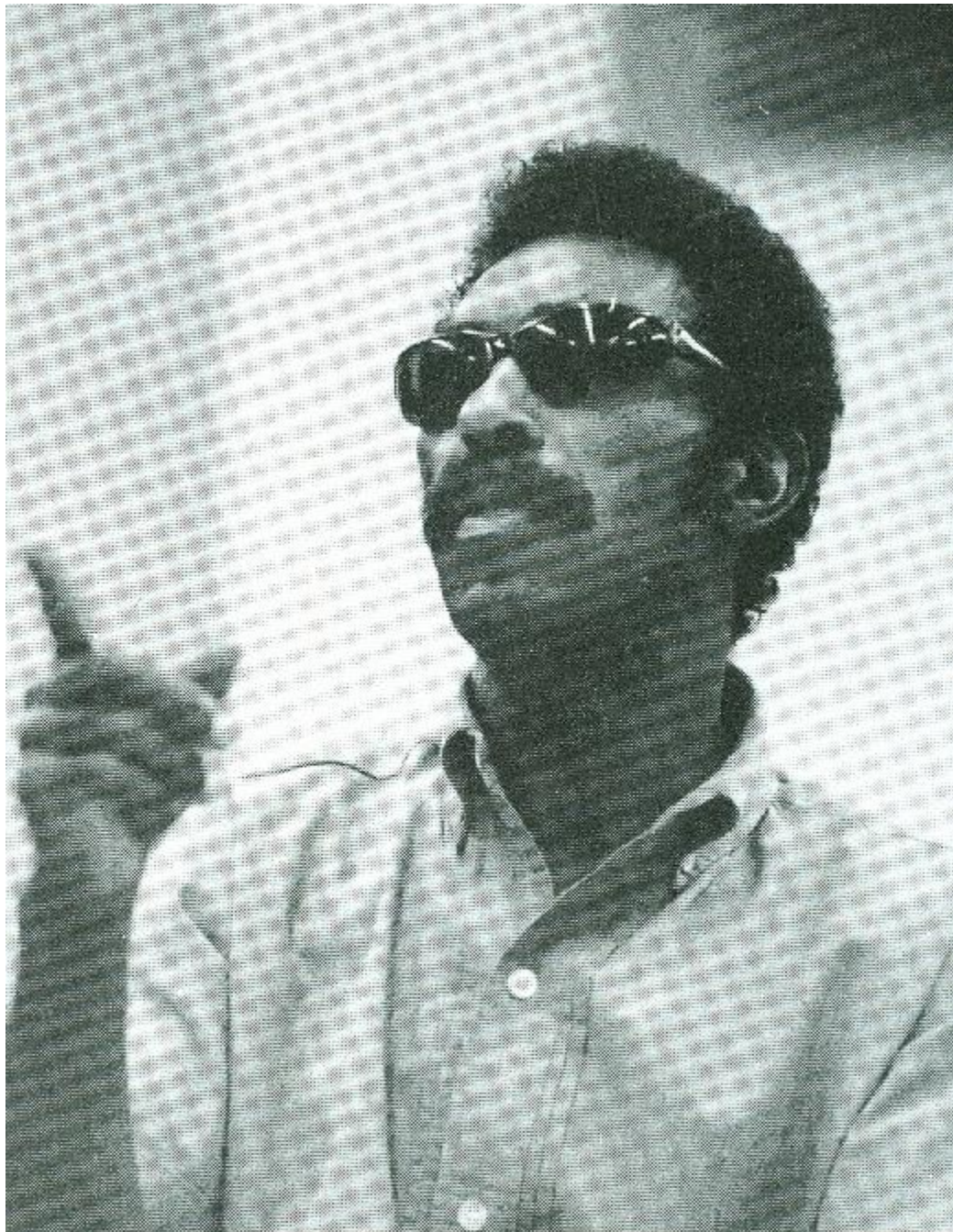
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**Gerald Wilson:**



### **El Chicano:**



### **Kid Frost:**



Can an African American bandleader's Mexicanized composition be considered Chicano music?

Anthony Macías

### **"Viva Tirado"**

Gerald Wilson is an African American jazz big band trumpeter, soloist, arranger, conductor, and composer whose musical legacy is heavily influenced by Latin music

and Mexican culture. Wilson wrote, arranged, recorded, and performed Latin-tinged tunes and bona fide Latin jazz originals, including a couple of *clave*-driven gems. In particular, he is known for writing a series of brassy homages to Mexican bullfighters.

As early as 1954, Wilson began recording songs inspired by bullfighting, the artistry of which he became an ardent *aficionado* in Mexico with his Mexican American wife, Josefina, and her family. In 1962, Wilson wrote and recorded the first and most famous of his bullfighter songs, “Viva Tirado,” a funky Latin jazz classic with a catchy theme, conga drumming, and jazz guitar, in honor of José Ramón Tirado, a sensational teenage *matador* from Mazatlán. As Wilson marveled, Tirado “had a lot of style,” like a smooth jazz trumpeter. During the 1960s, the California-based label, Pacific Jazz, released 9 Gerald Wilson albums in 10 years, and Mexican American saxophonist, clarinetist, and flutist Anthony Ortega played hard bop and free jazz on most of them. For example, the ballad, “El Viti,” a 1965 ode to the tough, stoic Mexican bullfighter Santiago Martín, showcased a “poignant” muted trumpet melodic line by Gerald Wilson, and an Ortega alto saxophone solo that twists and turns from soul searching to statement making.

Wilson’s “love of Mexico and Mexican music” coalesced on the 1966 LP *The Golden Sword*, named after a *torero*’s highest accolade. This recording included a traditional Mexican folk tune, along with three straight-ahead jazz orchestral odes to Mexican culture: “Mi Corazon,” and “The Feather” and “The Serpent,” two parts of an unfinished work, “Teotihuacan Suite,” inspired by the ancient Toltec capital. The title track is a catchy Latin anthem that evokes “the pageantry of the bull ring,” swaggers

with dramatic trumpet brio, and swings with soulful tenor sax lines. *The Golden Sword* also featured the tune “Carlos,” Wilson’s passionate, rousing “tribute” to Mexico City matador Carlos Arruza. During the same years that Herb Alpert’s pop party music gained great popularity, Gerald Wilson’s body of work infused American music with his deeply personal interpretation of Tijuana brass. As he explained, regarding his relationship to Mexico and Mexican Americans, “That’s my other family now and I’ve been into that culture.”

In 1967 Wilson recorded a looser, more uptempo arrangement of “Viva Tirado” for the album, *Live and Swinging: The Gerald Wilson Orchestra Plays Standards and Blues*, recorded at Marty’s, a South Central Los Angeles jazz venue owned by a Mexican American Angeleno, with an all-black clientele. From the visceral *tumbao* (syncopated Afro-Cuban bass line) to the roaring reeds, the trumpeter’s rapid-fire riffs and slurred notes, the drummer’s percussive cowbells and propulsive cymbals, the pianist’s nimble notes and block chords, and the rattling maracas in tandem with the scratching *güiro*, this live version packed texture, density, and intensity.

Can an African American bandleader’s Mexicanized compositions be considered Chicano music? In jazz history, Gerald Wilson is considered neither a creator nor a purveyor of Latin jazz, while his Mexican songs are not Chicano enough to be called Chicano jazz. Nevertheless, Wilson’s savory songbook consistently absorbed Mexican flavors. As Wilson declared, of his unique style, “It’s meaty, it’s deep, and it’s rooted in the history of black and Mexican people.”

This Mexican matador mojo continued working for the Mexican American

soul/Latin rock band, El Chicano, particularly on their organ- and conga-heavy hit cover version of Gerald Wilson's "Viva Tirado." Recorded on their debut LP in 1970, "Viva Tirado" helped El Chicano break through into the mainstream, reaching #28 on the Billboard Pop chart, #20 on the R&B chart, and #10 on the Adult Contemporary chart, while earning the group airplay on jazz stations, an invitation to the Ohio Jazz Festival, and a gig at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. The *conguero* from El Chicano, Andre Baeza, introducing their Chicano jazz version of "Viva Tirado" live in concert in 1971, announced, "This tune started what we call the brown sound," and, as the performance starts to pick up steam, he exclaimed, "*viva la raza!*" Is this Chicano jazz?

El Chicano's version of "Viva Tirado" is hailed as quintessentially Chicano music, and it was sampled in 1990 by rapper Kid Frost for his hit single, "La Raza." For the first Chicano rapper, Kid Frost (Arturo Molina, Jr.), his "reality based" lyrics are concerned with "taking it into the streets." After recording his first song in 1981, he rapped with Ice-T at greater Eastside backyard parties and low rider car shows, then paid his dues "rapping against blacks, battling against black groups" throughout metropolitan Los Angeles. According to Kid Frost, "some of the hardcore Chicanos" originally rejected rap music because they associated it with blacks. To please these *veteranos*, Frost "incorporated" oldies into his "sound," even though, ironically, Mexican Americans' cherished oldies-but-goodies originally consisted of rhythm and blues, soul, and funk played by African American artists. At the same time, Frost adds, "groups like NWA came out and stole Chicano culture" with their appropriations of "Pendletons" and low riders.

Kid Frost's 1990 debut album, *Hispanic Causing Panic*, featured his breakout single, "La Raza," which not only sampled El Chicano's version of Gerald Wilson's Mexican bullfighter ode, "Viva Tirado," but also utilized Chicano cultural nationalism in its lyrical *testimonio* to brown pride. *Low Rider* magazine initially considered the song's lyrics "totally negative stereotyping" that glorified and spread "gang-warfare." In contrast, *Hispanic* magazine defended the rapper's "gritty storytelling" that clothed "a message of tolerance, hope, and common sense in the kind of macho, street-wise image his audience can relate to." Kid Frost insists that he was showing kids "a better way ... to make something out of their lives" by bringing "an alternative to joining gangs," that he delivers a "positive message" through rap, "the voice and expression of the street."

Black-and-white music histories generally neglect the contributions of many Mexican American musicians, just as Chicano music histories often ignore the role and influence of African American music, culture, and style. This entry suggests that we can carefully recuperate these under-appreciated musical artists while respecting their cultural identities, honoring their cultural politics, and even acknowledging their *apolitical* identifications. For example, the band El Chicano, although politicized by the Chicano movement, embraced by MeCha, and escorted by the Brown Berets, never became overtly political, never espoused Chicano cultural nationalism. Similarly, Kid Frost's Chicano pride anthem has been rightly criticized for its sexism, patriarchy, and Aztec/Mexica-centric racial determinism. Perhaps, in the end, contextualizing the intertwined histories of the song "Viva Tirado" can help us collectively rethink the role

of the corporate music industry, which is bound by profit-driven genre categories, within Chicano music, the role of Chicanos and Latinos within U.S. music history, and the role of racial essentialism within Chicano and Latino studies.

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### **Further Reading/Viewing:**

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El Chicano, "Viva Tirado" live:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxmWpKqkCnk&feature=fvst>

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Gerald Wilson, "Viva Tirado": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83Cn2UU79F8>

Gerald Wilson, "Viva Tirado" live: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJXdX1bK-a8>