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Ritchie Valens:



What does one song's legacy of transnational travels tell us about the role of Latinos in American culture via popular music?

-Anthony Macías

"La Bamba"

This entry briefly traces several trajectories of "La Bamba," the traditional Mexican wedding song from the Veracruz region, in the *son jarocho* style, which blends Spanish, indigenous, and African musical elements. The Mexican American rocker, Ritchie Valens (né Richard Valenzuela), learned to play "La Bamba," along with other Mexican songs, from an uncle and a cousin at house parties, where family and friends would sing and play guitar on neighborhood front porches and at backyard barbecues. In 1958, Ritchie Valens recorded a rocking version of "La Bamba" as the Spanish-language B-side to his lovelorn ballad, "Donna." As disc jockeys discovered the flip-side, "La Bamba," radio listeners called in to request both songs, first in southern California, then across the country. Valens's interpretation introduced middle America to Mexican folk rhythms on guitar, combining them with a swinging rhythm section, driven by African American drummer Earl Palmer, and a clear, percussive, 2-3 *clave* beat. Valens performed "La Bamba" during a weeklong engagement at Loew's State Theater in Manhattan for Alan Freed's Christmas Jubilee, and he sang "La Bamba" live and in color on NBC's Sunday night prime time rock and roll television program, "The Music Shop." In 1959, after Valens's tragic, untimely death at the age of seventeen, "La Bamba" reached number twenty-two on the Billboard singles chart, while "Donna," a 750,000 copy-selling gold record, eventually reached number two.

Ritchie's Spanish-language hit asserted bilingual Mexican Americans onto the monolingual, English-only dominant cultural zeitgeist, or tenor of the times, and inserted multicultural music into a conservative context of social conformity. Valens's version of "La Bamba" came out after two pioneers of Chicano music had already paved the way: Don Tosti in 1948 with the million copy-selling "Pachuco Boogie," and Lalo Guerrero in 1956 with a rock *en español*/Chicano rockabilly recording, "Tin Marin De Do Pingue." This genealogy of Spanish, Spanglish, and *caló* vernacular music shows how rock and roll was never simply black and white. Yet acknowledging the Latin tinge in U.S. pop music does not mean simply attaching an addendum to the narrative of American cultural history; rather, it makes the case for the vital, central role of Latin rhythms, resulting in an American *Sabor*, or flavor of *las Américas*.

Mexican American singer-guitarist Trini Lopez, born and raised in Dallas, Texas, scored an international hit in the early 1960s with his version of "La Bamba," which his father had taught him as an eleven-year-old in 1948, two years after buying him his first guitar. By the late 1960s the song had sojourned along new cultural currents when the renowned Afro-Cubano Latin jazz *conguero* Mongo Santamaria recorded a Latin Soul version of "La Bamba." In 1979, The Plugz, a transplanted Texas punk trio, released their debut LP, *Electrify Me*. On it, they recorded a rapid-fire punk rock version of "La Bamba" in which they memorably changed the line, "*Yo no soy marinero, soy capitán*" ("I am not a sailor, I am a captain"). As a chronicler of the L.A. punk scene recalled, "nothing beats

the unforgettable sight of several hundred people frenetically dancing as if possessed while Tito [Larriva] insisted, 'Yo no soy capitalista! Soy anarquista!' ("I am not a capitalist, I am an anarchist").

Los Lobos recorded a version of "La Bamba" in 1987 as the title song for the soundtrack to Luis Valdez's biopic of Ritchie Valens, *La Bamba*. Los Lobos' "La Bamba" reached number one on the Billboard "Hot 100" chart in the United States, and also number 3 in Billboard's Latin category, number 7 in Adult Contemporary, and number 75 in Country, while hitting number one in the United Kingdom. Indeed, it stayed at the very top of the U.S. pop charts for 21 weeks in the summer of 1987, on the UK charts for 11 weeks, and became a worldwide hit, from Europe to South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia.

Despite the rhetoric of the so-called "decade of the Hispanic," crossing over has always meant something different for Chicanos. For example, Ritchie Valens did not suddenly switch from singing in Spanish to English—in fact, it was exactly the opposite. For the members of Los Lobos, who earned hard-fought recognition with their signature style of rock and roll after beginning their career playing traditional Mexican music, it was a return to their roots, and they followed up the *La Bamba* soundtrack with *La Pistola y El Corazon*, a studio album composed entirely of Spanish-language Mexican music, which won a Grammy Award in 1988. Their version of "La Bamba," like their subsequent musical creations, exposed non-Latinos to Mexican music and Chicano culture. Since their initial recording of "La Bamba," Los Lobos have performed the song live in

concert at countless venues and at music festivals across the United States, including at the White House for President Obama's Fiesta Latina, and around the world.

Valens's "La Bamba" also presaged the current transnational fandango movement, stretching from Veracruz to Los Angeles--which boasts an annual son jarocho festival--to Seattle, one which includes the Grammy-winning band Queztal. "La Bamba" has been recorded by the likes of Harry Belafonte and Neil Diamond, there have been Greek and Japanese versions, and it has been featured on Guitar Hero and on countless karaoke song lists. It has become a halftime and time-out mainstay at U.S. sports arenas, and an oldies radio station staple. In short, it has long since crossed over to mainstream American culture and beyond, yet is still a favorite component of the *mariachi* repertoire at Mexican restaurants and, as Ritchie Valens learned, at backyard family barbecues. Only time will tell where "La Bamba" will travel next, which iterations future generations will create, and whether the song represents the absorption of Mexican music and culture into a supposedly color-blind, multicultural meritocracy, or the persistence of resistive *Mexicano* and Chicano cultural production in a battle for the human rights and civil rights, for the hearts and minds, the soul, and the language of America, waged on the contested terrain of popular culture.

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