

# Mapping Rock Music Cultures across the Americas

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“Rock is not a crime.” This graffiti on a wall in Puerto Rico only makes sense when one understands that, for decades, Latin American rock fans and performers have been subject to a systematic pattern of harassment and abuses, under all forms of government—from Castro’s Cuba to Pinochet’s Chile—and ranging from outright government repression, to intellectual demonization and social ostracism. In Mexico, one of the first countries in Latin America where rock ‘n’ roll took hold, the government closed down the *cafés cantantes* (youth clubs) throughout the early 1960s, claiming that they fomented “rebellion without a cause” and encouraged the “distortion of local customs.”<sup>1</sup> In mid-1960s Brazil, the avant-garde rock project called Tropicália had to defend itself both from nationalists on the right, who feared its potential for subversion, and from critics on the left, who loudly asserted that rock was a deformation of traditional musical forms.<sup>2</sup> When, in 1967, the young Cuban guitarist Silvio Rodríguez (who would shortly become a principal figure of the left-leaning Nueva Trova song movement) mentioned on government television that the Beatles were an important influence on his work, he was promptly fired.<sup>3</sup> During the “Dirty War” period in Argentina (1976–82), the police routinely disrupted concerts and beat up rock followers for the sole offense of gathering to listen to music considered threatening to the military regime. Those in public office who supported local rock could also find themselves vulnerable to attack. In 1971 the mayor of Medellín, Colombia, lost his

post after having allowed a major rock festival to take place in the town of Ancón, just outside of the city. Following a similar massive outdoor festival of national rock bands in Mexico in 1971, commercial rock venues and large concerts were effectively banned for more than a decade.

Rock in Latin America has by now been “decriminalized.” Five decades after its initial arrival in Latin America, rock’s long-contested status has finally given way to social acceptance: it is now recognized as a legitimate form of popular music and has been incorporated within nationalist cultural discourses. Today, no nation—from revolutionary Cuba to indigenous Ecuador—is exempt from the cultural impact of rock. And, as vigorous, nationally identified rock ‘n’ roll scenes have developed throughout the Americas, following similar yet divergent trajectories, the region’s cultural landscape has been transformed in profound ways.

Nevertheless, in spite of a growing literature examining the impact and spread of rock music cultures throughout Europe and the former Soviet Union, little has been written on the history and contemporary presence of rock in Latin America (or, for that matter, other developing nations).<sup>4</sup> This lacuna has tended to reinforce assumptions that rock is somehow a distinctively North American and European phenomenon, and moreover, that musicians and fans need to be “developed,” not only to appreciate rock’s aesthetics, but also to create original rock sounds. The essays here intend to challenge these misconceptions and, at the same time, broaden the understanding of rock’s global impact by addressing fundamental questions regarding the spread of rock and roll to Latin America: Why is it that rock became such a controversial cultural force in Latin America? Given the highly contested nature of Latin American nationalism, in what ways has rock served as a medium for expressing national identities? How has rock, a transnational musical practice originating in the United States and Great Britain, been resignified in Latin American contexts? How are questions of race, class, and gender that are specific to Latin America inscribed in rock music and performance? How are the tensions between desires for local belonging (to the nation, region, or neighborhood) negotiated with desires for cosmopolitan belonging—especially given that “local” often means dealing with the everyday politics of poverty and repression, while “cosmopolitan” means engaging, in one form or another, with the influence of the United States or Western Europe? Ultimately, can there be a *national* rock in a transnational era, and if so, what exactly makes Latin American rock truly Latin American?

These questions guided the intense collaboration that resulted in this book, a collaboration among scholars and practicing *rockeros/as* (*roqueros/as*)<sup>5</sup> from diverse disciplines and from throughout the Americas (and Spain). With the

exception of Reebee Garofalo, most of us were not “rock scholars” per se; rather, we had migrated to the study of rock and its associated musical forms from a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences—from ethnomusicology (Ulhôa, Asensio, Arévalo Mateus), history (Zolov, McCann), and literature (Fernández L’Hoeste, Pino-Ojeda, Trigo) to sociology (Castillo Berthier, Séman, Palacios, Vila), anthropology (Pacini Hernandez, Benedetti), and ethnic studies (Habell-Pallán, Kun). Two rock musicians—Tere Estrada and Paulo Alvarado—provide the crucial perspective of practitioners. The essays in this volume represent the geographical diversity of the Americas—from Chile to Chicano Los Angeles. In our choice of authors, we also strove to be balanced with respect to both gender and generation, including both those who witnessed the birth of rock and those whose musical frames of reference are punk, techno, and the new wave of *rock en español*. This introductory essay, then, is largely the result of the intellectual ferment generated by this encounter of contrasting positions, cultures, gender perspectives, and ages.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the diversity embodied in this book, any collective discussion of rock music cultures must face an acute awareness of the inherently unreliable and vexing nature of “representation.” We cannot adequately describe the totality of rock practices in the Americas. First, such a task is physically impossible, given the immensity of the region. But in recognizing this impossibility, in choosing this or that musical culture or form for discussion, we run the risk of legitimizing and codifying certain sounds and styles as paradigmatic of rock, both historically and culturally, thus establishing a canonical (official) narrative that might exclude other histories. Furthermore, as mostly middle-class professionals, we cannot presume to speak for those whose lived experiences have shaped these practices, and of whom we often have only snapshot glimpses and understanding. This creates a particular challenge for the editors of this volume, situated in privileged locations within U.S. academia, in assuming roles as observers and enunciators, as interpreters and translators of a phenomenon largely occurring outside of the United States. While we are aware of these dilemmas, there seems to be no practical way to avoid them, other than to make very clear at the outset that, while each author speaks *from* one of many possible social as well as geographical locations, none speaks *for* anyone but themselves; and, moreover, our interpretations, although formed by attending as best we can to the methodologies of our chosen fields, are just that—interpretations. This caveat is particularly pertinent to the authors of this Introduction, which seeks to place the fifteen essays within a broader historical framework. Despite what we would like this book to accomplish, we do not—and cannot—claim the exclusive power to define.

Other crucial definitional issues bear addressing at the outset. The terms

"America" and "American," and their usurpation by the United States to refer to itself alone or to its presumed Northern European-derived culture, pose immediate problems for any book that conceives of Latin American culture transnationally. And, in a related problem, where does one locate rock music produced by U.S. Latinos/as—for example, by Chicanas in the United States (discussed in this volume in Habell-Pallán's essay) or by Puerto Ricans (discussed in Arévalo's essay)? If the term "Latin America" encompasses all the speakers of Romance languages in the hemisphere, then it follows that the United States, which has become the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, must also be included in any analysis of Latin American rock.<sup>7</sup> We resolve these difficulties by employing the term "Américas," in its original meaning—that is, to refer to the entire hemisphere, a usage that has been articulated most eloquently by the Cuban poet José Martí. In this way, we hope to add this volume to the body of work aiming to restore the terms "America," "Americans," and "Americas" to their rightful owners: the totality of nations and peoples that lie within the hemisphere.

A far thornier problem is the definition of rock itself, and what it means within a Latin American context. It is important to remember that early rock 'n' roll was a hybrid musical form, performed by black, white, and Latino musicians (for example, Ritchie Valens), which foregrounded African American aesthetics and performance styles.<sup>8</sup> As it moved into the mainstream, however, the music industry increasingly privileged white performers, such as the Philadelphia teen idols, the West Coast surfers, and the folk-rockers, over darker and more "ethnic" artists. Later, with the arrival of the Beatles and the rest of the British Invasion, musicians of color were virtually wiped off the U.S. pop charts.<sup>9</sup> As the marketing term "rock and roll" was shortened to simply "rock" around 1964–65—with black artists relegated to the categories of "soul," "funk," and/or "r&b"—many Latin Americans, especially younger fans who had come of age in the 1960s and thereafter, remained largely unaware of rock's original hybrid characteristics and their cultural implications. As a consequence, "rock" within most of Latin America tends to exclude those styles originated by African Americans. Thus, as Ulhôa and McCann have pointed out to us, black Brazilian funk is *not* usually categorized under the rock umbrella; similarly, Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo note in their essay that the black Cuban doo-wop group Los Zafiros occupies a marginal place at best in reconstructions of that nation's rock history. As for rap, its aesthetics have permeated rock throughout Latin America, but it remains to be seen how rap *per se* will figure within Latin American rock genealogies. While Trigo's essay hints at the traces of African influence in Uruguay's rock tradition, it is clear that one of the more significant and underexplored areas of research is pre-

cisely the question of how “black music” has been understood by youth throughout Latin America, both in those areas that are still characterized by large black and mulatto populations, such as Brazil, Colombia, and the Caribbean, and in regions whose African populations have largely disappeared, such as Uruguay, Mexico, and Argentina.

There are additional reasons for problematizing the term “rock.” Asensio, for example, does not consider Nortec, the new category of Tijuana-based techno music analyzed in her essay, to be a form of rock. And given the range of styles and sounds that exist under the rock umbrella, it is reasonable to question whether “rock” should be used solely to refer to a form of music, or whether it more accurately refers to a more general complex of cultural practices, including fashion, hairstyle, dance, and that indefinable quality known as “attitude.” In other words, are we discussing rock cultures rather than a particular type of music? These, of course, are the same definitional problems that rock scholars in the United States and Europe have been arguing about, without solution, for decades. Following Garofalo, who has participated in many of these debates, we find it most useful to consider rock as a template within which a variety of sounds and behaviors can be located and still be understood as a coherent category. Such a broad and flexible description thus accommodates all music that is mass-mediated, self-consciously “contemporary,” makes at least some use of electric or electronic instrumentation, is associated primarily (but not exclusively) with youth, and whose aesthetics are hybrid, that is, reflecting multiple cultural sources. This “definition” brings rock into more visible relief, especially when contrasted with other, similarly inclusive (and imprecise) categories, such as “traditional music” or “classical music.” Although true to its hybrid nature, rock can and does borrow from both of these domains. For all its imperfections, the idea of a rock template allows us to properly include musical forms such as funk and techno that otherwise might be excluded from consideration.

Although these terminological and taxonomical quandaries are necessary (if unresolvable), the more important and interesting question is historical: Why has rock been so problematic in the Latin American context? This discussion is impossible without first considering the intrinsic association of rock music with the United States, and thus with the history of unequal power relations between the United States and other countries of the Americas. Set against the dismal realities of U.S. economic and military interventions in Latin America, it is no wonder that for many, especially those on the left end of the political spectrum, rock was seen as an unwanted export of the Colossus to the North—at best, a distracting influence from the more urgent task of revolution, and at worst, the cultural component of what was perceived to be

a blatant imperialist offensive. Indeed, the era of rock 'n' roll coincided with the end of the "Good Neighbor Policy," as the United States came to identify reformist and more radical policies in Latin America through the narrow lens of Cold War struggle. The juxtaposition between the seemingly frivolous fads associated with a foreign youth culture and the brutal reality of military-backed repression, sanctioned and often orchestrated by the U.S. State Department, situated rock music, from the start, at the center of a polemic over national identity and sovereignty that was largely, if not wholly, absent from parallel controversies unfolding in the Anglo-European world. This juxtaposition can be gleaned, albeit somewhat crudely, through the following encapsulated narrative highlighting key moments in rock culture. The narrative begins with Bill Haley. As Haley was "Rockin' Around the Clock," Latin Americans were still coming to terms with the consequences of the CIA's direct role in the 1954 overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz, Guatemala's first democratically elected president and a symbol for many Latin Americans of the possibilities for a nonviolent path to reform. While young people were twisting to Chubby Checker, CIA-trained forces were landing on the beaches of Playa Girón in Cuba, seeking to topple Fidel Castro's new, revolutionary regime. Soon after, as the Beatles were instigating young people to let their hair hang down, the U.S. government was openly expressing support for a military coup in Brazil that had put an end to democracy in that country and that would keep the military in control for the next two decades. In 1965, as the Beach Boys were pining after "California Girls," the United States was sending twenty thousand troops to the Dominican Republic in order to squelch the reform-minded democratic regime of Juan Bosch, perceived by the State Department as a possible "second Cuba." And, as the hippie counterculture was reaching its apogee in the United States, the CIA was plotting with rightist elements in Chile to overthrow the elected socialist government of Salvador Allende, which in turn unleashed a brutal, fifteen-year-long repression under General Augusto Pinochet. In short, it is quite understandable that the Left in Latin America so closely identified rock with the United States and perceived it as a reflection, if not also an embodiment, of imperialism. As a result, the Left was reluctant to recognize rock's progressive potential. At the same time, rock was also being attacked by right-wing conservative sectors of society, who abhorred the music because, to them, it signified the breakdown of traditional patriarchal institutions and values. Thus, rock found itself in an isolated position, literally caught between *la espada y la pared* (the sword and the wall)—the "sword" of ideological purity and the "wall" of the old order; or, in U.S. terms, and excusing the pun, between "a rock and a hard place."

Another fundamental issue that needs to be addressed is how and why

rock music was embraced by Latin American (and U.S. Latino) youth in the first place—especially in countries, such as Mexico and Cuba, that already had extraordinarily vibrant and commercially successful national forms of popular music. Most often, credit (or blame) is given to the U.S. entertainment industry, an explanation that reflects the “cultural imperialism” thesis,<sup>10</sup> which holds that “a culture, usually that of a powerful society or group in a society, is imposed on another in a more or less formally organized fashion.”<sup>11</sup> Popular music scholar Dave Laing has shown that the idea of cultural imperialism “depends on an analogy between the historical colonizing role of Western nations in politically subjugating the Third World and the current role of transnational media and electronics corporations.”<sup>12</sup> To be sure, simultaneously with rock ‘n’ roll’s inception in the United States during the 1950s the music and youth culture it spawned was transported to other English- and non-English-speaking countries. Thus, major recording companies like RCA Victor and Columbia Records (CBS) worked in tandem with U.S. film and television production companies to promote commodified versions of youth rebellion that made their way around the globe via transnational channels. By 1960, virtually every urban, middle-class youth throughout the Americas (if not globally) knew who Elvis Presley was, what his music sounded like, and what his gestures looked like, even if access to that music and imagery was unequal.<sup>13</sup>

While the cultural imperialism thesis at least partially explains the spread of rock ‘n’ roll to Latin America, the sociocultural processes that allowed for rock’s acceptance within Latin countries were far more complex. In fact, Latin Americans were especially receptive to these transnational processes. By the late 1950s, as rock ‘n’ roll was gathering steam in the United States, the largest countries in Latin America were already well advanced upon programs of intensive, state-directed industrialization, which, under the intellectual and policy-making rubric of *desarrollismo* (Import Substitution Industrialization), were focused on breaking the dependency on foreign imports. These programs aimed to stimulate domestic production of manufactured goods (through the protection of local industries), while at the same time meeting the consumption demands of a growing middle class—itsself an outgrowth of the industrialization process.<sup>14</sup> Even the smaller countries of Central America, or those that were still predominantly agricultural, such as Colombia, were caught up in the inexorable trend toward urbanization.<sup>15</sup> In short, Latin America was becoming increasingly urbanized and “the middle sectors”—those who would become the first and most avid consumers of rock ‘n’ roll—were on their way to becoming important political, economic, and cultural actors in Latin American society.<sup>16</sup>

Associated with the urbanization process was a “push-pull” dynamic that

simultaneously forced peasants from their lands while at the same time drawing them to the cities, where they ended up swelling the ranks of the largely under- or unemployed. These newly urbanized and marginalized folk would, in due time, also become important consumers of rock. Thus, the 1960s was not only a decade of increasing middle-class growth but also one of rapid urban expansion in general. Mexico, for example, which had always been characterized by its enormous (largely indigenous) rural population, was 50 percent urban by 1960, and by 1970 the nation's capital had become one of the largest cities, in terms of population, in the world. The same promise of modernization that had vastly expanded middle- and working-class populations also exacerbated social and economic inequalities between, as well as within, urban and rural communities. Addressing this unequal economic development became an imperative for U.S. and Latin American policymakers after the Cuban revolution, which introduced the prospect of a revolutionary approach to resolving the question of underdevelopment. In response to this challenge, the United States made Latin American economic progress a priority of its foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> Unlike U.S. policymakers, many Latin Americans, particularly left-wing intellectuals, saw the Cuban model as a sensible response to oligarchic regimes. In the context of the Cold War, then, the ideological struggle over the very terms of modernization—whether it should occur through the private investment of capital, through state-directed capitalist expansion, or through socialist redistribution of accumulated wealth—raised the stakes for everyone: policymakers, intellectuals, and, of course, the emerging middle class.<sup>18</sup>

As envisioned by both Latin American and U.S. policymakers, modernization was a powerful cultural as well as economic process. To counter the appeal of socialist revolution, with its promise of a vibrant cultural nationalism, the middle classes were in effect offered a more tangible promise—that of achieving a certain level of cosmopolitanism by means of capitalist consumption, which came in the form of both domestically produced and imported goods. An integral component of this cosmopolitan promise was access to mass-mediated forms of popular culture, which had quickly become an influential—and profitable—U.S. global export. For middle- and upper-class consumers in Latin America, rock 'n' roll represented the quintessential experience of modernity: its appeal was precisely its cosmopolitanism, which was increasingly interpreted as being synonymous with U.S. culture. Hence, unlike in the United States, where rock 'n' roll emerged as an expression of working-class culture (and was thus antithetical to a construct of cosmopolitanism based on white, middle-class hegemony), rock 'n' roll in Latin America was initially embraced by the upper and middle classes as one manifestation of

their modernizing aspirations. This direct association between rock 'n' roll and the upper strata of Latin American society held true until the mid- to late 1960s, after which the lower and working classes also began to claim rock as their own.

Ironically, in self-identifying with modernity by listening and dancing to imported and domestic cover versions of rock 'n' roll, young people in Latin America were subverting the traditional patriarchal values, or *buenas costumbres*, of their elders. For boys, this often meant defying one's father by mocking (or, arguably, simply rewriting) the prevailing standards of machismo, for example, by growing long hair "like a girl." For girls, rock could be especially liberating. In socially and (often) religiously conservative societies, women face enormous pressures to conform to patriarchal value systems that subsume their desires and ambitions to the authority of men—often including their "liberated" boyfriends. The rock revolution thus offered new possibilities for women to manifest their rebellion against parental and social ideologies that kept women subservient to male dominance. An important paradox here, of course, is that by the end of the 1960s rock 'n' roll coincided with the ideals of capitalist modernization while at the same time challenging the very social and ideological foundations of those capitalist hegemonic projects. For example, in the mid-1960s, the television program *El Club del Clan*, Colombia's equivalent of *American Bandstand*, featured domestic rock groups like Los Flipers, who performed cover versions of top-40 U.S. hits. However, at the same time that these bands were being promoted by the mass media to Colombian youth, they were also provoking outrage within the historically traditional society of Bogotá. Something similar was occurring in Mexico, where Telesistema (later, Televisa), the monopoly television conglomerate, promoted groups such as Los Yaki on their program, *Yeah Yeah Yeah a Go Go*, often to the consternation of religious conservatives.

Indeed, this was a common pattern that was evolving throughout Latin America. By the end of the 1960s virtually every country could boast of home-grown rock bands and an accompanying countercultural milieu. In some cases, such rock scenes would culminate in local rock festivals, patterned after Woodstock and featuring local bands, in which tens of thousands of mostly middle-class youth would openly flout their parents' cultural values: examples include Avándaro (Mexico, 1971), Ancón (Colombia, 1971), Caracas (Venezuela, at various moments in the early 1970s), and Guatemala (1969). The fact that the local mass media were seen as collaborating with transnational corporations in promoting youth countercultures only highlighted, for nationalists on the right and left alike, the inherent dangers of unbridled capitalist modernization. The music was often regarded as a sign of imperialist attack, moral

collapse, or worse. In fact, rock *was* empowering—even if in contradictory ways (such as singing in English).

If rock 'n' roll (and later, rock) coincided with, and simultaneously subverted, ideologies of capitalist consumerism across Latin America, the ramifications of the Cuban revolution on rock music's reception were considerable. Cuba's revolution offered a competing vision of modernization, one that not only sought to redistribute economic wealth (through the expropriation of private property), but also approached culture as a domain that could and should be utilized in the service of revolutionary goals. The idea of constructing a "national culture" was not in itself new; since the 1930s, throughout Latin America, many regimes had understood the utility of protecting and promoting autochthonous forms of cultural expression as central to their elite hegemonic projects. Indeed, the objective of fomenting an (imagined) national culture was itself inherent to the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) project, then approaching its apogee in many Latin American countries. The Cuban revolution, however, sought an even more radical (if ultimately unsuccessful) cultural outcome for the ISI project: to extirpate all traces of extra-revolutionary consumption. (Thus, Fidel Castro's famous dictum "Within the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution, nothing.") The clear association of rock 'n' roll with capitalist consumerism—patently evident during the 1960s—was logically anathema to the Left's revolutionary project, in Cuba and elsewhere, not only because of its association with U.S. imperialism but, more fundamentally, because rock—as a reflection of "bourgeois decadence"—threatened to deplete the virile energies of (potentially revolutionary) youth. This ideological paradigm, embraced—often uncritically—by many within the Latin American Left, stimulated support for a new vision of popular music, one intended to counter the perceived hegemony of the mass-mediated, commercial, popular music that was being disseminated throughout Latin America by multinational culture industries. By the end of the 1960s, music inspired by this vision, known variously as *nueva canción*, *nueva trova*, *canción protesta/política*, and *canción folclórica*, could be heard throughout the hemisphere.

Popular music under this formulation differed from its commercialized counterpart in four principal ways. First, it was linked explicitly to a revolutionary consciousness. In contrast to commercialized music, which was viewed as stupefying and alienating, "authentic" popular music had an intrinsic didactic intent: to raise social and political awareness. Second, the logical outcome of this didacticism was that the music was disassociated from the expression of bodily gratification; this music was for listening, not dancing.<sup>19</sup> Third, this music was envisioned as linked to the fulfillment of the Bolivarian dream of a

pan-Latin American solidarity. This was expressed musically by the adoption of acoustic instruments autochthonous to Latin America, in opposition to the electronic instrumentation that characterized commercial music. Finally, the new music disputed the very definition of the term “popular.” “Politicized songs” championed the concept of *música popular*, music that was produced by artists who used native instruments to reproduce traditional melodies and rhythms from the rural (read, authentic) countryside, though ironically many if not most of these performers were themselves from the urban middle classes. *Música popular* was meant to contrast with *música pop*, which was attacked for its explicit commercialism and thus identified with urban (read, transfigured) cultural practices. To some extent, our description of the new music as celebrating the “rural” is an overgeneralization intended to underscore a point; many instances of *nueva canción* songs, those of Silvio Rodríguez (of Cuba) and Piero (of Argentina), for example, were actually meditations on modernity and urban life. Still, it is fair to say that the heroic cultural vision of the Left invoked the full recovery and protection of rural, “native” culture as a bulwark against the onslaught of urban, “foreign” culture (that is, culture linked to capitalist consumption). Given the music’s explicit links with a utopian ideology, and its promotion (sometimes institutionally) by left-wing regimes (viz., Luis Echeverría in Mexico [1971–76]; Salvador Allende in Chile [1970–73]; General Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru [1968–75]; and Fidel Castro in Cuba [1959–present]), it was all but impossible for socially conscious youth to disregard it. Indeed, the proponents of this new music were all too successful in achieving their goal of pitting *música popular* against *música pop*, in the process putting enormous pressure on young people to embrace the former and reject the latter. For instance, Julia Palacios, whose essay with Teresa Estrada on the history of women rockers in Mexico appears in this volume, ruefully recalls how in the early 1970s she almost threw away her entire collection of rock records, not only because she felt pressured to do so (by her socially conscious peers), but also because she herself had come to believe that her political convictions required her to do so. Indeed, Eric Zolov argues in his essay on La Onda Chicana that Mexico’s rock countercultural movement of the early 1970s disappeared after the Avándaro music festival, in large part because the middle class, exposed to the strong leftist critique of rock as cultural imperialism (a criticism that would be sustained by the incoming populist regime of Echeverría), had come to disparage even home-grown rock. In effect, the political song movement itself became a hegemonic construct, one that later generations would confront—musically, if not also ideologically. Walescka Pino-Ojeda addresses precisely this issue in her essay, which asks why young Chilean rockers in the 1990s rejected the “*charanguito*”—a dispar-

aging reference to the small acoustic guitar popularized by Chile's *nueva canción* performers as a symbol of liberation across the Americas. For a new generation of Chilean youth, the *charango* had become a symbol of cultural dogmatism.

Beginning in the late 1960s, in response to the ideological backlash mounted by the Left against rock, some Latin American rockers sought to strategically reposition themselves, by incorporating elements of political song and by attempting to redefine the rock genre so as to demonstrate that it was not necessarily opposed to a revolutionary paradigm. By adopting syncretic musical forms, rock artists (some more successfully than others) tried to show that a "dialogue" between rock and politicized song was possible, both at the aesthetic and ideological level. The Chilean group Los Jaivas, for example, fused indigenous instruments and rock styles, creating an original variant of rock whose sound helped bridge the polemic that separated rock from political song. Even in Cuba, as Deborah Pacini Hernandez and Reebee Garofalo show, there were efforts to create a syncretic form that would embrace both the political and the popular. There, the Grupo Experimental Sonora del ICAIC (which included the musicians Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, who would later become renowned promoters of Cuba's Nueva Trova movement) insisted, despite the official opprobrium of the Castro regime, that revolutionary music could and should experiment freely using all available styles, including rock—and that such music could still be socially progressive.

These indications that the polemical divide that had plagued rock since the early 1960s was being transcended, coincided, to a greater or lesser extent, with the transition to repressive military regimes across the region. For the same reasons the Left had supported the political song movement, the new military governments now viewed political song as subversive. While the few remaining populist-revolutionary regimes (Cuba, Mexico, Peru) continued to support political song for their own political ends, elsewhere in Latin America the movement came under attack and went underground. Most notoriously, in 1973, the musician Víctor Jara had his hands broken before being executed by the Chilean military and the *charango* (as well as other native instruments) was virtually proscribed.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, despite their progressive intentions, proponents of the political song movement of the late 1960s and 1970s did not take into account the ideological implications of celebrating (and romanticizing) Latin American indigenous music and culture. They could not transcend one of the region's most troubling historical legacies—that of "whitening."<sup>21</sup> In their eagerness to champion marginalized native peoples, political song artists tended to overlook Latin America's African musical heritage, thus perpetuating preexisting

racial hierarchies that had long privileged *mestizaje* over blackness.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, blackness was largely displaced in musical representations of the pan-Latin American imaginary that was heralded in the political song movement (once again, there are important exceptions to this generalization, notably the music of Pablo Milanés, who is himself Afro-Cuban, and that of Gilberto Gil, who is Afro-Brazilian). For example, the Left's reification of Andean music as the embodiment of a commitment to indigenous political struggle typically ignored the popularity of African-derived dance musics from the Caribbean basin, such as *cumbia*.<sup>23</sup> *Cumbia* (which paradoxically contains indigenous influences), along with other Caribbean dance musics such as merengue, was perceived as "party" music and therefore unsuitable for transmitting the intellectual and artistic seriousness of political song's cultural and revolutionary project. Similarly, in the Dominican Republic, the Nueva Canción-inspired group Expresión Joven incorporated the Andean panpipe into their music, but not the accordion, an instrument that was integral to the country's most representative popular musical style, merengue. Ironically, many practitioners and fans of popular dance styles, such as salsa and merengue, held equally critical views of rock; they and their political-song counterparts both used the same anti-imperialist language to denounce it. However, in the prevailing climate, even salsa and merengue could be perceived as problematic since these musical forms were at the same time patently commercial and primarily associated with urban, working-class black festivity. All of this is notwithstanding the efforts of such Nueva Canción-inspired *salseros* as Rubén Blades, who sought to infuse a greater degree of political content into salsa.

It is a sad coincidence that Latin America's historical predisposition to privilege whiteness by associating it with higher-class cultural values, and thus with modernity, coincided with a similar process of racial "whitening" of the rock 'n' roll genre in the United States. As previously touched upon in this introductory essay, in the United States this process was responsible for the transfiguration of rock 'n' roll into just plain "rock," a process that was accelerated in the 1960s, owing to the innovations of Bob Dylan and the Beatles, whose compositions helped rock achieve the status of "Art." This new development established an important distinction between music for dancing and music for listening; its attendant mind/body split was further reinforced when rockers began to use hallucinogenic drugs. In this sense, rock music was situated in opposition to soul music (for example, the Stax and Motown sounds), which was clearly music for dancing. Art rock took rock into a symphonic and highly intellectualized (read, European) direction, separating it still further from its African American roots. If rock was Art, soul was entertainment, which relegated it to a lower level in the hierarchy of cultural practices and

excluded it from serious consideration by the press, both in the United States and Latin America.<sup>24</sup> In Brazil, in the 1970s, as Bryan McCann discusses in his essay, black and mulatto youth favored African American soul and funk, whereas their white counterparts were experimenting largely with avant-garde rock musical styles that followed in the wake of the Tropicália movement. (It should be noted, however, that because of the influence, especially, of Gilberto Gil, an Afro-Brazilian founder of the Tropicália movement, African-derived rhythms—including samba and reggae—were in fact integrated into various aspects of the Tropicália repertoire; Gil would later play a key role in the legitimization of Brazilian funk and soul.<sup>25</sup>) It was the Tropicália style that came to “represent” the Brazilian countercultural rock vanguard throughout the hemisphere, whereas Brazilian soul continues to be denigrated by rock critics and excluded from the nation’s rock historiography (and musical canon). During the 1970s, then, both Latin American art rock music and political song effectively subordinated African-derived music and dance forms, particularly in countries where whites, mestizos, and Amerindians constituted the majority.

By the late 1970s, those rock bands that had survived the earlier period, as well as those bands that had distanced themselves (for whatever reasons) from the polemic over rock versus political song, now became the vehicle for youth resistance to political as well as social repression. In authoritarian contexts, such as in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Guatemala, bands’ lyrics were usually not politically explicit but rather contained encoded narratives of opposition, often expressed metaphorically, to avoid military censorship. For example, during the Dirty War in Argentina (1976–82), “Canción de Alicia en el País” (Alice’s Song in the Land) by the rock band Serú Girán conveyed the idea that, under the military junta, “wonder” had been supplanted by “terror.” In this same period, the very name of the Guatemalan rock band Alux Nahual conveyed their implicit identification with that nation’s Mayan population, at a time when the Guatemalan military was engaged in a scorched-earth policy against Amerindians suspected of abetting the guerrillas. The lyrics of “Hombres de Maíz,” a song which romanticizes rural life, are otherwise benign, but they contain a single, veiled reference to the civil war that was engulfing Guatemala: “I don’t care for the government / or for the revolutionaries / but if this is what it is to be alive / I’d sooner die while singing.”<sup>26</sup> In Argentina, by the 1980s, in a process of self-identification by rock critics and fans alike, bands such as Serú Girán were seen as constituting a coherent national movement, which came to be referred to as *rock nacional*.<sup>27</sup>

This process of “nationalizing” rock occurred simultaneously elsewhere in Latin America in the same period, although in different ways. The common

denominators, however, were threefold. First, rock musicians began using original Spanish or Portuguese lyrics. Second, they began to incorporate local youth slang—reflecting the increasingly diversified class origins of rock musicians and their publics. Third, rock bands began adopting local and national topics into their songs. In order to appreciate the significance of this shift at the textual level—a musical shift would also occur, as we explain below—it is important to understand that the choice of language had been politicized from the moment rock ‘n’ roll arrived in Latin America. In the early days, a combination of marketing considerations, nationalist sentiment, and a lack of familiarity with English had led to the rise of the *refrito* (from the verb *refreír*, “to re fry”). The term was originally used in Mexico to describe the production of Spanish-language covers of imported hits, but it could easily be used to describe similar practices throughout the region. In Brazil, the media baptized the fledgling rock ‘n’ roll/youth movement the *Jovem Guarda* (Young Guard), while in Spanish-America it was generally referred to as *La Nueva Onda/Ola* (the New Wave). Beginning in the mid-1960s, however, as rock ‘n’ roll evolved into rock in the wake of the British Invasion, Latin American rock musicians (and their fans) concluded that “authentic” rock needed to be sung in English—that only English conveyed the essential feeling of the rock original.<sup>28</sup> (An important exception is the case of Brazil, where in 1964 Ronnie Cord inaugurated a *fase nacional* with his original song “Rua Augusta,” sung in Portuguese; this trend was later cemented by the *Tropicália* movement after 1967.<sup>29</sup>) The shift to incorporating English (Mexican groups, for example, would at one point write exclusively in English) naturally fed into the indictment of rock by its nationalist critics.

Nevertheless, the politics of language choice was always more complex than the cultural imperialism thesis might suggest. For example, rock musicians of *La Onda Chicana* (Mexico’s countercultural movement of the late 1960s–early 1970s) employed English to endow their music with a legitimacy they believed had been lacking from the earlier period of *refrito* rock. An alternative manifestation of the politics of language choice occurred during this same period in Cuba, where some young rockers used the original English-language lyrics of foreign tunes to establish the authenticity of their performances. By singing in English they were simultaneously showing their capability (and courage) to break through the cultural blockade, imposed from without by the United States and from within by the island’s Communist regime, which forbade the use of such lyrics as imperialist. This pattern of adopting English, within a variety of local contexts and with varying political and cultural implications, held true for many countries.

By the end of the decade of the 1960s, however, most Latin American

bands were breaking away from a dependency on this linguistic artifice. Pioneers in this trajectory away from English included Luis Alberto Spinetta's group Almendra in Argentina (1967–70), and the group Three Souls in My Mind (later, the TRI) in Mexico (after 1971). The move toward Spanish also brought with it the use of local vernacular, which reflected the increasingly diverse class composition of rock musicians and their fans. As Pablo Semán, Pablo Vila, and Cecilia Benedetti show in their essay, in Argentina the lyrics of *rock nacional* included the *lunfardo* street slang of the Argentine lower classes. In Mexico, Héctor Castillo Berthier points out, such groups as the TRI led the way in introducing the *caló* (slang) of the *chavos banda* (economically marginalized youth of the capital) to rock. Ironically, in spite of its new emphasis on Spanish or Portuguese lyrics and on local themes, in its early stages *rock nacional* often sounded like a close replica of its U.S. and British equivalents. Recovering indigenous musical forms had been central to the ideological mission of political song, but what made *rock nacional* "national" was not necessarily expressed at the level of musical style. Indeed, *rock nacional's* musical aesthetic was often closer to the formerly demonized sound of imported rock. Its musical template could range from symphonic rock, as with Guatemala's Alux Nahual (see the essay by Paulo Alvarado), to Colombia's punk-rock group La Pestilencia (see the essay by Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste), to the New Wave sound of Argentina's Soda Stereo. Although their music often duplicated the sound of foreign rock, these new bands had clearly advanced beyond their predecessors' direct emulation and dependency on covering foreign hits: now performing original, musically and lyrically sophisticated songs in vernacular Spanish, they could no longer be simplistically characterized as mere imitators of foreign models.

The rise of *rock nacional* also coincided with the advent of neoliberal economic policies, initiated during the 1980s, which set in motion the systematic privatization of national infrastructures throughout Latin America. These policies, largely imposed by U.S. and international lending agencies, signaled the collapse of the nationalist projects (encompassed under the rubric of ISI) that had defined the economic policy of Latin American governments since the 1930s. In addition, this radical economic transition was accompanied by the return, after decades of military rule, of democratically elected governments all across Latin America. In this new environment, local rock not only thrived but for the first time also began to receive open approval by leftist intellectuals. These former critics, who had once shunned rock for its presumed cultural imperialism, now embraced *rock nacional* as an authentic movement of cultural resistance to the devastating economic marginalization and political repression that was accompanying the structural shift toward neoliberalism.

Abetting this intellectual rapprochement was a concurrent shift in academic discourse toward a reappraisal of the term *cultura popular*. Once used to refer exclusively to rural cultures, the term was now broadened to incorporate urban cultural practices as well, including those which were mass-mediated.<sup>30</sup> Latin American rock was now seen as a legitimate form of expressive culture, akin to literature and cinema, which clearly opened up new possibilities for narrating and performing nationality. The fact that intellectuals (and music critics) were ready to recognize this reality thus heralded an important new era in the legitimization of locally produced rock as an authentic form of cultural expression.

By the late 1980s, the middle and upper classes had lost their exclusive claim to rock. Rock's fan base was now increasingly diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, and class. This new generation of rock musicians and their fans had come of age listening to the *rock nacional* genre—both locally produced and imported from other Latin American nations, especially Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. No longer interested in the outdated polemic over rock's "politics," they rejected the heroic discourse of an earlier revolutionary moment. Musically and lyrically, they enacted a politics of *anti*-politics, repudiating at the level of sound and performance not only the old hegemonic ideology of the socialist Left but the ascendant ideology of neoliberal capitalism as well. The disintegration of the Soviet Union (and in its wake, the increasing dollarization of Cuba's economy), on the one hand, had rendered the goal of communist revolution obsolete, while the rise of neoliberalism had created severe social disruptions that were disproportionately shouldered by the poor. As the title of the 1989 Colombian punk-rock film *Rodrigo D No Future* signaled, there would be "no future" for marginal sectors of society—that is, for the majority of Latin America's urban and rural populations.

Unlike their predecessors, this new generation of rockers assumed their right to listen to and make rock music, whether in Spanish, Portuguese, or English, whether domestically produced or imported, and whether incorporating "foreign" formulas or "traditional" musical elements. Like the Puerto Rican rockers discussed by Jorge Arévalo Mateus, rockers throughout Latin America were saying, in essence: We have a right to express ourselves without being socially ostracized, accused of being a *vendepatria* (a "sell-out"), and, more fundamentally, without having our heads cracked by the police. Totally uninterested in participating in the construction of a master narrative of the nation as a uniform imagined community (as pursued by the political song movement, for example), they put into practice a more flexible and inclusive discourse—one in which they actually claimed some protagonism—that articulated the complex (if often violent) textures of *lo cotidiano* (everyday life) in urban Latin

America. Examples of such rockers include Rodrigo González, who is discussed by Héctor Castillo Berthier in his essay on Mexico, and Patricio Rey y Sus Redonditos de Ricota, members of the *rock chabón* movement that Semán, Vila, and Benedetti discuss in their chapter on Argentina. Many of these groups employed a punk and heavy-metal aesthetic, as well as a “do it yourself” approach to making music, reflecting not only their marginalized economic and political situation but also their limited access to production and distribution facilities.

During the 1990s, as Latin American governments sought to reinsert their nations into global circuits of capital, culture, and media—transformations collectively recognized as “globalization”—they found themselves newly open to outside cultural and economic influences. In response, some rock bands turned inward, incorporating popular and indigenous musical traditions that originated within Latin America and that would distinguish them within the global marketplace. Rock groups such as Café Tacuba (Mexico), Los Fabulosos Cadillacs (Argentina), Aterciopelados (Colombia), and Los Amigos Invisibles (Venezuela), for example, all freely incorporated regional genres and transnational styles as diverse as salsa, tango, *cumbia*, *vallenato*, reggae, ska, rap, and hip-hop.<sup>31</sup> This trend toward hybridity was facilitated by new local media infrastructures, which were connected to (but not dependent upon) the dominant transnational cultural industries, and which, in turn, opened up new markets for these musical expressions. Paradoxically, while this eclecticism did indeed mark such music as “local” and distinguish it from rock that originated elsewhere around the globe, it simultaneously served to internationalize the groups’ fan bases, as consumers from widely disparate regions of the Americas and beyond heard, understood, and embraced these novel sonic mixtures. As a result, many of these groups came to enjoy a global exposure unimagined by their predecessors. But, more importantly, as was not the case in earlier decades, when rock was produced and consumed in isolation from other musical genres, these new musical forms articulated both local and transnational styles and thus could be understood as truly cosmopolitan—a cosmopolitanism no longer narrowly associated with a triumphant U.S. consumer culture but, rather, one which retained a place for the local within the global.

Significantly, this new strain of hybrid rock, by incorporating diasporic musics from within and beyond the nation, also opened up the possibility for new ways of re-imagining the region’s African heritage, which had long been undervalued or ignored. For decades, dance musics from the predominantly black Caribbean basin and Brazil—for example, *cumbia*, salsa, samba, and merengue, generically referred to as *música tropical*—had circulated throughout the Americas and had held their own against rock, particularly among the

lower classes.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, salsa in particular was perceived by many Latin/o Americans as a bulwark against the encroachments of rock.<sup>33</sup> Given the widespread perception among middle-class rockers of dance music as music of the lower classes—literally “darker” and thus less sophisticated—it should come as no surprise that the audiences for *música tropical* tended to remain distinct from those for rock. The *rockero/cocolo* split, described by Arévalo Mateus, was an outgrowth of such perceptions. This distancing held true until the mid-1980s, when the impact of lower-class musicians and fans whose musical *habitus* had always included *música tropical* finally began to be reflected in rock music throughout Latin America. Thus, by the 1990s, rock was not only consumed among the working class, but working-class preferences for dance musics also began to seep into the hardcore aesthetics of such music as punk and heavy metal, reflecting a new musical (and narrative) sensibility. Indeed, one might venture to say that the relationship of contemporary Latin American rock to popular dance styles, and its blending of these aesthetics, go a long way toward explaining what makes Latin American rock Latin American.

Despite the Latinization of rock via the use of Spanish or Portuguese vernacular language and themes, and the incorporation of regional/national musical aesthetics, *rock en español* has not fit easily within the pan-national category of “Latin music.” The terms *rock en español* and *rock en tu idioma* first appeared in Latin America during the 1980s as part of a strategy by regional subsidiaries of the transnational recording industry, who hoped to distinguish a local rock product within a growing market for popular music. Today, well-established recording industries located in major urban centers throughout the Americas—Mexico City, Caracas, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, and Rio de Janeiro, as well as New York City, Los Angeles, and, more recently, Miami—constitute multiple nodes of a transnational circuit of production and distribution, and are led by Spanish- and Portuguese-language media conglomerates such as Univisión, Telemundo, Globo, and Venevisión and supported largely with Latin American capital. These conglomerates generate most of their content in—and primarily for—audiences in major urban hubs such as Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and Caracas. And while these conglomerates maintain important offices in (now Latinized) Miami, as well as in Los Angeles (where much Mexican and Chicano/Latino rock is recorded),<sup>34</sup> it is important to note that they develop their media strategies with Latin Americans in mind, as does MTV Latin America and its Latin American equivalent, HTV (also based in Miami). If Latin Americans now “share the power” with the U.S. culture industry, this fact does not obviate the problem of exclusion and erasure. Instead, what we find are certain sounds and images that have been elevated as the dominant tropes of *latinidad*, or “Latinness,” which supposedly encompass

the diversity of Latin Americans and Latinos.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, as Alvarado points out, in this construction the musical practices of Latinos residing within the United States are virtually excluded, as are those from smaller countries such as Guatemala.

Thus, while Miami's growing importance as a music center continues to facilitate economic and cultural flows along a North-South axis, the larger picture reflects a multidirectionality that is far more complex. On the one hand, we find that the different media conglomerates are quite attentive to local music scenes. On the other hand, the marginal place to which bands in under-represented geographic regions are relegated points to a politics of exclusion, an observation made by Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste in his analysis of David Byrne's "discovery" and marketing of the Colombian rock group Bloque de Búsqueda.

In the face of these problems, the coalescence of domestic rock scenes has also forged new social spaces and created alternative narratives of belonging. In repressive societies, where the state seeks to monopolize political discourse (either through authoritarian practices, outright military rule, or the narrow participation of a limited sector in democratic politics), rock has served as a vehicle for participatory action and a site for expressing a political discourse or agency that is either too dangerous or impossible to express through other means. However, even the most apolitical, commercialized rockers have presumed—demanded—the right to speak (to narrate through song and gesture) and to associate (to occupy space through performance and dance). Rockers have assumed their right to belong to the nation and thus to have their voices heard as citizens.

What remains problematic, however, is the way that self-conscious youth music, with all its abstract cries for freedom, liberty, and justice, and its critique of power relations, can often end up reproducing conservative, or status quo, embodiments of masculinity.<sup>36</sup> Women have always been present in Latin American rock. In fact, the very first "rock 'n' roller" in Mexico was a woman (Gloria Ríos), and women have played a central role in that nation's rock history. In short, rock created new possibilities for female empowerment, as well as enabling a critique of the dominant patriarchal hierarchy. The simple act of attending a rock concert unchaperoned, for example, or of using fashion to assert an act of stylistic rebellion, indicates the presence of a profound paradigmatic shift occurring in society. The essay by Palacios and Estrada, discussing the history of *rockeras* in Mexico, demonstrates this important aspect. Yet the sounds of rock, its genres, performance spaces, and performance gestures, have always been defined in masculine terms, and these have seldom been examined critically. Michelle Habel-Pallán addresses this question in her essay

on how Chicana punk-rockers enacted new, less limiting gender identities in East Los Angeles.

Looking back on the past fifty years of rock music in Latin America, what conclusions can we draw? The essays in this volume only begin to scratch the surface of the complexities involved in understanding rock's trajectory in Latin America, although we do believe that collectively they illuminate a number of themes that are significant for rock studies both in the United States and in Latin America. For one, any lingering doubts about whether rock is an exclusively U.S. phenomenon—the idea that developments in rock that take place beyond the Anglo world are merely imitations of the “original” rock product—should be laid to rest once and for all. These essays confirm the validity of local rock projects, while also demonstrating the commonalities and disjunctions between them. Second, conventional notions of a U.S.–Latin American cultural axis that is defined by U.S. cultural hegemony no longer hold true (if they ever did): music, images, and ideas now circulate via multiple nodal points of production and reception, severely complicating any simplistic dichotomy of a North-South divide. Moreover, there are peripheries within the “core,” and “cores” within the periphery, and these latter cores also exercise their own forms of hegemony (such as with the preeminence of Argentine and Mexican rock, to the exclusion of other national groups). Finally, it is clear that while rock may be impossible to define, it is quintessentially hybrid and characterized both by its musical porosity and semiotic flexibility. It is these qualities that have made rock the music of choice for generations of young people from widely varying socioeconomic classes and cultural contexts throughout the Americas. They have found in rock an effective and powerful vehicle for articulating their particular experiences and visions of modernity—and postmodernity. We hope this volume contributes to the legitimization of Latin American rock as a cultural practice and as a serious object of scholarly study, not only in the United States, where it still remains outside of the academic canon (as well as off the English-only mainstream airwaves), but especially in Latin America, where in spite of an emerging corpus of research and personal memoirs, it still bears the stigma of decades of condemnation. Rock, we insist, is not a crime.

## **La Onda Chicana**

### **Mexico's Forgotten Rock Counterculture**

**ERIC ZOLOV**

**M**exican rock music has come a long way since the late 1960s, when the first indications of a truly original movement (La Onda Chicana) became evident. Contemporary groups such as Café Tacuba, Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del Quinto Patio, Molotov, Tijuana No, El Gran Silencio, and others have all achieved what their predecessors only dreamed of, namely, gaining respectability as part of a musical vanguard both within Mexico and abroad. Today, moreover, Mexican rock is an integral aspect of left-wing student politics and has gained more than a grudging respect from intellectuals, not to mention politicians. The question of rock as “cultural imperialism”—a rallying cry of the Latin American Left in the late 1960s—is no longer relevant, which has as much to do with the impact of a postmodernist discourse on the social sciences as it does with the fact that today’s rock seems light-years away from that of La Onda Chicana. Yet, strangely, although this earlier movement paved the way for today’s diverse and vibrant rock scene, a collective memory of La Onda Chicana has been all but lost. For a number of reasons, La Onda Chicana marks a period which is literally difficult to access, and which, at any rate, many seem eager to forget.

This essay explores three important themes related to this formative period in Mexican rock, which will hopefully help to highlight both the similarities and uniqueness of Mexico’s rock history in the Americas. The first theme I examine is the irrelevancy of native rock to the 1968 student movement, an event that shook the political and cultural foundations of Mexican society.