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SOC 264: Latinxs in the South

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Role of Music in Southern Latinxs Scene

In looking at the immigration of Latinxs in the American South, the legal aspects of the ordeal are often the focal point of discussion. However, it is important to discuss the experience of the Latinx immigrant in the south. In particular, how do they assimilate into the culture of the American South? Is assimilation the goal or do Latinxs wish to maintain their own identity? I chose to focus on the role of music in the cultural experience of Latinxs. In particular, I will take a closer look at the role of music in the Latinxs' experience in the southern cities of Houston and Charlotte.

One of the early examples of the musical influence of Latinxs in the south can be seen with the influx of Mexican musicians who came to the 1884 World's Fair and subsequently remained in New Orleans. The Mexican musicians who remained in New Orleans were widely accepted by the city and went on to greatly influence the city's cultural scene.¹ Fast forward to the twenty-first century, and we can still look at the influence of Latinx music in the cultural identities of cities as well as in the Latinx populations themselves.

Houston, Texas lies near the southern border, and therefore is home to one of the largest and most diverse Latinx populations in the United States. The city is home to large numbers of Mexican Americans, Costa Ricans, Guatemalans, Caribbeans, and other South and Central

¹ Corazon de Dixie: Chapter 1 - Mexicans as Europeans: Mexican Nationalism and Assimilation in New Orleans, 1910 - 1939

American communities. In a study performed by University of Houston sociologists², various Houston Latinx groups were observed and interrogated to see the role of music in constructing self-image and cultural identity in a sprawling metropolitan city such as Houston. The study used a three-fold approach to organize its findings: scene, idioculture, and place.

The scene, according to Irwin's 1977 concept, is a framework for interpreting cultural circumstances such as Latino music. In looking at the scene, the artists and audiences are analyzed as well as the ecological locations themselves, such as clubs or recording studios. Further, in 2008 Silver, Clark, and Rothfield argued that in music scenes, “collections of amenities and peoples serve to foster certain shared values and tastes, certain ways of relating to one another and legitimating what one is doing (or not doing).” An idioculture is defined by how groups develop and maintain a local culture. It involves a becoming of self. In a city such as Houston with rapidly changing social and cultural environments, the notion of individual identity can be elusive. Thus, it is in the establishment of a sense of place that the rewarding aspects of Latinx music in a city such as Houston come to fruition.

A good example of the impact of music on Latinx cultural identity in Houston can be found in the rise of rock en Español music in the twenty-first century. Rock en Español can be defined as a movement to create rock music in Spanish so as to create a connection to the Latinx artists and audiences. The followers of this movement, *rockeros*, feel no need to hide their ethnicity or to follow the accepted preferences of Anglo audiences. This scene in Houston is now known by locals as “el movimiento”, or the movement. “El movimiento” has picked up momentum and become very trendy, extending its venues to smaller coffeehouses and restaurants

² *An Ethnography of Emerging Latino Music Scenes* by Kotarba, J, Fackler, J., and Nowotny, K.

that attract Latinxs from nearby universities such as Rice University. A big theme in rock en Español songs is their political nature. Some bands focus on and denounce the troubles of undocumented Latinxs in the United States and the political uprising in Chiapas in Mexico.

The audiences of rock en Español venues are mostly third-generation Mexican Americans who are completely bilingual and are mostly in their twenties attending college or working. At a rock en Español concert, the importance of the Spanish language is obvious. In a time where young Latinxs striving to find a place in American society may be expected to become predominantly English speakers, rock en Español provides an avenue for pride and thorough use of the Spanish language, connecting the audience with the roots of their parents. “Scene participants use the scene as a cultural tool in various ways. For instance, although it may appear that rock en Español blocks assimilation through an insistence on Spanish-language use, it in fact functions as an efficient resource for upwardly mobile, third-generation Latinos to become American in the twenty-first century by creating a music that conforms to the sensibilities of both cultures...Paradoxically, the rockeros’ rejection of their parents’ tejano and norteno music in favor of rock and roll is not a rejection of their parents but an effort to share their parents’ world on terms that fit with being an American.”

Latinx music plays an important role in Houston in another scene. In Houston, the supporters of the city’s Major League Soccer Team, the Houston Dynamo, sing in a style that is distinctively Latin. Unlike other sports, soccer is a sport in which the atmosphere of the event is completely driven by the fans, specifically the singing and chanting of the fans. In this way, supporters of the Dynamo are all seen as equals among each other within the stadium regardless of ethnicity or belief. Supporters of the Houston Dynamo sing in a Latin style that adopts mostly

Argentinean and Mexican styles of soccer music and chants. Each game, there are “chant leaders” who lead all of the supporters in various songs such as the popular Argentinean song “Que Calor” by the salsa group Supermerkado. The songs are often accompanied by instruments such as bass drums, trombones, saxophones, and hand clapping. The singing of these songs, including the anthem “Soy de Houston”, strikes a narrative of camaraderie and mutual respect between the Anglo, white Americans and the Latinx communities in Houston.

The impact of the local Latinx music scene can also be looked at in the city of Charlotte. In his dissertation at the City University of New York, Samuel Byrd lays out how the Latinx music scene in Charlotte illustrates a social and demographical divide among the city. In an interview with Byrd, Juan Miguel, a drummer of the popular band La Rua stated a change in Charlotte being, “a city that was not very diverse to a really, really diverse and dynamic city.”³ He believed that this change was due to the hard work of people like himself who acted as “ambassadors” of Latinx culture to bridge the gap between the native-born Southerners and the Latinx community.

However, there were many problems with this attempt at bridging the communities. We can see how location of venues greatly impacts the audience of a show. Members of Bakalao Stars, a well-known Charlotte Latinx band, have stated that their fans from Charlotte’s Eastside who are undocumented are reluctant to travel to see the band when they perform in clubs in the NoDa neighborhood of Charlotte as this is an Intown neighborhood, and they fear deportation if they are caught at the concert. On the other hand, when Bakalao Stars has played at venues on the Eastside such as Skandalos, their Intown crowd does not attend due to fears of crime in what

³ Making Music in Latino Charlotte: Politics and Community Formation in a Globalizing City by Samuel Kyle Byrd

they believe to be a dangerous neighborhood. Thus, the Latinx music scene has experienced difficulty, as it has exposed a social and racial divide among its followers.

Music has the ability to play a significant role in Latinx communities in American cities. “El movimiento” of rock en Español in Houston has created a united community of young, (mostly third generation) Latinxs. Members of this movement often share common ideas about political policy that often involve the necessity to help undocumented Latinxs. These groups also share common family histories and customs. Thus, a greater sense of camaraderie and cultural identity is enacted within this Houston music scene. This camaraderie is extended by the supporters of the Houston Dynamo, many of whom are Latinx, who join in song to support their team, thus bridging social and racial divides, at least for the length of the soccer matches. The narrative appears to be different in Charlotte. While the Latinx music scene is prevalent and has united Latinx groups within the city, a cultural and social divide can be seen in the audiences at venues in different areas of the city. In both cities, Latinx musicians have the capability of uniting the Latinx communities. The subsequent issue lies in the way in which these Latinx communities assimilate into Southern culture as well as how accepting the white Southern communities will be.

Works Cited

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