

# File under: Post-Mexico

Josh Kun

Café Tacuba, **VALE CALLAMPA** (MCA, 2003)

Café Tacuba, **CUATRO CAMINOS** (MCA, 2003)

Jaguares, **EL PRIMER INSTINTO** (BMG, 2002)

Jumbo, **TELEPARQUE** (BMG, 2003)

El Gran Silencio, **SUPER RIDDIM INTERNACIONAL, VOL. 1** (EMI Latin, 2003)

Nortec Collective, **THE TIJUANA SESSIONS, VOL. 1** (Palm, 2002)

Various artists, **MANOS ARRIBA!** (Bungalow, 2003)

Murcof, **MARTES** (Static, 2002)

When the transnationalization of the economy and the culture situates us at the crossroads of multiple traditions and cultures, to limit our options to dependence or nationalism, modernization or local traditionality, is to simplify the actual dilemmas of our history.

—Néstor García Canclini

The video for one of Café Tacuba's recent singles, "Déjate Caer," opens with the band's lead singer Rubén Albarrán leaning backwards over a panorama of Mexico City, his face cloaked in a black rooster mask. You can't tell if he's falling or flying or just teetering there, floating high above the chaotic metropolis that first gave birth to the band back in the late 1980s. The shot offers a near-perfect metaphor for the music that Tacuba has been making ever since—complex and style-swapping rock that, while rooted in the daily hustle and manic cultural collisions of Mexico City life, has always flown above its traffic jams and plazas into a worldly sky with no national limits. This inside-outside tug of war is even present in the song itself. Tacuba may make "Déjate Caer" their own, and with help from the video may give it a distinctly chilango slant, but this soundtrack to a new vision of Mexico City

originally comes not from Mexico but from Chile and the Chilean band Los Tres. Tacuba's take on "Déjate Caer" is the highlight of *Vale Callampa*, an EP featuring nothing but Tacuba covers of Los Tres songs.

That a band synonymous with pushing the boundaries of Mexican rock convention would record an entire album of Chilean songs should come as no surprise. Tacuba has always made listeners think hard about what it means to be a Mexican band. Though Tacuba's debut album was released by Warner Mexico, *Vale Callampa* and their latest, *Cuatro Caminos*, are both out on MCA with worldwide distribution. This band of former graphic design students who were discovered playing a book fair on the outskirts of Mexico City is now firmly rooted in the globalized channels of the recording industry, their albums receiving simultaneous release and promotion on both sides of the border.

Following the moves of "guacarock" pioneers Botellita de Jerez, Tacuba was part of a new wave of Mexican rock bands comfortable with featuring Mexican popular culture in their takes on Anglo rock style. Though they used drum machines instead of drummers and even threw a melodica into their scrappy post-punk style mix, Tacuba has always made music that strives to participate in international conversations while being identifiably Mexican. They referenced Mexican cultural history, wore huaraches in their videos, played acoustic contrabajo and acoustic jarana guitar, spliced son jarocho, boleros, and banda into punk, disco, and classical, and sang songs about the metro and falling in love with a chica banda. Their belief that they could be avant-garde without ever having to leave home—which they spelled out on *Re* (1994)—has made them a favorite of like-minded music boundary-pushers throughout the Americas. They've worked with the Kronos Quartet, toured with Beck and translated his "Jackass" into a mariachi jam session in front of an audience of U.S. Latinos who have both artists in their car stereos, worked on every album with their L.A.-based Argentinean producer Gustavo Santaolalla, and, on *Cuatro Caminos*, enlisted Flaming Lips producer Dave Fridmann for a couple of tracks.

*Cuatro Caminos* is Tacuba's most eloquent statement yet of Mexican rock's vibrant translocality, the way it uses local experience and local idioms to create a musical conversation that is thoroughly transnational in style and audience. "When we started, we were very focused on giving voice to our city," Albarrán has said. "But with the passing of time, we had the chance to know other countries and other music and now we are not as focused as we once were on speaking only about what happens in our city. We want to be able to look outside and then look back inside with new

vision. But in the end, we continue being who we are, products of Mexico City” (Kun 2003).

What Albarrán explains (and what Café Tacuba performs) is a musical version of what the Mexican anthropologist Roger Bartra has described as “the post-Mexican condition”—a post-NAFTA reconsideration of the basis of Mexican national identity and a re-visioning of Mexico as a multicultural constellation of multiple traditions that do not necessarily add up to a singular, integrated whole. In a 1997 essay, Bartra critiqued sociologists who ignored the massive changes affecting Mexican civil society and Mexican economic participation as globalization began shaping a new Mexico, one quite different from the revolutionary national model that had dominated social thought since the beginning of the twentieth century. “I am convinced that we are faced with the problem of constructing postnational forms of identity,” Bartra wrote. “I think we can speak of a post-Mexican condition, not only because the NAFTA era has plunged us into so-called globalization, but primarily because the crisis of the political system has put an end to specifically ‘Mexican’ forms of legitimation and identity” (2003, 47).

In Mexico, nowhere has this paradigm shift been played out more plainly than in the world of Mexican popular music, most specifically in the overlapping worlds of Mexican alternative music—rock, electronica, hip hop. Eric Zolov, José Luis Paredes Pacho, and Rubén Martínez have all written of Mexican rock’s negotiations with Mexican national culture, examining it (respectively) as a tool in the building of a Mexican counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, both within and against Mexican national society (Zolov 1999); as a force of subterranean resistance, social protest, and subaltern dissonance in the 1980s (Paredes Pacho 1992); and as a national language in motion with the migratory flows of culture and community across the U.S.-Mexico border (Martínez 1992). One of Mexican rock’s most influential and beloved figures, Saúl Hernández—leader of Jaguares, whose *El Primer Instinto* offers a sweeping career retrospective of the band through extraordinary acoustic renditions of their biggest hits—has even echoed Bartra’s claims directly by describing his band as “new Mexicans” because they carve their sound from national sources but would have no final product without elements and inspiration from abroad. “We have all learned that we are the new Mexicans,” Hernández has said. “We have our roots, we have our culture, but we learn about other people, other countries, speak in other languages. We grew up with Led Zeppelin, but we also have realized that one bolero is as strong as ‘Stairway to Heaven.’ Both have passion, both are powerful” (2003).

Jaguares is named for the ancient Mayan lord of the underworld. The band they grew out of, Caifanes, took its name from the street toughs with Vaseline-slicked hair who hung out on the corners of Hernández's native Colonia Guerrero barrio in Mexico City. Yet for all of this local and national grounding, the band's first hit single, "La Negra Tomasa," is a cover of the Cuban song "Bilongo"; "Matenme Porque Me Muero" is a bid for Anglo rock legitimacy; and Hernández gives David Bowie's "Life on Mars" the credit for inspiring him to be a songwriter. *El Primer Instinto* features guest appearances by legendary Mexican artists La Sonora Santanera and Eduardo Hernández (of Los Tigres del Norte) as well as veteran U.S. session player Jimmy "Z" Zavala and Chicano roots-rock pioneer David Hidalgo (of Los Lobos). *El Primer Instinto* offers a rare chance to hear this "new Mexican" or "post-Mexican" identity in formation, as the members of Jaguares take stock of their musical past and reinvent themselves, ready to face their next chapter.

In the early 1990s, their "La Celula Que Explota" was all Cure-inspired synth-rock that saved a mariachi blast for its final moments. When they perform it on *El Primer Instinto*, the new wave classic becomes a mariachi blowout in a duet with El Mariachi Sol de Mexico. The point is that Jaguares is not choosing one form of Mexican identity over another—the band can move freely between Mariachi Sol de Mexico and the Cure, between synthesizers and trumpets. According to the Jaguares model, sounding "Mexican" means being flexible, being multiple, being open to inhabit multiple registers of belonging at once. Zolov has argued that Mexican rock in the 1960s redefined "an image of Mexican modernity that had been overly dependent on the stereotyped mariachi performer" (1999, 67). More than three decades later—after the student movement of 1968, after the earthquake of 1985, after the Zapatista rebellion of 1994—Jaguares safely reinserts the mariachi back into the image of Mexican modernity but with a postmodern twist: the mariachi now stands on the rock star's stage, the rock star now stands on the mariachi's stage, and Mexican modernity is once again redefined for a post-NAFTA Mexico.

One consequence of rock's "post-Mexican condition" has been its decentralization away from Mexico City as a production capital. Tijuana and Guadalajara have played key roles in the history of Mexican rock since the 1960s, but the story—especially in the 1980s—has mostly belonged to the Mexico City underground and its gradual integration into the multinational recording industry. In recent years this cartography has undergone a massive shift, with Tijuana reemerging as a musical center

and Monterrey quickly establishing itself as one of the dominant musical meccas in the Americas.

There's been a rock scene in the heavily middle-class Monterrey since the 1970s, but the release of hip hop crew Control Machete's *Mucho Barato* in 1997 and the attention it garnered in Los United opened the major label gates to a whole new generation of aspiring bands. They have benefited from the city's role as a major industrial hub for north-south commercial transit and its location just two hours by car from Texas record stores. Ever since, it's been Monterrey bands who've been setting the next generation pace under the Paulina Rubio radar: Kinky, Plastilina Mosh, El Gran Silencio, Panda, Jumbo, Resorte, and Zurdok, to name just a few. And when Spike Jonze needed beats and rhymes for his Super Bowl Levi's ad that he shot in Mexico City, he went to Monterrey and introduced Control Machete's "Sí Señor" to a national U.S. television audience.

Jumbo's third album, *Teleparque*, is their latest attempt to create melodic norteño alterna-rock that switches back and forth between English and Spanish. Recorded in Los Angeles, the album was made under the influence of Queens of the Stone Age and the Flaming Lips, whose music Jumbo transforms into sonically dense songs that start on the ground in Monterrey and often end up floating in psychedelic hazes of swirling guitars, looped vocal samples, and 1960s harmonies. When they're not howling "What's your name?" (in English) over a stomping garage flare-up or lamenting (in Spanish) "Now I look at the floor so I don't have to see you," they're riding a "stampede into the emptiness" that melts into a piano lullaby.

El Gran Silencio leaves far behind the alt-rock that Jumbo pledges allegiance to and heads straight for old-school-meets-new-school mash-ups of cumbia and norteño with hip hop and Jamaican dancehall. Their third album, *Super Riddim Internacional, Vol. 1*, continues the band's commitment to finessing the chúntraro hybrid: everyday Mexican culture blasted through Afro-urban woofers, polkas tangled up in hip hop, electronica that smells of the carne asada that saturates the Monterrey air. For El Gran Silencio, being "el mérito Nuevo León" (keeping it real Monterrey style) means wearing a Run DMC shirt while you play a vallenato, Los Cadetes de Linares in a b-boy stance. "It's a new day in my Monterrey," a chorus sings on the norteño chill-out of "Buenos Días," and it sounds like it: sharp rhymes cut through beds of choppy electronic beats, electric guitar twangs wrap around yawning bass bends. El Gran Silencio takes international "riddims"—from Jamaica, from New York—and uses them to birth a new Monterrey day. *Super Riddim Internacional* is so effortless in its regionalization of hip hop

and dancehall (their cumbia-ization, their vallenato-ization) that there is no mistaking where El Gran Silencio is from.

There has been a thriving electronic music scene in Baja California since the mid-1980s, not to mention Tijuana's instrumental role in the formation of rock en español from 1960s artists like Los Rockin Devils and Javier Batiz up through Tijuana NO in the 1990s (Valenzuela and González 1999). The broadcast of new wave music and early electronica on San Diego's 91X and Tijuana's MoreFM helped spawn a cadre of musicians that included Avant Garde, Artefakto, Vandana, Ford Procco, Santos Oleos, and Motor Oxido. But it wasn't until the formation of the Nortec Collective and the release of their first-world-meets-third-world, hi-tech-meets-low-tech fusions of norteño and banda sinaloense with techno and house on *The Tijuana Sessions, Vol. 1* that Latin Alternative fans started to take notice of the Mexican electronic movement. Because of Tijuana's proximity to U.S. swap meets (where aspiring musicians can find cheap equipment) and to U.S. radio stations and concert venues, as well as its bustling centrality to international commerce and industry as the world's busiest border crossing point, the city has long been a more hospitable home to electronic music than other urban centers in Mexico.

Nortec artists Bostich and Terrestre appear on *Manos Arriba!*, a new compilation assembled by the German label Bungalow. Subtitled "Your Introduction to Mexico's Electro Scene," it highlights Baja California's influential role in the development of Mexican electronica and pairs it with Mexico City (Silverio, Natos, Mexican Institute of Sound) and Monterrey (Sport, Plastilina Mosh, Panorama). *Manos Arriba!* is Mexican culture past and present fed into a sampler, then triggered to spill out over shifting patterns of beats cobbled on bedroom computers and finessed in recording studios. Mexican Institute of Sound puts its technological affinity right up front with its "Two Protocols Concierto," and Plastilina Mosh heads straight for the source of American rock and roll iconicity, tears it down, then builds it back up as irreverent border kitsch when they take on Elvis Presley's "Viva Las Vegas."

Nortec's Terrestre is the nom-de-maquina of Ensenada's Fernando Corona, who also performs as Murcof. Where Terrestre works with big, colorful swatches of norteño and banda, Murcof is a pointillist who makes electronic chamber music out of bits of Arvo Part and Morton Feldman. He reduces everything he touches to melancholic clicks and glitches, emotive CD skips and violin cries that dance forward in a haunting ballet of malfunction. His debut, *Martes*, which was nominated for Europe's prestigious Prix Ars

Electronica award, might be the Mexican new school's most provocative addition to "the post-Mexican condition" because of the way it uses digital abstraction to play with the erasure and absence of identity. Like the panoramic photographic of the unnamed and unpopulated desert included in *Martes's* CD art (it could be Mexico, but it could be anywhere), Murcof's music imagines landscapes that have yet to be filled, wide open spaces of cultural possibility for Mexican identities that have yet to be born.

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# Experiments in Chicano Education

Edlyn M. Vallejo

**COLEGIO CESAR CHAVEZ, 1973-1983: A CHICANO STRUGGLE FOR EDUCATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION.** By Carlos Saldivar Maldonado. (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000. 130 pages. Hardcover \$90.00).

Research on and documentation of Chicano educational initiatives during the 1970s are alarmingly few. In light of the educational inequities experienced by Chicanos, literature depicting past Chicano educational efforts can educate stakeholders in shaping current initiatives to improve the educational conditions of this historically marginalized group. To this end, Professor Carlos Saldivar Maldonado ambitiously documents the successes and failures of a significant Chicano endeavor of the 1970s: Colegio Cesar Chavez. Although a mere 121 pages of text, Maldonado's book *Colegio Cesar Chavez, 1973-1983: A Chicano Struggle for Educational Self-Determination* contributes notably to higher education and Chicano history literature.

Maldonado takes the reader on a ten-year journey through the rise and fall of an institution specifically created to educate and grant degrees to Chicanos and other non-traditional students. The driving forces in the creation of Colegio Cesar Chavez were the political climate of the 1970s, the experimental college movement, and the Chicano movement. Colegio aimed to respond to the social needs of the Chicano community and was the first four-year Chicano institution of higher education accredited independently in the West and Southwest.

Situated in the small, rural community of Mt. Angel, Oregon, Colegio focused on bilingual/bicultural issues and was completely run by Chicano administrators and faculty. An innovative institution, Colegio was "academically structured on an educational experimental model, 'College Without Walls'" (4). This model allowed working adult students to create

a personalized and flexible education program that combined practical experience with classroom work. A few of the innovative elements that characterized Colegio were a novel curriculum that boasted classes such as “The Political Evolution of the Campesino” and opportunities to receive academic credit for prior work experiences.

From the first pages, Maldonado is honest about Colegio’s enduring struggles, describing a well-intentioned educational initiative gone awry: “A review of Colegio’s history reveals that a slow death had gripped an anemic Colegio from its inception” (5). *Colegio Cesar Chavez, 1973-1983* clearly delineates how both internal and external institutional problems forced Colegio’s close. One major internal problem was that the fundamental needs of the college were not consistently met. Legal battles over accreditation and federal foreclosure consumed the energy of Colegio’s administrators and educators. In addition, the Chicano institution faced financial troubles and political struggles from within, including low morale and a constant flux of employees. Compounding these obstacles were low student enrollment and attrition in the “College Without Walls” program, resulting in a lack of campus community among its students. In addition to the internal problems, significant external problems faced Colegio, including a decline of federal funding, the effects of the economic recession, an upsurge of national conservatism, and the lack of community support from Mt. Angel. The combination of these internal and external struggles ultimately resulted in Colegio’s demise.

I find Maldonado successful in framing his study of Colegio in a social and historical context. Taking advantage of extensive interviews, newspaper articles, institutional records, and public documents, he takes into account the significant national, local, and institutional conditions that affected Colegio’s operation. Maldonado synthesizes these sources into a clear account of the college’s history. He ends his historical account by offering insights into maintaining a successful institution of higher education for Chicanos. Drawing from higher education literature, he makes suggestions for future promoters of Chicano educational initiatives like Colegio. Examples of topics in this section include demanding effective leadership, developing political strategies, and using symbols in establishing organizational culture.

While Maldonado’s book is thoughtful and insightful, he fails to take into account several crucial elements when discussing future Chicano educational efforts. For example, although he discusses preliminary planning, Maldonado does not consider the importance of strategic planning in his

analysis. In fact, a strategic plan is essential to the success of any institution of higher education. Colegio lacked a proper strategic plan, contributing to its downfall. More space devoted to insights regarding issues such as governance, student development, and retention of Chicano students and employees would have created an even more comprehensive analysis.

Though successful in accomplishing his main objective, Maldonado's historical account of Colegio is also largely lacking the voices of those who were intimately involved in the educational process. Specifically, the insights of Colegio's students—those who were most affected by this institution—must have important memories and feelings to contribute to Colegio's story. Their social construction of how Colegio functioned could have added richness to Maldonado's vivid picture of this innovative institution. The few students' testimonies Maldonado did include were valuable, yet left this reader wanting more.

Overall, *Colegio Cesar Chavez, 1973–1983: A Chicano Struggle for Educational Self-Determination* provides a thoughtful description and analysis of an institution of higher education's struggle for survival. Filling a gap in the literature of Chicano educational endeavors of the 1970s, Maldonado provides inspiration for Chicano historians to document the triumphs and struggles of other educational initiatives geared toward empowering the Chicano community. Such commendable work will continue to contribute to knowledge regarding social justice, education, and the Chicano movement.

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