



Virgin Mex

El gran silencio.

# Mexican Rock in the Global Village

Alejandro Acevedo\*

Around 1960 Mexican radio stations began to play songs like *Popotitos* and *Confidente de secundaria*, the Spanish-language versions of the U.S. hits *Bony Marro* and *High School Confidential*, respectively. Groups like the Teen Tops and Los Locos del Ritmo (approximately “Rhythm Crazy,” in English) made young boys of the time move their Brylcreamed pompadours and teenaged Mexican girls swing their full skirts and petticoats to a rhythm that scandalized parents: rock ‘n’ roll.

In the mid-1960s, rock ‘n’ roll left behind the “courtesy” of the “roll” part and opened up its

most independent, energetic variation: rock. The Mexican government expressed its most decided rejection of rock, an attitude the national record industry was forced to second. For more than two decades, rock was vilified in Mexico; groups like La revolución de Emiliano Zapata (Emiliano Zapata’s Revolution) and the Dug Dugs, among others, saw their work totally blocked in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1995, the U.S. magazine *Pulse!* explained this, saying, “A succession of Mexican governments never quite warmed up to the idea of rock, with its rebel attitude and non-conformist stance. Still, rock survived in the underground in Mexico for almost 30 years.”<sup>1</sup>

Things in our country changed radically in the early 1990s. The Mexican government finally

---

\* Mexican writer, he has written for *Expansión* and *Cambio* magazines and *La Jornada’s Cultural Supplement*, among others.

When stars like Metallica,  
U2 and Madonna began to perform in Mexico,  
record companies rushed to promote Mexican groups.



Titán.



Julieta Venegas.

changed its point of view. Mexican rock began to come out into the light when President Carlos Salinas opened up Mexico's borders to rockers from abroad. When stars like Metallica, U2 and Madonna began to perform here, record companies rushed to promote Mexican groups. For the first time, people began to see the great creative and commercial potential of the genre in Mexico.

"Yes, they held us back for three decades, but today, Mexican rock is in an unprecedented boom," says Juan José Arteaga, member of a Jaguares fan club.<sup>2</sup> Maná drummer Alex González sums it up: "The scene today is incredible. Mexico has changed a lot in the last ten years. I'm glad that recent administrations have become more aware about music. There are lots more groups than before; we have better coverage in the media; and the record companies are a lot more interested in rock bands."<sup>3</sup>

#### WORLDWIDE INTEREST

"Are there any newcomers to Maverick [the Warner subsidiary headed up by Madonna]?" *Interview* magazine editor Ingrid Sischy asked Ma-

donna. "We've just started a Latin label...and we're trying to sign a band right now called Café Tacuba. Have you heard of them?" "No." "They're unbelievable. They're Mexican, and in fact there's loads of artists that we're trying to sign right now. There's really so much talent, you have no idea. And it's not like your typical kind of Latin pop thing, but much edgier, interesting stuff, things that you wouldn't expect, kind of like the Latin version of Air; you know, that French group, Air."<sup>4</sup>

But Madonna's interest in Mexican rock is by no means an isolated phenomenon. For several years now, international record producers have been turning their attention to Mexico. Molotov, for example, began its career with Surco, a Californian label closely associated to Universal; and the legendary Chris Blackwell of Island Records produced the Baja Californian Nor-Tec's album *Tijuana Sessions*. Jason Roberts from Cypress Hill has produced Control Machete; Titán will produce its next album in Europe with Virgin; and unfortunately for Madonna, Café Tacuba is about to sign with the Music Corporation of America (MCA).

There seems to be a recurring theme among most foreign record executives: the local color that the new Mexican groups are giving to rock.

As David Byrne, formerly of Talking Heads and today a talent scout in the Third World, says, “We’re looking for music outside the international mainstream; the world of pop is tired of groups like Maná because there’s too much of that. We’re placing all our attention on the fusions that groups like Café Tacuba and La Maldita Vecindad are coming up with.”<sup>5</sup>

#### MAMBO-ROCK, TECHNOCUMBIA AND MUCH MORE

Foreign producers specifically prefer the hybrids that fuse Latin tunes with Anglo Saxon beats. Says Pepe Mogt, from Nor-Tec, “If you walk along Revolution Avenue in Tijuana at night, you’ll hear hip-hop coming out of a club, mariachis playing on the sidewalk and strains of ‘gruperá’ music coming out of trucks with polarized windows. All this feeds Nor-Tec.”<sup>6</sup>

In its album *Avalancha de éxitos* (Avalanche of Hits), Café Tacuba pays homage to Jaime López (*Chilanga Banda* [Mexico City Band]), Alberto Domínguez (*Perfidia* [Treachery]), Latin American authors who inspire the group to create its own sound. This kind of attitude is

applauded by the industry and the international media. For its video *La Ingrata* (The Ingrate) (a song included in the album *Re*), Café Tacuba was awarded a prize by MTV, while *SPIN*, the influential U.S. rock magazine, included *El Circo* (The Circus) by La Maldita Vecindad among the “90 most important albums of the ‘90s.” *The New Yorker*, for its part, in 1999, saluted our latest newcomer, saying, “[Julieta] Venegas has become one of the brightest lights of Mexican rock.”<sup>7</sup>

Another group with “local color” is Monterrey-based El gran silencio (The Great Silence), made famous thanks to the “cover” it did of *Déjenme si estoy llorando* (Leave Me Alone, I’m Crying), a song originally written by the Brazilian Nelson Ned. *Chúntaro Radio Power* is El Gran Silencio’s most recent production. Tony, a member of the band, explains that “*chúntaro* (or someone kitsch) is a socio-urban hybrid totally unrelated to *naco* (or someone tawdry or tacky); *chúntaros* aren’t born, they’re made. *Chúntaros* take a little from here and a little from there without caring about what people will think. Lupe, a member of the gruperá band Bronco, soldered an iron pedal to the accelerator of his lime-green Camaro... He’s a great *chúntaro*.”<sup>8</sup>

The influential U.S. rock magazine *SPIN* included *El Circo* (The Circus) by La Maldita Vecindad among the 90 most important albums of the ‘90s.



Plastilina Mosh.



Happy Ft / Tongola Recording / EMI



Control Machete.

Discos Manicomio / Universal



Warner Music

Maná.

But today we are not only producing bands that fuse “exotic” elements. We also have bands doing surf (Los Exquisitos and Lost Acapulco); electronic music (Parador Análogo, Dj Perra); and hip-hop (Molotov, Control Machete and Titán, about whom *The Guardian* has said, “Elevator [Titán’s most recent album] could justifiably become a massive hit.”<sup>9</sup> Marcelo Lara, founder of Discos Manicomio, comments, “Our intention is to foster proposals in which hip-hop and other avant-garde forms all fit.”<sup>10</sup> And independent cultural promotor Arturo Saucedo says, “What you can feel in places like Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, Tijuana, Puebla or Querétaro is that there is already a territorial form for aesthetic ideas. Today, groups like Linga or No-

pal Beat are creating their own sound that really lets them compete abroad; they’re creating an aesthetic that differentiates them from the overwhelming European production.”<sup>11</sup>

#### THE NEXT BIG STEP

Molotov has sold more than a million and a half records; Control Machete, 700,000; El Gran Silencio, 400,000. Plastilina Mosh’s albums have been re-cut in 45 different countries. These numbers are unprecedented in the history of Mexican rock.

After a stay at the multinational labels and their subsidiaries with operations in Mexico



Café Tacuba.

(BMG, Universal, Virgin, Warner, Sony, Discos Manicomio, Tómbola Records, etc.), many Mexican groups hope to jump to the main catalogue of an international label, even skipping over the First World subsidiary labels. “Among other things, this means having a bigger budget,” says Adel Hattem, label manager at Polydor, “This is the big step that several Mexican groups are about to take.”<sup>12</sup>

Café Tacuba, La Maldita Vecindad, Nor-Tec and Titán have surprised the world with their own sound. Stages previously reserved for U.S. and European artists are now offered them. Seemingly, the decades-long dark ages that pop music went through in our country have been left behind. Globalization is welcoming our rock music with open arms. **MM**

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ramiro Burr, *Pulse!*, August 1995.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview with the author.
- <sup>3</sup> Interview with the author.
- <sup>4</sup> *Interview*, March 2001.
- <sup>5</sup> *El País* (Madrid) n/d.
- <sup>6</sup> Interview with the author.
- <sup>7</sup> [www.julietavenegas.com](http://www.julietavenegas.com)
- <sup>8</sup> [www.virgin.com.mx](http://www.virgin.com.mx)
- <sup>9</sup> [www.titantitan.com](http://www.titantitan.com)
- <sup>10</sup> Telephone interview with the author.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with the author.
- <sup>12</sup> Telephone interview with the author.