

MEXICAN ROCK: THE GHOST OF PARADISE LIVES

Victor Roura

If our country was suddenly flooded by dozens of recordings by young rock and roll musicians, it wasn't due to a sudden interest in rock and roll, rather, it was due to authorities who allowed this to happen.

At the end of the 1950s, several rock bands contacted recording studios in order to record the new U.S. musical sound. The musicians had no freedom. They were at the mercy of the incipient television industry and of the rigid radio programming of the period. Rock and roll, therefore, became a fashion not a movement. It became an established current, one more branch of the music industry.

Created as a fashion, rock was forced to follow the rules of the market. It was a product created for instant sale. It had to leave aside its artistic objectives. That's how our first rock and roll functioned, as a commercial game. For example, musicians were told, "If you sing well you'll have a chance at a spot in a Loco Valdez or Antonio Badú movie." When the young entertainers enjoyed themselves with their parents' permission (some of the new stars were the children of well-known entertainers or people well-connected to the industry), the doors to the recording studios, television, and radio were open to them.

These young stars were, obviously, non-threatening. They were safe examples, role models for the youth of that period who had no chance of reaching stardom, a youth which lacked opportunities. Paradoxically, the Mexican rock and roll stars were conservative. The path they followed, unfortunately, did not lead to the creation of permanent work. The majority of the young musicians were being eliminated from the road to stardom while a minority astutely realized that putting on a false personality would ensure then success.

A New Horizon

Towards the end of the sixties when the first group of rock and roll stars had gone out of fashion, many musicians, almost *en masse*, arrived from various regions of the country, mainly from the northern part of Mexico. These musicians had enriched themselves musically by listening to imported records. In less than two years, they succeeded in changing some of the customs of the middle-class neighborhoods of the city. The afternoon reunions became jam sessions, and the parties held in warehouses, soccer fields, and abandoned buildings became known as *hoyo fonqui's*, or funky holes, a name given to them

by the young writer Parmenides Garcia Saldaña.

Rock arrived in Mexico as a ready-made product for instant sale, artistic intentions were put to one side

From 1968 on, rock in Mexico has gone its own way forming currents which at times separated, at other times disappeared altogether. While a new phase of rock and roll began in Mexico in 1968, the musicians of the period ignored the student movement and preferred to immerse themselves in analyzing and questioning the results of the latest Led Zeppelin tour. These musicians were concerned mainly with writing the next song, introducing it to commercial radio and collecting their royalties. Meanwhile the student movement of 1968 experienced catastrophic results when on October 2 young people were shot by the military under orders of President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz. 1968 for Mexican rock and rollers went by unnoticed.

During this second phase of Mexican rock and roll, musicians composed their songs in English. Some of the bands which appeared at the end of the sixties were Dug Dug's, Peace

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and Love, Ritual, Spiders, Tequila, 39.4, Iguana, Javier Batiz, Love Army, Three Souls in my Mind, El Amor, Tinta Blanca, La Division del Norte, Bandido, Epilogo, La Tribu, and Enigma.

Although plenty of ideas flowed,

lacked stability. The musicians did not read. Their bookshelves were bare. Television dominated people's attention. Television was the sacred temple of idleness. It was on television that the U.S. and British superstars could be seen and heard.

tors of the record companies. At the beginning of the seventies, the majority of the rock bands had the opportunity to record an album. On the one hand, a lack of skill as well as the lack of discipline lead to songs of poor quality. On the other hand, the use of a foreign language, in this case English (so as to reaffirm our dependence and to consolidate the colony), worsened the situation. Rock became a distant language, not because of its rhythm but because of its inability to communicate. However, spaces opened up for rock in television, radio and in film. Two movies were made, *La Verdadera Vocación de Magdalena* ("Magdalena's True Vocation") by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo and "Bikinis and Rock", the infamous film in which groups like Peace and Love and Bandido appeared along with the Mexican comedian Loco Valdez.

Avándaro Music Festival

Then came the Avándaro music festival, the first and last of its kind. Avandaro, which took place on September 11 and 12, 1971 in state of Mexico, attracted thousands of rock fans (an estimated half a million attended). They came to enjoy the live performances of bands such as Dug Dug's, Epilogo, Tequila, Division del Norte, Peace and Love, Ritual, Bandido, los Yaqui, Tinta Blanca, El Amor, and Three Souls in my Mind. Avándaro wanted to be a Mexican Woodstock. A few of the emcees spoke in English while all the rock bands excepto Three Souls, El Amor, and Tinta Blanca sang in English, transporting the audience to another land. The festival was being broadcast live, but the broadcast was suspended after 12:30 a.m. when Felipe Maldonado yelled "Screw your mothers if you don't sing."

Avándaro occurred just three months after students and teachers had been once again fiercely repressed during that terrible afternoon of June 10, 1971. However, in the rock and roll world no one cared. The apolitical attitude was as unfortunate as it was surprising. After the Avandaro festival, no one wanted to be responsible for Mexican rock. The media closed their doors to the rock musicians. Rock musicians once again found themselves



Betsy Pecanins. (Photo by Rogelio Cuéllar)

ideology was lacking. The language of the rock and roller was a different language, a hip language made up colloquialisms and slang. It's not that the hip language lacked richness in expression, rather the rock musicians limited their vocabulary. Someone said with good reason that the Mexican rock stars had the uncanny ability to "freak out" everyone with their language. Perhaps, because of this limited vocabulary, the rock of this period

It was enough to be a modest poet of rhyme. As an example:

*I like to go on a roll
I play with a rock and roll band
And I don't care what they think
If I feel fine.*

There is nothing easier than getting used to having the doors slammed on your face by the direc-

confronting the authorities. Faced with unemployment, the musicians insisted on their own ways of getting together in their own space — in the funky holes. They formed a committee to speak with President Echeverría. They were unsuccessful.

Once again, participation in rock and roll was limited to a small group.

Radio stations stopped playing rock music. Rarely were rock musicians invited to do TV spots. Now and then they managed to get into recording studios. By the mid seventies, rock was a thing of the past. It had no voice in society.

By the end of the seventies and on into the eighties we would see an increase in independent labels, the only possible alternative.

Then the third phase began. This occurred when the first effort towards a more authentically Mexican rock arose although we see this trend in the first period with songs like "Haciendote el Amor" ("Making love to You") by Los Locos del Ritmo.

*What would happen to me
What would happen to you
If people found out
That we make love all day*

These types of lyrics (subversive in nature) began to be used more frequently in the eighties. New elements became acceptable and were utilized, such as the daily poetry of street language. This was the "onda" or, hip rock.

*Hey, bartender, serve me
another drink*

*I want to get drunk
I want to feel my worst
I want to drink a lot to forget
Listen bartender, don't make
me beg
I know what I want and I
want to get drunk
Since the woman I love went
to bed with some other guy.*

This new hip rock, a response to "ranchera" music, a type of Mexican country and western music, and blues discovers that something is amiss in Mexican rock and that it manifests itself in the corruption, repression, and daily injustices of the police. The hip rocker sees that the world is upside down but does not know how to put it right side up. However, while the hip rocker suddenly challenges the system, he also displays his own sexism, violence and fascism. There are two types of hip groups, the protestors and the reactionaries.

The former tendency has the largest number of followers. They create a progressive rock, although not exactly Pink Floyd nor Tangerine Dream: none of the national groups are blessed with the sound equipment necessary to compete with the foreign rock bands. This is the rock with progressive, advanced ideas. Guillermo Briseño demonstrates his sharp look at the social reality of his country:

A charro while being born
with a national omen
strikes his horse with his reign
with stormy lassos
And the omen tells him
That in other times he would
walk
with metal livestock*

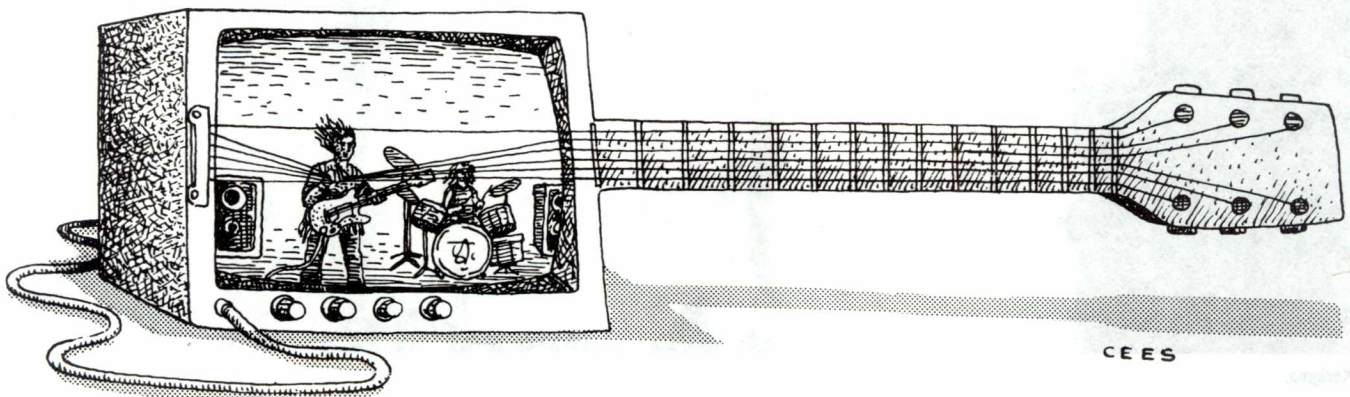
*speeding up the milking
process
Riding a desk
Gaining in on
the general public
He managed to place reality in
a closet*

In 1968, rock musicians were more concerned with analyzing the results of the latest Led Zeppelin tour than with the repression of the student movement

*He became a hundred-year-old
ghost
of international fame
He planted a partisan group
Over the tomb of the calendar
and shapes history to suit his
interests*

In other words, it is a rock which searches for a new path, a rock which seeks a new expression, even though it seldom succeeds in doing this. Rock bands and singers who identify with this tendency included Carlos Arellano, Camerata Rupeste, Jaime López, Rockdrigo, Iconoclasta, Cecilia Toussaint, Nobilis Factum, Flight, Mama Z, Musica Contra Cultura, Tierra Baldía and Trolebús. This tendency

* a "charro" is a Mexican horseman, but a "charro" is also slang for a sold-out labor union leader.



doesn't necessarily require progressive instrumentation.

The use of the parody is in itself an important element of this phase. Instead of singing "I'm not a rebel without a cause, I'm not even wild, all I want is to dance rock and roll..." Federico Arana, from the Naftalina band changes it to "I'm not an orthodox Marxist nor am I a Trotskyist. All I want to do is to form a trade union and to practice self-determination." What is said isn't as important as how you say it. The band Botellita de Jerez is one of several groups which little by little approaches this tendency:

*The unions and the bosses
have lowered my morale
If I let them, they'll pull my
pants down, too
Yes, because justice takes time
And I just can't wait
I prefer to walk in my mind...
Hey Jesus, don't come back
They just might shave off your
hair
In the Age of Aquarius no
one will understand you
People will freak out just look-
ing at your hair
and that'll make you cry.*

**Rock in the 1970s continued
to use English: it was a
distant language**

As with the hip rock, this tendency is divided equally into two phases. On the one hand there are bands who have worked incessantly at perfecting their instrumentation, even though they have not been successful in creating a balance between the high quality of their music and their mediocre lyrics. On the other hand, there are bands who, although unsuccessful in synchronizing their songs with their music, have produced high quality lyrics.

The third and last tendency of Mexican rock and roll is the one which for various reasons will be usually linked with the other two tendencies. In other words, it depends on the development of the other two. This is a rock with the times, a rock which follows the international music trends: electro-acoustic in the mid-seventies, disco in 1976, punk in 1979, new wave at the

beginning of the eighties and reggae around the same period.

Rock, by the mid eighties, is managed by local television stations. The singers are chosen by the recording companies, thereby, making them more commercial. Those who continue to make their own music without compromising their identity are marginalized by the music industry which prefers complacent rock bands. Something similar occurred during the first phase at the end of the fifties. Thus, the cycle is repeated with attempts at cooptation once again by the authorities.

It is not until 1986 when a local radio station, (Nucleo Radio Mil) begins to play new rock music not heard before on Mexico radio.

A High Quality Sound

Rock 101 FM begins to feature several bands from Argentina and Spain who sing in Spanish and who break with the norm which says that there is no rock besides that which is composed in English. After 25 years of programming rock in English, Mexican radio starts to play rock in Spanish once again as in the first phase.



Kerigma.

ROCK IN SPANISH HITS MEXICO'S AIRWAVE

Place: Nucleo Radio Mil. Time: 10 a.m. Theme: Interview with Luis Gerardo Salas, artistic director of Rock 101 (FM) and Espacio 59 (AM). Complication: Luis Gerardo has not arrived. Meanwhile, an attentive and hospitable young man with a penetrating stare takes pity on me: "Welcome to the world of rock," he says to me smiling. "Would you like to talk to me until Gerardo gets here?" "I'd like that but aren't I in the way? Do you have time?" "Yes. Gerardo won't be long. We could start in on it." And for a while Francisco Mulliert also a rock fan, introduces us to the rock world seen from the point of view of his vocation, his passion, and from the beginnings of rock.

Francisco Mulliert is animated in his conversation. He tells us that apart from being a collaborator of Gerardo Salas, he produces two programs: *El Jinete Nocturno* (The Night Ranger) designed for night workers, and *El Fantasma del Rock* (The Rock Ghost) that tells the history of rock from its blues origins in 1870. "In the program there appears a ghost sent by the Supreme Council of Spirits of Music," explains Mulliert. "It was my idea to use the ghost as the main thread in the narrative. The ghost crosses the United States, England, the North of Mexico and Africa which are the central points in the rise of rock. The ghost has written immense volumes, a complete collection of his adventures in the search for rock. For example: from last January to March we were speaking about blues. The chapter is called *Ajonjolí de todas las moles rocanroleros* (Sesame from all the rock sauces) Why a ghost?" Francisco asks himself. "Because in 1959 they kill rock in the United States and England. They substitute the rockers for an image of well-behaved youth and begin the fabrication of rock idols. From this comes the idea of the ghost: they kill rock and roll, but not its spirit."

Espacio 59—one of the stations directed by Luis Gerardo Salas and under the influence of Rock 101—became a novelty in radio programming in 1987. Its programming is varied, with priority for productions in Spanish. What is striking about Espacio 59 is that since it began, other radio stations on the AM wavelength have had to bring themselves up to date.

With respect to the origin of rock in Spanish, Gerardo Salas says, "It arose basically in Mexico, where it gained more momentum because of the

influence of groups on the border with the United States. At the end of the 1950s Latin America hardly imported any records and in Spain there was Franco. In the United States, rock and roll was at its height and had a lot of influence on Mexican radio. In this period the phenomenon of the 'opportunists' was also visible in Mexico where rock and roll also came into fashion, as seen for example, in the film *Rebel Without a Cause*.

"At that period," continues Gerardo Salas, "rock groups played in the *Cine de las Americas* and the *Internacional* on Insurgentes Avenue. Among the rock groups were the Teen Tops, The Rebeldes del rock and The Locos del Ritmo. Enrique Guzmán, César Costa, Julissa and Angélica María were among the singers. It is interesting that in Mexico they tried not to be so violent. The groups played before a film: there was a 'jam session' then a 'nice film with Doris Day' for example, and finally, a rock film. Each time there was music they all started to dance on stage. *Cine de las Americas* had a stage then. The cinema was turned into a 'happening' until 1959 when they destroyed the *Cine de las Americas*. The police arrive. There is the usual 'razzia' (police raids) and then comes the 'fetishization of violence' in rock. That's the way it is seen in Mexico." The rocker becomes a fetish, a cool-cat, a stray cat as he is called by the writer Parmenides García Saldaña in the book "En route for fashion."

At the end of 1967 and 1968 there was rock art, poetry and cinema. In 1969-1970 the Mexican edition of the magazine *Rolling Stone* was published. Parmenides, Nikito Nipongo, Federico Arana, José Agustín wrote for it. *Rolling Stone*, continues Gerardo Salas, "brought out at the most 10 numbers before the government closed it down, in my opinion, simply because the government did not want young people to speak. If they speak, they think and if they think, they question. In 1971 anything to do with young people was prohibited. The resentment, the feeling of 68 remained."

In a parallel way, in 1971 the decadence of psychedelic music arrives. Rock goes underground. In Mexico, according to Gerardo Salas, the 'underground' appears only in isolated efforts. "The Tri would be the most important of the underground groups, this group reflects the experience of the gang, of the underprivileged: it

conserves the essence of rock," adds Gerardo Salas, "The rest of the groups in Mexico suffer an 'involution.'"

In Argentina, rock appears in the small lapse of democracy between two military coups. What is interesting, explains Salas, is that this rock comes from the initial rockers in Mexico: Teen Tops, Enrique Guzmán and César Costa. Argentine rock developed Charlie García, Leon Gieco, Pedro Asnar, Grupo Almendra and Spinetta, while Mexican rock went "underground."

In Spain, now out of the Franco regime and with the socialists in power, rock is widely played on the radio. This rock has an impressive influence due to its quality and it is convenient for the record industry.

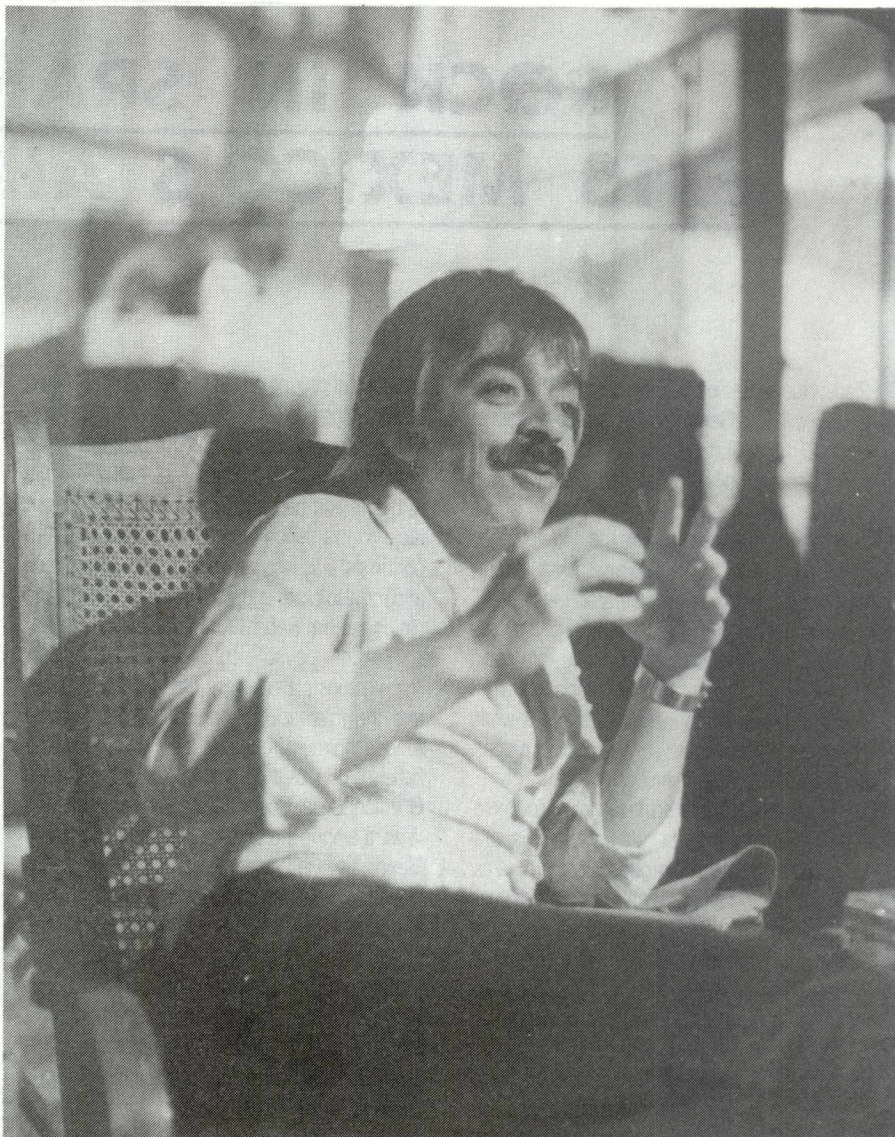
Radio rock in Mexico, explains Gerardo Salas while he waits for a telephone call to be answered, begins with the new wave movement and is not widespread until 1982-1983 when WFM plays only rock in English. WFM is the first station to say that they are playing rock and does not attempt to intertwine it with other kinds of music. Later, says Gerardo Salas, we come in "with a little bit more force" with Rock 101 and Espacio 59. "Rock 101," he states, "is a complete success. There are those who insist that it is not rock. That rock has to be aggressive, violent. That's the way the establishment thinks."

In the programs directed by Gerardo Salas a lot of Spanish rock is played: Radio Futura, Alaska y Dinarama, Miguel Ríos, Los Inhumanos, La Unión, Loquillo, and Trogloditas. From Argentine rock they play Charlie García, The Grandparents of Nothing, Porchetto and Spinetta. The Mexican groups include the Caifanes, Dangerous Rhythm and Neon among others.

"Rock, given its origin and the bases of its essence," says Gerardo Salas, "reflects the human reality that we live, not the social reality." Real rock "is an art form, not a political force. It wasn't in 1968, although some young people used it as such, but rock rises above protest." "Rock," concludes Salas, "is music, is intention, is rhythm, is voice. Rock reflects the energy of young people. It unites their internal universality, their feelings, their essence, their complexity. Rock in the 1980s is less local, more universal."

Because of this trend, new bands have appeared. In a recent contest sponsored by the Arreola RCA-Victor label and Rock 101FM, three hundred rock bands from all over the country participated. The first-place winner was a Mexico City band called Los Amantes de Lola. However as of yet none of the Mexican bands have acquired the international recognition that Argentinian and Spanish bands and singers such as Charley García, Soda Estereo, Miguel Mateos, Miguel Ríos, Nacha Pop, Mecano, and Radio Futura have obtained.

It is now radio and not television which has the most influence over young people's musical tastes. If television has continued to determine people's musical tastes, it has created another type of rock and roll audience, one which is more complacent, an audience which doesn't care whether it listens to Tatiana or Yuri, Emmanuel or Mijares, Timbiriche or Fresas, Botellita de Jerez or the Mondragon Band. For the first time Mexican rock will be heard on different labels. As never before, record companies are investing millions of pesos in local bands such as Los Amantes de Lola, Arturo Huízar, Los Trapos, Amagedon, Boni y Los Enemigos del Silencio, Cecilia Tousseint and Los Caifanes. It is said that, finally, the Mexican rock bands will have clear, high-quality sound.



Guillermo Briseño. (Photo by Liliana Contreras)



Mamá-Z in concert. (Photo by Fabrizio León)

This process has just begun. How long will this last? For the moment, and despite the palpable enthusiasm of the musicians and producers alike, no one knows for sure. Television in Mexico can at any moment silence any musical initiative which differs from the one it has established.

Yes, these are new days for Mexican rock. Yet, no one can say for sure now long the trend towards valuing and listening to Mexican rock will last. Something similar to this occurred in the past but it wasn't much more than a phase. Yesterday's ominous shadow is still an annoying ghost. In Mexico, the Ghost of Paradise continues to roam. He is none other than that creative rock and roller who succumbed to the powerful music industry. □