



Photos courtesy of Zaidee Stavely

# Over the Radio and into the Woods

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Emerging from the foliage of the northern Veracruz mountains, a trombone plays a single note,

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then another, and is followed by trumpets, cornets, tubas and drums. The musicians march out from among the pines, having walked miles to participate in this celebration of Saint Cecilia.

Blasting away, they take their place in the line, where another nine bands are

already waiting. One group of musicians is decked out in matching blue suits. Others sport ponytails and Che Guevara T-shirts, while many wear baggy jeans and baseball caps. The drums are painted with the names of the bands and colorful images of deer, mountains, starry

skies and roads winding their way among houses.

A young indigenous woman runs from one band to another with a small minidisk player to record the songs for the radio. When one band finishes, she looks around quizzically, wondering who will be the next to begin, then rushes off at the first blast of a trumpet.

The woman is Lucrecia Linares, Tepehua radio announcer for Radio Huayacocotla, a shortwave community radio that transmits in Spanish as well as the three indigenous languages of the region, Otomí, Nahua and Tepehua.

Today, the radio's directors and announcers have come to the Otomí community of Pie de la Cuesta for a special celebration of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of musicians. In the last year, the radio has helped pay for instruments for eight new bands, two of them made up of mostly young people, making a total of 12 bands in the municipality of Texcatepec.

As the procession makes its way down, then up the hill, meeting two bands from the community, winding around to the church and back to the basketball court which is the center of town, a crackling radio calls from a one-room wooden shack with a corrugated tin roof as the procession passes.

"Radio Huayacocotla, the voice of the campesinos, XEJN, broadcasting for you at 2390 kilohertz with 500 watts of power to the Sierra Norte of Veracruz."

Even here in Pie de la Cuesta, three hours by car on a dirt road, and a seven-hour walk from the town of Huayacocotla, where the radio is located, the people listen to the shortwave station, which programs music ranging from *rancheras* and *norteñas* to *banda* and Huastec trios from the region, as well as birthday greetings, community announce-

ments and informative shows ranging from "The Rights of My People" on human rights to "The Sullen Cow" about raising cattle. The news is transmitted in Spanish twice a week, and in Otomí, Nahua and Tepehua once a week.

Linares, who is from the nearby municipality of Tlachichilco, did not used to listen to Radio Huaya much.

"I thought the radio was like all the others, but it's not. This radio is for all people, rich and poor. Radio Huaya is for everyone."

What she did listen to were radio soap operas. In communities where there is no television, people listen to

Some of the bands have traveled all the way to Huayacocotla to record in the studio; others are just learning. But today, everyone is invited to play together.

And play together they do. Although at the beginning the bands take turns playing one at a time, in the afternoon they begin to blast all together, making it difficult to distinguish the tunes filling the air against the bright pink sunset over the mountains.

Across the ravine, in Huayacocotla, the telephone rings in a bright building painted with a mural of green mountains, groups of farmers and indigenous

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Radio Huaya's radio dramas every day. The priority for Radio Mita (in Otomí) or Radio Lacaxcajak (in Tepehua) are the indigenous people who live in these mountains of Veracruz. From the language spoken on the radio to local music and interviews in rural areas, the radio "is the people," as coordinator and Otomí announcer Pedro Ruperto explains to me.

Ten years ago, explains Ruperto, the young people in Huayacocotla did not like the radio or the music it played. Now, with *banda* music on the rise, people pay for the indigenous bands to play for parties.

"Young people want to learn to play an instrument now," he tells me.

Many of the older members of the indigenous communities in Texcatepec have told the radio that they see the bands as a way for young people to be reintegrated into the community.

people and a man with a microphone. Inside, a man sitting at a typewriter, surrounded by piles of old tapes and records, answers the phone.

"Hello," says the voice from the other end. "This is Diego Alberto calling from New York. I would like to dedicate 'Las Mañanitas' to my daughter who is turning three today."

Every day, Radio Huaya receives calls from indigenous and mestizo men who have migrated to New York. A large part of the announcements made six times a day are messages from *El Otro Lado* (The Other Side): "Angelina García, please go to the telephone booth in El Papatlar on Saturday at 10:00 to receive a phone call from Isaac," or "The family of Pablo Ricardo, don't worry; he arrived safely at his destination."

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service. Migrants working in carwashes, as delivery boys or in construction send messages to receive money orders, phone calls or just to say hello from Queens and the Bronx.

Radio Huaya receives between 800 and 1,000 hand-delivered letters a week. Ricardo González, one of three radio announcers at the station, explains that many of them are sent from surrounding indigenous communities with the merchants who come into Huayacocotla for the weekly market.

The letters are not the only way they know the radio’s 500 watts are working.

“In the indigenous communities, the people know you,” explains Pedro Ruperto. “You arrive and they ask, ‘Who are you?’ ‘Pedro Ruperto,’ you say, or ‘Ricardo González,’ and they hug you.

“It feels good to know they are listening to you when they heat tortillas, when they are eating, when they are sad, when they are happy.”

Radio Huayacocotla dates back to 1965, when a radio school was established here. In 1973, however, the program closed, and in 1975, a group of Jesuits was invited to come to Huaya and establish a community radio project, based on programs in South and Central America.

In those years, the first changes were made, converting the antenna from a “clothesline” to a tall vertical tower. At first, the Jesuits focused on problems such as foresting resources and kaolin production in the mestizo communities.

Alfredo Zepeda, one of the first Jesuit priests to arrive in Huaya, laughs, remembering how they used to play protest music by Silvio Rodríguez instead of local music from the region.

“In those days I didn’t even know how to say hello or thank you in Otomí,” he says. “I knew Otomí was spoken, but you never saw them or talked with them or had any real contact.”

In the early 1990s, all of this changed. In Texcatepec, directly across the ravine from Huayacocotla, outbreaks of violence exploded over land issues.

Every day people who were organizing in the valleys began to be kidnapped, tortured or killed.

“We turned things around and tried to see the world not just from Huaya, but from the indigenous communities,” explains Zepeda.

In 1995, soon after the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Radio Huayacocotla was one of many community radios closed down by the government. For three months, because of supposed “technical errors,” the “Voice of the Campesinos” remained off the air.

Authorities told Zepeda, “You are broadcasting coded messages.” Zepeda’s answer: “That code is Otomí.”

In fact, Radio Huaya is one of only two community radio stations in Mex-

Every day, Radio Huaya receives calls from indigenous and mestizo men who have migrated to New York. It has become a form of communication in a region where there are few phones and an unreliable mail service.



ico with permission to transmit, but only on shortwave. Although the radio has distributed at least 1,700 shortwave sets in the region, people still come into the station to ask how they can make their radio get Radio Huaya.

Because it is shortwave and has no filters at the moment, the radio sometimes turns up in unwanted places: the television, for example, or the speakers in the Catholic church.

"Los Cuatro del Pueblo play really well, don't they?" one man asked Ricardo González. "I don't have a radio, but my neighbor plays it at top volume!"

Currently, Radio Huaya is one of 43 radio stations in Mexico belonging to the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) negotiating with the Ministry of the Interior to ask for legal permission to broadcast on FM or AM.

The AMARC radios range from indigenous radios to urban youth stations

to women's programs. Most of them have no legal permits whatsoever. One group in the northern state of Sonora was told to prove they had at least one million pesos (about U.S.\$100,000) and even then the permission would not be guaranteed.

For the government, community radios are easily bunched together as "pirate, clandestine, guerrilla and subversive," and in the past it has used the army to investigate and report on them.

Aleida Calleja, director of AMARC México says the majority of reports against community radios come from the owners of private commercial stations.

"Mexico is number one in media monopolies," she states. According to AMARC, two families control 86 percent of the country's television, and 13 groups manage 90 percent of radio broadcasts.

Although the Ministry of the Interior promised not to make any moves against the radio stations during dialogue with AMARC, the Ministry of Communications and Transportation has attempted to close down several different community radios, from Oaxaca and Michoacán to the outskirts of Mexico City in 2003.

Radio Huaya has asked for permission to broadcast on AM twice in the past. Denied in 1978, in 1984 the radio received permission from the Ministry of Communications and Transportation to transmit on 1350 KHz, but the Ministry of the Interior never followed through.

Even if the government decides not to give them AM or FM licenses, Radio Huayacocotla is becoming a bulwark for indigenous autonomy. There, in the small town with cobblestone streets and apple trees perched among pine forested mountains, two adolescent girls approach the door to the station.

Giggling, they walk through the waiting area, covered in photographs and posters, and explain they want to send a message.

Lucrecia Linares leads them down the hall into the studio covered in foam rubber, across from the tiny cabin where Ricardo González is sitting among compact disks and a newly acquired computer.

"We have a dedication," he says in Spanish, and signals for them to begin. The girls speak one at a time, in Spanish and then in Tepehua, and leave with shy smiles on their faces.

In the studio, between smooth pine walls and microphones, standing under the foam rubber ceiling, one can almost hear a brass band playing, recording their first tune to be played over the radio and into these hills. **MM**