

2018

# The Link Between Latinx and American Music

Koby T. Sonnabend

*Eastern Washington University*, [Ksonnabend@eagles.ewu.edu](mailto:Ksonnabend@eagles.ewu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw\\_2018](https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw_2018)

---

## Recommended Citation

Sonnabend, Koby T., "The Link Between Latinx and American Music" (2018). *2018 Symposium*. 7.  
[https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw\\_2018/7](https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw_2018/7)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the EWU Student Research and Creative Works Symposium at EWU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2018 Symposium by an authorized administrator of EWU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jotto@ewu.edu](mailto:jotto@ewu.edu).

The Link Between Latinx and American Music

Koby T. Sonnabend

Eastern Washington University

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Martín Meráz García, Ph.D.

Author's Note

Koby Sonnabend is an Eastern Washington University Student. This paper was submitted for consideration to the 21st Annual EWU Research and Creative Works Symposium in March, 2018 in Cheney, WA and submitted as an assignment for Introduction to Chicana/Latina Culture (CHST 101/ANTH 161). Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Koby

Sonnabend. Contact: [Ksonnabend@eagles.ewu.edu](mailto:Ksonnabend@eagles.ewu.edu)

### Abstract

Music is something that is constantly changing along with its listeners. What is unique about music is the affects it can have on communities and specific groups of people while in return, those people change the future music that will be released in the future. As the Latino population grows in the U.S., the impact felt by the culture follows suit. Latinx musical elements are becoming an integrated part of American popular music which coincides with the increasing presence of Latinos in America. This paper will describe the traits present in Latino music and relate them to developing traits in modern American music. Celebration and cultural pride for example, are some of the most common themes from traditional Latinx music and are present in some of the most popular music in modern-day America. The sources used in this study are peer reviewed journal articles and textbooks as well as Billboard's online archive.

*Keywords:* Latinos, Music, Culture, Popular Music, Latinx Music

### The Link Between Latinx and American Music

It is widely known that musicians influence other musicians. In today's music, it can be subtle or hard to pick out elements of classical music, but the characteristics are still there assisting the message in being interpreted by the listener appropriately. And with the growing Latino population in the United States, there are increasingly more Latino musicians. This influx in numbers have brought success to Latino artists and as a natural consequence, American popular music has adopted traits of these artists' works. The musical characteristics shared between Latinx music and American popular music, and how those shared traits have created a more blended, diverse American culture will be the focus of this paper. This idea has happened in the past with the African American community. So, it is no surprise to see it has been reoccurring with the Latino community in the United States. For many previous decades, the African American community was segregated in American society, much like how the Latino population was; and this included the musical community (Starr, 2008). But because music is not a visual media, therefore colorless, it allows musicians to be on an equal level. We are far less likely to discriminate by race when we cannot tell of which race everybody is.

In decades past, there were few musicians who topped the charts in the United States. Santana broke through in the 70's and brought Latin Rock into the spotlight during that time and as a result, earned him the honor of being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Santana's most iconic piece, "Oye Como Va!", was not just a catchy tune people could dance to. The song was originally written by Tito Puente and Santana changed portions of it to fit the subgenre that he had been creating but kept the main identities and call to "pay attention" (Hernandez, 2010). "Oye Como Va!" was released during a crucial point in the Latino community's history. The 1960's and 1970's were a critical point in time for the Latino

community and culture. Discrimination and racism were very common against Latinos and was often ignored by the Government. The release and incredible popularity of Santana's work was received as a call to young Latinos to embrace their culture and to overcome the disadvantages they had been facing throughout the prior years (Hernandez, 2010). The line "Bueno pa gozar" loosely translates to "good for enjoying". This was interpreted by Latinos (as well as many white American listeners) to mean that you should not focus on negatives in life but find enjoyment in life which will help you overcome the obstacles easier (Hernandez, 2010).

By the 1980's popular music in the U.S. not only was defined at the time by musicians of different races and cultural backgrounds, but the collaboration of artists with different backgrounds was much more common (Starr, 2008). This trend continued and remains a common occurrence. The increase in the population of Latinos in the U.S. means that there is also an increase in Latino musicians and music consumers. As a matter of fact, the Latino population spends more time listening to music per person than any other major people groups in the U.S. (G. Peoples, 2015). Music is a business selling a product. Like any other business, the people releasing the product want large groups of people to buy it. If this were not true, the company would not be profitable and would fade away. So, unsurprisingly, this means that as the Latino population continues to increase, the impact that they have on music in the U.S. will also increase. Not only is an understanding of Latinx music critical to understanding Latinx culture, but it provides insight to what American music is becoming more and more driven by. Also, it allows further understanding regarding the culture of an increasingly large people group in the nation.

An extremely impactful style of music, the habanera, is widely known for its Cuban roots, two counts, and syncopation patterns that were most common in 19<sup>th</sup> century jazz music.

Syncopation is a rhythmic technique that adds flavor and interest to a song (Starr, 2008). If you counted along with a song's beat (i.e. 1 2 3 4) and added an "and" between any downbeat (i.e. 1 2 3 & 4), the beat becomes much more interesting and much more musical. The habanera began to cross into American mainstream bringing its distinct rhythms and dance-oriented style to the spotlight (Starr, 2008). Paul Simon was one of the artists responsible for this shift and brought us the start of the dance-focused music we create in American Popular music. (Starr, 2008). These rhythmic shifts carried throughout multiple genres. From Latin rock, to hip-hop, country, and all the way to funk. This helped lay the foundation for the road that was to be laid for the progression of American and Latinx music. As hip-hop rose and gave birth to dance music, the habanera was slowly moved out of the direct spotlight but remained to be a vital part of American popular music. And again, this rhythmic style became chart topping in 1981.

When Joan Jett & The Blackhearts released their version of the track "I Love Rock N' Roll", the rhythmic styles were new and a nice change from typical garage rockers were used to hearing. According to their own archives this song hit number one on the Billboard Hot 100 and remained there for over seven weeks. Joan Jett's hit shared the same habanera-like rhythmic style of Paul Simon's music, but appealed to a much different crowd; and Billboard's records clearly show us that the American rockers clearly loved it. This effectively paved the road for Latin rock traits to over time become an integral part of American rock.

It is without question that this key characteristic of Latinx music was essential to the success of the music moving forward. As a result, when artists like Jennifer Lopez, Pitbull, and Enrique Iglesias broke out into American Popular music, they brought with them the roots of their culture; so, it was no surprise when their music took over the styles moving forward into today. Surprisingly, some of the tracks these artists released even featured lines of Spanish. This

was not commonly done in American music, and when it was, most of the time it was almost never a hit song. This is because in American music, the listener is focused on vocal melody (Starr, 2008). Not being able to understand the lyrics of a song makes it hard for someone who is accustomed to American popular music to become interested. This is the same reason why movies that are in different languages rarely become especially popular; especially in countries that, like America, have so many people that only speak one language. Despite this drawback, this trait is somewhat becoming more accepted and has created a new element and challenge in creating music for Latinx musicians (Spencer, 2016).

The featuring of Spanish phrases was a huge step in the development of the musical culture in America and was almost never chart-topping until Santana released his rendition of “Oye Como Va!” (Hernandez, 2010). As this characteristic of Latinx music became more popular and accepted in American Popular music, it could also be interpreted as a representation of the two cultures beginning to blend together socially in the U.S.

Jennifer Lopez for example, has appeared on Billboard’s Hot 100 multiple times and has reached top 15 on 10 different occasions. The release of these chart-topping hits ranges from 1999 to 2011. Several songs in which include many Spanish lyrics. In modern America, the acceptance of the Spanish language is even still a working progress. The high school walkouts in the 1960’s was largely motivated by the failure of Californian schools to accept Spanish language and culture (Colón-Muñiz, 2015). However, the inclusion of Latinx culture in music has helped lead to a more inclusive American society that we now live in (Hernandez, 2010). Though there are still some things that could be improved. The inclusion of Spanish lyrics and acceptance of these lyrics are critical to developing a culture that is diverse and proud of being diverse (Hernandez, 2010).

Combining these characteristics of Latinx music provides insight into how American music has been impacted. Modern music, as opposed to early jazz, is very repetitive. This helps our brains memorize and categorize the things we are hearing and makes us much more likely to listen again or recognize the song if heard in the future (Starr, 2008). The fact is that humans almost always enjoy positive emotions and thoughts much more than negative ones; and we know that music is capable of bringing the listener's emotions to the surface (Hernandez, 2010). This is largely the reason why the themes of celebration are so popular in Latinx music as well as American music (Hernandez, 2010). As people are becoming more social and enjoy spending time at public areas, the music being released and played at these places need to continue to suit that environment. Imagine walking into a night club and hearing Beethoven's 4<sup>th</sup> Concerto. Not only would this be surprising but would make the atmosphere seem rather uncomfortable. Unsurprisingly, celebration and dance, and an overall upbeat theme are dominant in today's music to suit this lifestyle.

In the 1900-1950's, music was generally of a more somber theme. This being because of the rather unfortunate events that were occurring one after another in America and in the world. For example, World War One took place and millions of people died defending their countries. Then shortly after, the U.S.'s stock market crashed, and the Great Depression caused a nation-wide economic struggle. Then, without skipping a beat, the U.S. joined the Allied Forces in World War Two. Which again allowed widespread death and financial struggle to find its way into the minds of Americans. Unsurprisingly, this caused the music at the time to be (for the most part) rather sad, dark, and depressing (Starr, 2008). The way in which this is written may cause negative connotations to be assigned to the music being described. However, this music is

unquestionably some of the most inspirational and most important with regard to the way in which contemporary American music developed (Starr, 2008).

These key traits of Latinx music touched on above reflect the cultural pride of Latinos and their breakthrough into American Popular music represents the ability of the culture to overcome the suppression they faced especially up until the 70's when activists began receiving the attention and representation of American politicians. We can still see these characteristics in the American scene, but they are no longer as new and are more established in the construction of music which thereby makes them harder to notice in each song. Contrary to the previous years past, this could mean not that the culture is being shut out once again, but that it has become more of an integral part of American culture, especially regarding music and musical construction (Spencer, 2016). This has created diversity in the musical community which in turn creates more diverse and unique musical styles and continues to make music be an extremely dynamic entity.

There is a clear connection between Latinx and American music especially regarding the rhythmic patterns used by both of these parties. This particular paper is a brief description of how these two cultures have meshed together musically. What is fascinating is that little of it is easily recognizable and often requires prior knowledge of how music is constructed. The author believes that this is largely because music is not a visual media aside from music videos which are not as often consumed by the masses (Starr, 2008). This allows music to channel thoughts and emotions without our personal opinions changing how the message is intended to be received. These messages can be very much influenced by culture and express the unique traits each person or group of people has (Spencer, 2016). These can be very relatable and enjoyable and when people enjoy similar things, they become one larger group that is accepting of

differences. Music is widely believed to bring people together. We have seen it happen in the past and it is currently happening now in America; allowing the Latino culture to be better accepted into the American culture. We have a limited amount of time in our lives and it is meant to be enjoyed. “Bueno pa gozar”.

## References

Colón-Muñiz, Anaida, and Magaly C. Lavadenz. *Latino Civil Rights in Education: La Lucha Sigue*. New York; London: Routledge, 2015.

G. Peoples and L. Cobo, "LATINOS AND MUSIC: RESILIENT, GROWING," *Billboard*, vol. 127, (12), pp. 51, 2015.

L. Cobo, "Behind Latin Music's World Takeover," *Billboard*, vol. 129, (19), pp. 15-16, 2017.

Pacini Hernandez, D. (2010). *Oye como va! hybridity and identity in Latino popular music*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Starr, L., Waterman, Christopher Alan, & United States. Department of State. Bureau of International Information Programs. (2008). *American popular music*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of State, Bureau of International Information Programs.

Spencer Espinosa, C., & Mendivil, Julio. (2016). *Made in Latin America: Studies in popular music* (Routledge global popular music series). New York: Routledge.