

Chicano Music: An Influence on Gang Violence and Culture

by Gabe Morales,
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The rivalries between black East Coast and West Coast gangster rappers have received a great deal of media attention in recent years, particularly in regard to high-profile violent gang incidents involving individuals, groups, and companies. For years, record companies capitalized on the violent gangster image. However, when Ice-T released *Body Count*, the resulting backlash against the album's glorification of violence directed toward law enforcement officers resulted in Time Warner severing his contract. Gangster rap music has historically included elements of gang-related violence in lyrics. Even the U.S. Congress has held hearings on the issue of violent gangster rap music, and has called upon the expertise of gang specialists like Ret. Sergeant Ron Stallworth, Utah Department of Public Safety, to provide testimony regarding violence in the gangster rap industry. Much of the media focus has been on black rap artists. However, music has played a historical role with Latino gangs, and popular Latino artists have been influenced by the gang culture, as well. Oldies and Rap continue to be popular with the gang members of this decade.

The influence of gangs upon music, and vice versa, goes back to the *Bandito* days of the 1800s. *Corrido* songs were written about the exploits of Mexican rebel leaders (banditos) and what many sympathizers felt was "gringo oppression" during the Mexican-American War. These songs became even more popular during the Mexican Revolution. In the Pachuco days, big band songs were based upon the 1940s Zoot Suit Riots in L.A. and major cities. The *Pachuko Hop* was released by Chuck Higgins who grew up in the Aliso Village barrio. Based on the success of that song, Higgins released another song, *Wetback Hop*. This title would undoubtedly cause quite a commotion nowadays. "Chico" Sesma promoted L.A.-area concerts and had a radio program that was popular with Chicano youth in the 1950s, including gang members. In particular, the Chicanos in this era loved ballads sung by black artists, the so-called "Doo Wop" groups.

Ricardo Valenzuela, from Pacoima, California, who was better known as Ritchie Valens, was just one of the many popular Latino singers in southern California who played at concerts in El Monte's Legion Stadium, the Pomona Auditorium, and other music halls. Art Leboe, a popular disc jockey, recorded many of these songs on his "Oldies, but Goodies" compilations. Dick Hugg, better known as "Huggy Boy," was another popular disc jockey during this time period. Today, gang members listen to similar radio shows such as "The Sancho Show" in Southern California and the "Bajito Onda Show" in northern California.

The song *Louie, Louie*, still a popular favorite at Mexican-American weddings for its Latino beat, was the subject of an FBI investigation (one of Edgar J. Hoover's many paranoid delusions), and was almost banned by right-wing politicians

because it had a mix of white, black, and Chicano music and a rebellious message. *Louie, Louie* was a party rebel song enjoyed by Chicanos and American kids alike. A great explanation of this song is now given at the new Experience Music Project museum built by one-time rebel (and now establishment billionaire) Paul Allen. The Kingsmen, who recorded *Louie, Louie*, were a Seattle-based band from the 1960s. The song remains popular with many of today's youth. During the 1960s and early 1970s, an East L.A. band, Thee Midnighters, produced *Whittier Boulevard*, named after a famous lowrider cruising strip, and culminated their career with a song entitled *Chicano Power*, about the east L.A. riot. This song was very popular with members of the "Brown Berets" and Chicano gang members, who were sometimes called "Batos Locos" according to David Reyes, a Chicano music historian. A band called El Chicano wrote a Latin jazz tune called *Viva Tirado* (which roughly translates to "long live throwing down," a reference to getting into the party groove). The term "throwing down" is now a reference to throwing gang handsigns in today's street gang culture. This song was later sampled by Kid Frost in his song, *This is for La Raza*, which was heavily gang-influenced. The video for the song prominently depicts Cholo-style gangsters.

There are other popular songs that are gang-influenced or have been adopted by gangs as their theme songs. *I'm Eighteen with a Bullet*, recorded by Pete Wingfield, and included on a 1970's lowrider music album reprint, *Eastside Story, Volume 12*, is the 18th Street Gang's theme song. *Slippin' into Darkness*, by WAR, is popular amongst tecatos (junkies). *Natural High* by Bloodstone was adopted by the Pirus on the tiers at Folsom Prison as their theme song. While these songs are popular with non-gang members, there are some music groups who are increasingly involved in hardcore promotion of gang warfare and violence towards law enforcement officers. When the Hip-Hop culture first began to gain momentum in the late 1970s, Latinos were very active as DJ's, break-dancers, and taggers, but few got on the microphone to rap. However, this has changed. Many Latino rappers are now "getting on the mike." The Hip-Hoppers call this "spitting," and popular rappers like Eminem may make references like: "just wanna' spit it, get wit' it..." Some of the present-day Latino gangsta' rappers make Kid Frost's *La Raza* look like a church hymn.

Many Gang Specialists have pointed to a trend of Norteno gangs rallying around Latino rap music companies to get their messages out to young people in a popular music format. The Generation of United Nortenos (GUN) Coalition recorded music promoting the gang lifestyle. The Producer of these recording later became an informant. Black-n-Brown Productions in the Bay Area put out Norteno music. *Darkroom Familia* (Salinas and Tracy Area), before it was shut down by the government arrest of David Rocha, also released a recent CD entitled *Gang Stories*. The CD liner notes from *Gang Stories* state: "The authorities pulled the CD off store shelves...we're not just rappers, we live la vida loca. Violence solves everything! The cops are trying to pick us all off, this is Darkroom Familia, Homeboy, till the wheels fall off! - Sir Dyno."

Symbols which have become entrenched within the Hispanic street gang culture often originated within the music scene. One of these is the "Smile Now, Cry Later" or Happy Face/Sad Face tattoos worn by many gang members. According to the information that I have gathered, a 1960's song by Sonny (Ozuna) and the Sunliners called *Smile Now (for My Friends) and Cry Later*, appeared as a reproduction on the *East Side Story* lowrider records (now in reprint) that were popular in the seventies. For Chicano gang members, the phrase "Smile Now, Cry Later" also represents *Mi Vida Loca* (translated as "My Crazy Life"). The term Smile Now is symbolic of the gangster lifestyle of running the streets and partying with friends and "Homies." But, the lifestyle leads ultimately to getting busted, going to jail or prison, and being away from loved ones, thus "Cry Later." Los Solidos, a gang in the northeastern U.S., also uses this phrase as a symbol of their gang, and it is also commonly used by non-Chicano gang members around the U.S. However, this phrase is not a reference to any specific gang, but is more of a commentary on gang life in general. More recently, Kid Frost made a 1995 rap-release of the song *Smile Now, Die Later* and young people across the U.S. have adopted the phrase to fit the "live fast, die young" mentality of the street.

It might be very easy to conclude that much of this ethnic music is gang-related. However, that conclusion is not warranted. These styles of music, including Oldies, are popular with a wide segment of the overall population. However, the gang lifestyle has influenced the songs of many Latino singers and bands who grew up in gang-infested neighborhoods. This music, in turn, may influence the behavior of the younger gang member/listener but is not necessarily indicative of gang involvement. At this point in time, Latino rap has had a relatively small market share when compared to other forms of rap.

With the increasing numbers of Latino youth in the U.S. and cross-over with the "Latino Hit Explosion" of 1999, this style of music may eventually increase in popularity. Professionals working with gang members should be aware of the role which music has historically played in the gang culture, as well as the increasing use of music by gangs to built recruitment and support for their gang. The growing violence in the lyrics in these songs also seems to indicate a trend toward willingness on the part of gang members to commit violent acts directed at law enforcement officers.

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