

INTRODUCTION



the mexican american generation, music, and los angeles

[Like jazz], History is also everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms being played simultaneously. The events and people we write about did not occur in isolation but in dialogue with a myriad of other people and events.

—Elsa Barkley Brown, “Polyrhythms and Improvization”

I don't want to be put in a label, in a category. It's the same with my music.

—Gil Bernal, interview by author

Mexican American Mojo documents the culture, consciousness, pride, and prejudice of a generation of Mexican Americans who worked hard, served their country, composed music, studied theory, wrote lyrics, and pushed ahead. As an urban cultural history, it analyzes mixed-race neighborhoods, dance spaces, and music scenes that challenged the attempted containment of Mexican Americans and African Americans in a segregated city marked by racial discrimination. As a Chicano cultural history, it shows how, from the Great Depression to the Vietnam War, Mexican Americans created prototypically Chicano and Chicana cultural expressions, refusing to remain marginalized as they both contributed to and struggled against the larger society. Particularly in Southern California, they represented a “hep” wartime, and “cool” postwar counterculture with a street edge and

a tough, working-class masculinity and femininity. They produced, consumed, and customized mass culture, yet as members of a “racialized” group they never completely melted into the pot, maintaining Spanish and interlingual usage and exhibiting a distinctive sensibility.¹ As workers, they ran the gamut, hustling in underground economies, toiling in anonymous jobs, joining labor unions, acquiring skilled trades, and even achieving fame, both fleeting and long-lasting. During this period, Mexican Americans rejected second-class citizenship, transformed Los Angeles, and enriched American culture.

Chicano historians have employed a political generation paradigm to describe the successive cohorts of urbanized, educated Mexican Americans who came of political age during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. As illustrated by existing social, political, intellectual, and musical histories, members of the “Mexican American generation” were neither passive nor monolithic.² This book sheds new light on their creations, aspirations, acculturations, and associations, brushing layered details into a historiographic portrait of a generation, while arguing for an alternative geography of Chicano Los Angeles that ranges far beyond East L.A., and an alternative genealogy of Chicano music that incorporates jazz, and even classical, family tree branches. In addition, by proceeding from the assumption that Mexican American and African American cultures were mutually constitutive in wartime and postwar Los Angeles, the book also brings Chicano studies into dialogue with African American studies. Connecting these two fields opens a third path of interpretation, beyond a limiting binary pitting an assimilationist Mexican American generation against a nationalist Chicano generation. Based on the evidence presented in this study, both assimilationist and nationalist arguments could be seen as flights from blackness that raise problematic issues regarding Chicanos and whiteness. Even though some Mexicans and Mexican Americans have distanced themselves from black people over the years, scholars need not unnecessarily distance Chicano history from African Americans. With this in mind, the book traces the ways that African Americans and Mexican Americans informed each other and the English language, particularly in the realm of popular music, as illustrated by the West African–derived word *mojo* in the title.

Mojo is a small flannel bag, worn on one’s person, containing powerful amulets and charms intended to conjure spells for winning luck in gambling, attaining or preventing love, and starting or stopping a hex or jinx.

2 Introduction

Mojo is linked with New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz, where Afro-Caribbean folk medicine took root in the United States. As it evolved, the term *mojo* went hand-in-hand with African American popular music, from 1920s New Orleans jazz parlance to 1930s rural blues lyrics. In 1957, gospel singer-turned-secular shouter Ann Cole recorded “Got My Mo-Jo Working (But It Just Won’t Work On You),” a saxophone rocker in which the lovelorn narrator follows a gypsy woman’s advice by using, among other things, cured, dried “black cat bones,” and “hoodoo ashes.” That same year, urban blues guitarist Muddy Water’s version became one of his signature songs, influencing countless British and American rock bands of the 1960s and ensuring that the term entered into the mainstream completely.³

As the Afro-diasporic word *mojo* crossed over into common usage, it lost much of its original association with magical talismans and supernatural luck. Hence, the *American Heritage Dictionary* also defines *mojo* as “personal magnetism” or “charm.”⁴ *Mojo* is used herein to signify good fortune, but also personal character, strength, and inner ability. In particular, it describes the ability of Mexican Americans to control their lives, fight for their civil rights, pursue higher economic standards of living, and influence popular culture with their innovative styles. Just as Clarence Major’s *Dictionary of African American Slang* defines having one’s “mojo working” as experiencing “good luck or success,” the members of the Los Angeles Mexican American generation had their “mojo working.”⁵

In other words, “Mexican American mojo” refers to the power of Mexican Americans as everyday historical actors to exert agency, choice, and free will in the face of multiple structural constraints.⁶ At the same time, it also refers to their modern urban expressive culture. Chicanos and Chicanas are a multifaceted group of people whose culture cannot be reduced to a static set of essentialized, stereotypical traits; however, they have developed a cumulative, collective way of expressing their relation to the world. Specifically, their suave, laid-back style, which includes a visual aesthetic favoring clean lines and stylized silhouettes, is reflected in their attitude, body language, walk, talk, dance, fashion, automobiles, and even bicycles. As heard in certain musical genres more than others, there is also something unique in their phrasing, intonation, and accent. Over centuries, the Spanish language in Mexico borrowed many translated Indian expressions, as well as many indigenous words, pronunciations, and spellings. The special lilt of Mexican Spanish has been called the *canto mexicano*, or

Mexican song, and it shaped the Mexican American generation, as did the gypsy-borderlands-barrio youth dialect *caló*, as well as the rhyming jive of Harlem and Central Avenue “hep cats.”

Culturally, rather than identifying pure Mexican features, hidden Indian strains, or latent Chicano aspects, the book indicates how people used popular music, dance, and style to articulate a point of view—an identity—both Mexican and American. Artistically, across the period the recurrent theme remained eclecticism, as Mexican American musicians consistently selected what they considered the best elements and methods from diverse sources. Not every one of their many compositions in the popular styles of each era must be labeled “Mexican American music.” Nevertheless, taken together, their songbook should be considered the music of the Mexican American generation, even when based on black forms, or when conveyed entirely in English. In general, Mexican Americans produced their own soulful, cool Chicano aesthetic, whether they were *pachucos* and *pachucas* in all-black zoot suit fashions dancing to black big bands; low-riding *cholos* in tinted sunglasses cruising their customized classic cars to rhythm and blues; or dapper mambo dancers stepping and twirling to interlocking Afro-Cuban polyrhythms. These vibrant creative expressions embodied a deep spirit of ceremony, revisioned in urban musical environments. I therefore use the African American term *mojo* to evoke a kindred Mexican American oral culture that tells stories to the next generations, a folk healing that utilizes an ancient knowledge of curing roots and herbs, a paganish spirituality that maintains relationships with one’s ancestors, and a ritualistic music and dance that raises the spirits of both performer and audience.⁷ Ethnic Mexican peoples have their own histories of transculturation and canny adaptation; their own relationship to percussion instruments and the rhythm of the drum, to what is deemed not sacred but superstitious or savage by white European Enlightenment societies. They have their own tradition of “trickeration”—of struttin’ their stuff and stoppin’ the show.⁸

Like the black “race rebel” zoot suiter, “El Pachuco” is a “bad man” in the Stackolee, or Staggerlee mold, while the “Black Widow” *pachucas* from the Eastside paralleled the African American “slick chicks” from Central Avenue.⁹ Mexican Americans and African Americans in Los Angeles shared strong bonds, from the zoot suit and the jitterbug to neighborhood jazz instructors and high schools, from boogie woogie and jump blues to doo

wop, Motown, and Afro-Latin music. Although they began the 1940s as despised racial groups, their respective social, racial, and class statuses seemed to diverge, as Mexican Americans managed to benefit from the wartime and postwar booms by exploiting the slight but significant advantages they enjoyed over African Americans. Still, while some Mexican Americans secured higher positions, the majority of them suffered through regional economic contractions, and their realization of the American dream was often thwarted by Anglos and white ethnics who still perceived them not only as dark, dangerous, exotic “others,” but also as expendable manual laborers. Thus, visible gains during the period notwithstanding, Mexican American Angelenos still experienced class insecurity and instability.

Yet this story is not one of victimization in which Mexican Americans were entirely constrained by what the larger society would allow. For example, Mexican Americans were not trapped in Eastside barrios. Instead, they insisted on having a run of the city—a contested run, but one in which they asserted their freedom of movement, their freedom of assembly, and their social mobility. Since they refused to be held back physically or artistically, the city’s music and dance scenes enabled them to occupy different spaces in various neighborhoods, providing them room to maneuver further. As a result, Mexican American Angelenos not only claimed public space across the city and the region, but also infused American culture with a sardonic, satirical, and improvisational Chicano style. At a time when European Americans protected segregated social gains, Mexican Americans merged black music, dance, and fashion idioms with their own, entered the popular culture industries, and succeeded, as I will show, at the intersections between the margins and the mainstream, between the minority and the majority. I therefore examine their cultural practices and creative productions in order to reveal the political possibilities and outward ambitions, as well as the social imagination and interior life, of a people.

In 1970, Chicano studies scholar Fernando Peñalosa outlined a continuum of Mexican American identity, arguing that rather than make sweeping generalizations about such a heterogeneous group, we should try to establish a “range of variation.”¹⁰ In that spirit, the following account attempts to render the Mexican American generation in its full diversity and complexity, especially its thematic, stylistic, and conceptual orientation, open-minded enough to draw from Mexican, Latin American, Afri-

can American, Anglo, Jewish, and even British cultures. The book illuminates a historical moment in which Mexican Americans connected and engaged with other racial, ethnic, and class groups, in which they interacted with, and even entertained the dominant society. Mexican Americans adopted mass culture to satisfy their need for music and dance, tailoring both mainstream and antiestablishment forms to speak to their specific situations.¹¹ Meanwhile, their own modern, versatile styles covered the full spectrum of moves, sounds, rhythms, harmonies, and melodies, while continuing certain Mexican and Latin American forms. Mexican Americans were included in some arenas yet excluded from others, and their bicultural, hybrid sensibility produced a kind of “double consciousness.”¹² Moreover, during a period when many Mexican American Angelenos were frustrated with their socioeconomic position yet hopeful about the benefits of assimilation, African American music and style proved to be an ideal model of both participation in and resistance to Anglo American society.¹³ Conversely, the detached attitude, or “studied indifference” of the pachucos, and later, the cholos, resonated with disaffected blacks, as it eventually would with many white youths.¹⁴

Politically, Southern California’s climate of racial retrenchment created a cultural landscape in which civic institutions and grass-roots collectives mirrored competing discourses of morality. This postwar drama played out in a regional context of federal defense contracts, population explosion, rapid decentralization, and a growing disparity between an affluent white suburbia and a poor “colored” inner city. In particular, nightlife entertainment venues became sites of contestation over public policy and civic values, as city politics met cultural politics. Viewing Los Angeles through the prism of popular music therefore produces a fresh take on a city open to multiple readings. Mapping the multicultural terrain of popular music, in other words, reimagines the racial geography, and scholarly biography, of Los Angeles.¹⁵ Similarly, inscribing Chicanos and other Latinos into the literature on jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll reorients popular music studies from black/white binaries and New Deal/postwar divides, while grafting Los Angeles to the body of scholarship on Latin music mitigates any East Coast exceptionalism. Finally, my Los Angeles “case study” can help illuminate the ways that other people navigate the public spaces of, and construct democratic civil societies in, other multicultural cities.

on organization and themes

The book is composed of five research chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion. The first four chapters proceed in chronological order, although the second focuses on the war years, while the fifth chapter doubles back and spans the entire period again. Chapter 1 begins to sketch the contours of the Mexican American generation in Los Angeles by presenting everyday music lovers who danced the jitterbug to nationally famous and local big bands, and by introducing a cohort of professional modern jazz musicians who also grew up during the Great Depression, came of age during the Second World War, and took part in the cultural life of the swing era. Chapter 2 traces the evolution of the early 1940s African American zoot suit style, situating pachucas and pachucos in the local urban music and dance scenes, comparing them to black hep cats, and even contrasting them with Mexican American “squares.” Chapter 3 follows not only the continuing black-brown cultural cross-pollination as postwar Mexican American Angelenos produced and consumed jazz, jump blues, and “pachuco boogie,” but also several of the swing-era musicians’ careers, as well as the broader Mexican American stylistic aesthetic, and socioeconomic struggle, into the rhythm and blues era.

Chapter 4 examines Mexican Americans’ intensive involvement in doo wop and rock and roll, placing the familiar histories of white disc jockeys, Mexican American car cruisers, Ritchie Valens, El Monte American Legion Stadium, and the Eastside rock music scene in the book’s analytical and theoretical framework. In addition, this chapter continues tracking our straight-ahead jazz, and all-around entertainer protagonists, as well as Mexican American style, upward mobility, and political praxis, into the rock and roll era. Chapter 5 completes the study, re-creating the city’s Latin music scene of rumbas, boleros, Latin jazz, mambos, and cha cha chás, while adding the final texture to the overall generational portrait. Specifically, this last chapter argues that Mexican Americans repudiated segregation and an Anglo-imposed cultural identity as labor commodities by participating in a sophisticated, Spanish-language Latino cosmopolitanism, through which they demanded dignity.

In sum, the book details the development of a distinct Mexican American expressive culture, and of a “multicultural urban civility,” while profiling key neighborhoods, high schools, and musical venues. As Mexican

Americans responded to injustice, and opportunity, chapter 1 shows how they began to push out beyond the downtown and Eastside areas, while in chapter 2 the clash between antagonistic forces, each with its own vision of civil society, intensifies, as the Anglo powers that be, and everyday whites, push back. Chapters 3 and 4 can be read as dispatches from the many postwar flashpoints in what had become a cultural cold war, even as more Mexican Americans moved from the central and eastern city to surrounding suburbs. Another line of inquiry, threaded throughout, is the extent of interracial ties and tensions, principally Mexican Americans' complicated relationships with whites, blacks, Mexicanos, and other Latinos. The voices of unsung artists and unknown fans can be heard, while certain Chicano icons, from El Pachuco to well-known musicians and bands, are analyzed anew within the wider context of their contemporaries, the city, and the nation.

Gender is used as a category of analysis by highlighting the gendered innovations of Mexican American expressive culture, and the gendered limitations of urban civility. For example, pompadoured pachucas sported ensembles of exaggerated jackets, short, tight skirts, or, for those daring enough, the full zoot suit with the men's baggy slacks. The carefully coiffed, impeccably pressed pachucos, on the other hand, epitomized both classy pride and tough-guy stoicism, yet compared to typical business suits, the length and narrow waist of the zoot coat also evoked contemporary female fashions. Similar gender ambiguities arose in the 1960s, as Beatlemania invaded the Eastside, where some Mexican American women adopted British mods' straight bangs and international miniskirts, and where some male musicians wore long bangs and tight, skinny suits. By that time, Mexican American performers like Lalo Guerrero, Ritchie Valens, and Eddie Cano had introduced a stocky, *mestizo* masculinity into the culture industries; Gil Bernal, Don Tosti, and others had succeeded in the age of handsome Latin singers and bandleaders; and Mexican American women and other Latinas had increased their visibility in the urban public sphere as callers on rock and roll dedication shows, as members of all-girl car clubs, and as mambo dancers. Finally, a gendered power differential all too often reasserted male privilege, from limited job opportunities for female musicians to macho song lyrics, thereby lessening the egalitarianism of the music and dance scenes.

on terminology

The politicized term *Chicano*, which had long connoted lower-class status, was appropriated in the 1940s by some pachucos to signify defiant difference, and, in the 1960s, by militant activists to signify political self-determination, anti-assimilationist consciousness, indigenous racial heritage, and socioeconomic community empowerment. Even though the Mexican American generation originated many antecedent examples of contemporary Chicano culture, *Chicano* is, for the most part, used as a referent for the 1960s generation, rather than as a synonym for *Mexican American*, although both terms are employed to describe people of Mexican descent born and raised in the United States. The book uses *Mexican* or *Mexicano* for Mexican-born migrants and immigrants, and *ethnic Mexican* for both Mexicanos and Mexican Americans together. To acknowledge commonalities with other mestizos from former Spanish colonies, the term *Latino* is used to include ethnic Mexicans, but also to specify Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and non-Mexican Latin Americans. *Anglo*, *white*, and, to a lesser extent, *European American*, are used for the descendants of English, Scottish, Irish, French, Dutch, German, and northern European immigrants, as well as for the many Midwesterners and “Dust Bowl” refugees from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas who relocated to Los Angeles. *White ethnic* is also specified for the *Caucasian* children and grandchildren of Eastern, Central, and Southern European immigrants. *African American*, *black*, and, in its historical context, the period term *Negro*, are used for the ethnically diverse African descendants in the United States.

The term *assimilation* means something different in Southern California, where Spanish newcomers tried to convert Indians, who were forced to become nominally “Hispanicized,” and where nineteenth- and twentieth-century migrants from various backgrounds acclimated to a foreign environment with a Native American and ethnic Mexican presence. To assimilate typically means for a minority population to become similar to the majority society, into which it is absorbed. Yet assimilation is a matter of degrees, and it is a two-way process. Mexican Americans, who were never fully absorbed, have selectively assimilated cultural elements from whites, and also from blacks, both of whom have themselves appropriated elements of Chicano culture. For most Mexican Americans, therefore, assimilation never meant the complete adoption of middle-class white values, or the complete rejection of working-class Mexican values.

Genre names are ideological terms that market lifestyles and sell commodities for the corporate profit of an Anglo-dominant, historically racist American music industry.¹⁶ As this introduction's epigraphs attest, musicians did not exist in isolation, and many did not want to be pigeonholed by any one label, just as many music lovers and social dancers did not listen solely to one type of music or socialize solely with one group of people. Nonetheless, genre labels help theoretically conceptualize and chronologically organize my research findings, as demonstrated by the book's internal periodizations of different musical "eras." Geographically, the term *Eastside* is used broadly to denote the area east of the Los Angeles River, including Lincoln Heights, the neighborhood just northeast of downtown; Boyle Heights, the neighborhood just east of downtown; and of course, East Los Angeles proper, the unincorporated territory bounded by Boyle Heights to the west, City Terrace and Monterey Park to the north, Montebello to the east, and the City of Commerce to the south. The terms *Westside* and *West Los Angeles* are used broadly to denote the area west of Western Avenue, south of Hollywood Boulevard, and north of Venice Boulevard, although there is a "West Los Angeles" neighborhood just west of the 405 freeway, between Santa Monica and Olympic boulevards. For African Americans in South Los Angeles, the imaginary line dividing their version of the Eastside/Westside split has shifted westward through the years, from Central Avenue to Figueroa Street to Vermont Avenue to Western Avenue. The term *South Central Los Angeles* is used to denote the area south of downtown along Central Avenue and along Alameda Street. Finally, throughout the book, people's nicknames, stage names, maiden names, and married surnames are used as biographically appropriate, and when chronologically accurate.

take a little trip

As the "objective" historian, I will be your "omniscient" narrator, your tour guide on a trip that will examine ethnic identity, unpack essentialistic authenticity, and uncover cross-cultural connections—and disconnections. Along the way, we will meet Mexican American swing bandleaders with Japanese American drummers and Jewish American arrangers; young whites who became Mexican Americanized after growing up around ethnic Mexican families; Jewish American composers who wrote rhythm and blues songs for African American musicians; and Mexican Americans

who played Afro-Cuban music. In the pages that follow, the cultural networks that facilitated these exchanges will be analyzed across the city's many classrooms, workplaces, leisure spaces, record stores, and dance floors. Furthermore, we will see how African American, Mexican American, and Latino styles migrated across class and racial lines, via radios, record players, jukeboxes, television sets, and movie theaters.

For Mexican Americans, the period was one of emerging middle-class formations and burgeoning civil rights expectations, yet despite their increased mobility and visibility, many of them were still beset by police brutality, vigilante violence, racial discrimination, underfunded schools, Anglo stereotyping, and a combination of real estate redlining, electoral redistricting, urban renewal, and freeway construction that isolated, destabilized, and dissected ethnic Mexican barrios. Whites tried to put uppity minorities back in their place, but in the end, Mexican Americans rose up and commanded respect for their cultural creations and social achievements. Beginning with "Rosita the Riveter" war workers and returning servicemen, an untold number of Southern California Mexican Americans purchased homes, jump-started small businesses, and acquired technical skills, higher education, and white- or pink-collar jobs. Determined not to be treated economically like cheap labor, or socially like blacks, those members of the Mexican American generation who were veterans utilized the G.I. Bill to obtain college or vocational diplomas, and those who were musicians joined the all-white musicians union local.

Taken as a whole, although they seized every opportunity, maximized any advantage, and exhibited some antiblack prejudice, they never fully embraced whiteness, nor fully benefited from it. All the while, their multi-racial dance hall congregations defied the ruling social order, and their unique expressive culture blended various influences into a new mixture, as they found their voice, forged an identity, and made history. In short, in a context of bitter racism, über-patriotism, and anticommunism, Mexican Americans sang the pachuco blues and paid their dues—in labor unions and in life—while working their magic under circumstances, to paraphrase Karl Marx, not always of their own choosing.¹⁷