

Carlos Monsiváis: The Musical

Readers of Carlos Monsiváis are familiar with music's centrality in his thinking. But it is no exaggeration to suggest, after visiting this exhibition co-organized by the Museo del Estanquillo and the Fonoteca Nacional, that music is unifying element of the thinking and education of the author of *Amor perdido*. Throughout his life he considered music as a passion, but also as a manifestation of public life, a cultural product and an all-encompassing reference point. Music pervades the writing of Monsiváis: a bolero or a religious hymn will erupt when you least expect it. The author's tastes range from Bach to gospel, jazz to boleros.

Re-reading Monsiváis can also become a listening experience. His texts use all manner of musical references that make an impression on the reader. The selection of the items in the Monsiváis collections—both those held by the Museo del Estanquillo and the 5,183 audio files in the Fonoteca Nacional archives—obeys the author's particular musical preferences and specific pieces mentioned in his works. An entire lifetime would be too short to listen and research all the sources of Monsiváis's beloved pieces of music.

Monsiváis must have known thousands of songs and he clearly enjoyed revealing his knowledge of musical moments in films or the repertoires of great singers. He could sing remarkably well, mimic, recite, and write wonderful pieces about iconic musicians such as Agustín Lara, Chavela Vargas, Juan Gabriel, José Alfredo Jiménez, Pedro Infante . . . His work is vastly complex because it made connections between music and other manifestations of Mexican culture.

This exhibition aims to bring to light Carlos Monsiváis's immense and erudite enjoyment of music.

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The Musical Predilections of Monsiváis

“Where Have All the Flowers Gone”

The seeds of Carlos’s different musical tastes were planted at an early age and grew over the course of his life. In the mid-1950s, he began to listen to rock-and-roll singers fashionable at the time, such as Elvis Presley and Little Richard, and he also developed a lifelong interest in jazz and the blues; during that period he listened particularly to Sam Cooke, Johnny Ray, Billy Holiday, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Sarah Vaughan. His favorite composers included Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and George Gershwin.

Classical music was another of Monsiváis’s preferred musical genres and is an important part of his music library. His LPs include his best-loved works of the leading baroque, classic, and romantic composers: Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Tchaikovsky.

In the early 1960s, Carlos began listening mainly to U.S. protest and country singers such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger; Peter, Paul and Mary; Odetta, Miriam Makeba, Chad Mitchell Trio, Johnny Cash, and Harry Belafonte. One of his favorite songs from that era was “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” written by Pete Seeger in 1955 and with additional verses added by Joe Hickerson in 1960.

“Isn’t It Romantic?”

Music being one of his passions, Carlos was always on the lookout for new music from Mexico and abroad, and he liked to share his discoveries. In particular he enjoyed listening and re-listening to Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis Jr., Tony Bennet, Johnny Mathis, Ray Charles, Chet Baker, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, Dinah Washington, Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, Edith Piaf, Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe, Caetano Veloso, Nina Simone, and Eartha Kitt. As this list shows, he had a preference for female singers.

When he was especially fond of a song, such as “Isn’t It Romantic?”, he would listen to it repeatedly in its different versions.

“Happy Together”

Pop music was also one of Carlos’s preferred musical genres. In particular, he liked singers and groups such as Dionne Warwick and The Supremes, Diana Ross, The Temptations, The Platters, The Four Aces. He would listen to The Turtles’ “Happy Together” over and over again.

Another part of his music library is filled with the scores from Broadway musicals such as *Cabaret*, *Cats*, *Chicago*, *Chorus Line*, *Funny Girl*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Godspel* and *Gypsy*, as well as from movies including *Oliver*, *West Side Story*, *Hair*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Singing in the Rain*.

“Drume negrita”

Although Carlos also listened to Mexican and Latin American music throughout his life, he always had a preference for U.S. pop music and jazz. In his youth, he listened to the XEW radio station’s afternoon programs that his mother tuned in to, and that broadcast the music of composers such as Agustín Lara, Alberto Domínguez, Gonzalo Curiel, and Esparza Oteo. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he also listened to the trios played by his uncle Manuel on a portable record player.

His favorite Mexican and Latin American singers included Julio Jaramillo, Hugo Avendaño, Elvira Ríos, Las Hermanas Landín, Toña La Negra, Celia Cruz, Olga Guillot, Bola de Nieve, Elena Burke, Omara Portuondo, La Lupe, Pérez Prado, Trío Garnica-Ascencio, Los Panchos, Los Tres Diamantes, Los Tres Caballeros, Pedro Infante, and José. He once even asked Celia Cruz to record one of his favorite songs, “Drume Negrita.”

When writing a piece about a singer or composer with whom he was unfamiliar—such as Juan Gabriel, Gloria Trevi, Luis Miguel, Flans—Carlos would listen closely to their work.

Hymns, Spirituals and Gospel

El himno Escucha, mi niño, te voy a contar / la historia más dulce que hubiera jamás, / quisiera en tu almita esta historia grabar, / la historia que el tiempo dará más y más se le atribuye a Lutero, pero constituye la piedra de toque de la emoción perdurable que es la emoción familiar.

Carlos Monsiváis

"Cristo bendito, yo pobre niño"

Carlos made his initial contact with music in the evangelical church he attended as a boy. Songs of praise were an important part of the services, and Carlos learned by heart children's songs as well as traditional hymns and youth choruses. He remained fond of evangelical music for the rest of his days.

Some of the children's' songs that Carlos always remembered and sung included "Cristo bendito, yo pobre niño," "Por mi niñez venturosa," and "Aunque soy pequeñuelo." Carlos listened throughout his life to hymns sung by soloists and various choirs, forming a key part of his musical taste. His music collection includes records of hymns sung by his favorite singers such as Mahalia Jackson, Ella Fitzgerald, Aretha Franklin, Leontyne Price, Tennessee Ernie Ford, and Elvis Presley. *The Power and the Glory* sung by Mahalia Jackson with Percy Faith & His Orchestra were among his most treasured records.

Spirituals and Gospel Music

Spirituals emerged from African-American evangelical protestant churches in the eighteenth century and became hugely popular in the 1930s; these religious songs linked to Black Christians from the American South that expressed their yearning for freedom. They identified with the people of Israel, described in the Bible as being downtrodden in Egypt and Babylonia. Spirituals and gospel music occupied a special place in Carlos' religious music collection, and he began listening to them from a very young age: Mahalia Jackson, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Leontyne Price, Marian Anderson, Jessye Norman, Kathleen Battle, Aretha Franklin, Odetta, Edwin Hawkins Singers, The Spiritual Singers, the Golden Gate Quartet and the Robert Shaw Chorale all occupied pride of place in his vinyl collection.

Gospel—from "God spel" or "good news," referring to the first four books of the New Testament—originated from the U.S. Pentecostal movement' religious music. In this genre, Carlos listened mostly to Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Golden Gate Quartet, Miles College Choir, God's Ambassadors Choir, the Gospel Harmonettes, and Mahalia Jackson.

Christmas Carols

Christmas was Carlos's favorite time of year for listening to music, hence its songs formed an important part of his record collection. Every year, from October to December, Carlos listened to carols, hymns, and Christmas songs on an almost daily basis, his favorite being "Away in a Manger."

His collection includes Yuletide music by various singers and choirs, including Harry Belafonte, Mahalia Jackson, Ella Fitzgerald, Jessye Norman, Barbara Hendricks, Elvis Presley, Johnny Mathis, Edwin Hawkins Singers, the Cleveland Singers, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Rubén Sánchez Monsiváis

II. A Snapshot of the Context: Folklore, Revolution and Nationalism

To provide a panorama, this section looks at the component parts of an area continually visited by politics, ideology, literature, and, naturally, music: the placid waters of artistic nationalism. Creation and vocation of writers, intellectuals, and musicians: this perspective of Mexico developed over decades but with particular fervor during the early twentieth century that saw various attempts to define “the essence of Mexico.”

For various historical and aesthetical reasons, the Bajío region began to take center stage in this artistic movement. The capital began to receive sones from Jalisco and jarabes, folk orchestras and mariachis, singers from provincial towns, and poetry by López Velarde. Out of this trunk emerged branches leading to Aztequismo, Sarapes, Chinas Poblanas—art forms that were perhaps superficially clichéd but upon deeper, closer inspection revealed large communities and exceptional productions.

That vision became engraved in music, but its visual correlation would be Vanegas Arroyo’s cancioneros or folk songs illustrated by Posada, that led to Cancionero Picot, that led to Notitas Musicales, that in turn led to a nostalgia for a genre that no longer exists. An iconography, typography, and a vast repertoire of songs is dedicated to Mexico and its regions, offering its own take on the country’s various epochs—Independence, the French Intervention, the Revolution—performed equally by individuals (Julia Garnica, Lucha Reyes, Javier Solís) and by groups (Chinas Poblanas, Tehuanas which entranced Diego Rivera, and charros).

Monsiváis swam in these waters: he praised and criticized the virtues and limitations of these art forms. We must not forget Nellie Campobello, Diego Rivera, Miguel Covarrubias, Posada, and the anonymous designers and illustrators of cancioneros and scores.

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III. The Thrilling World of Music: Theaters and Dance Halls

In the beginning came “La gatita blanca,” the zarzuela performed by the spirited María Conesa. Porfirian society supposedly rushed to hide, but in reality to see “La Conesa,” to praise her enticingly picaresque performances despite her lack of a singing voice. She became an emblem of the Díaz era and legend of the theatrical scene: for Carlos Monsiváis, Conesa embodied the eternal tease, never surrendering herself but always hiding behind feathers and velvet. If we give chase and run into the labyrinth of promise, we will only find our way into other musical venues and nightclubs: burlesques, the passion for foxtrot and rumba, dance halls where danzón was the king of the dance genres, never surpassed but later sidelined by a succession of new trends: mambo, cha-cha, and cumbia.

The theaters of the Porfirio Díaz period maintained their aristocratic appearance and taste, but the marquees became a place for the people and gave a platform for stars such as Cantinflas. There the nation anointed its idols. The burlesques promised laughter and the dance halls a place to sway to the rhythm of music: Salón México, Colonia, and later on the California Dancing Club. Salsa later became the genre of choice for intellectuals, sparking controversy among the former performers of son. According to the musical experts, salsa was simply a stylized version of Cuban son. This did not prevent Monsiváis from appreciating and highlighting its virtues.

For the author, music and space are interchangeable, places that require characters and idols to find places to turn them into emblems. The Teatro Blanquita, for example, therefore became as important as the “Teatro Blanquito” (José Antonio Alcaraz’s nickname for the Palacio de Bellas Artes): landmarks of the capital’s nightlife and music. Jukeboxes similarly define taste, but ultimately they are only representations of the living world of the stage.

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IV. "They only go to see the movie / when it has a cast"

Carlos Monsiváis wrote that: "Cinema is a series of musical shows interrupted by soul desastres". Sometimes the choreographies stopped completely to contemplate an enigmatic discourse by Cantinflas or Joaquín Pardavé's nostalgia for Don Porfirio Díaz overflowed onto the silver screen. We tend to think that film created the city, that the typical ditty of the capital came from a movie, or that without its movie stars half of Mexico simply would not exist.

Movies: the place where attitudes and customs are born, and eyebrows are raised. In the sacred spots of neighborhood movie theaters, Mexicans learned that prefabrications were genuine and that the improbable was a daily affair. On the screen, virtue succumbs, incest is exposed, leading actors are seized . . . But a mariachi band can be heard striking up in the distance, people are moving to the rhythm of danzón in the cabaret on the corner, the joyful rumba drowns out the sobs of the vedette. "Víctimas del pecado! Take one! Action!" And a close-up focuses on stereotypes in couples. The industry produced singing charros, rumberas, Porfirian gentlemen, urchins who only had language to defend themselves, valiant pachucos . . . The characters walk a tightrope between comedy and drama, guffaws and sensationalist news stories.

The screen is the kaleidoscope that shows the impermeable nation to the modern history, the longed-for world of rumberas and their impenetrable navel (censure, in this case, was strict) and the change of cities, modernized and boasting of their progress. This would amount to nothing without the idols who make a film unique: Pedro Infante and *Amorcito corazón*, Agustín Lara and *Aventurera*, Tin Tan and *Contigo*, Lucha Reyes and *¡Ay Jalisco, no te rajes!*, Joaquín Pardavé and *El Makakikus* . . . Performances that become unique and unrepeatable, definitive and taste-defining. Carlos Monsiváis's collection includes a vast number of the three most outstanding musical genres in Mexican films: the singing charros, the rumberas and pachucos.

V. XEW: *Empire Station*

How to approach Mexican radio? An industry that monopolizes the free time of the country's population, encouraging them to act in a certain way (as a radio drama accompanying every life stage). Pero industria que es, simultaneously the way of feeling and a communicator of an overwhelming sentimentalism. The songs of Agustín Lara, radio broadcasts transcending national borders, the phenomenon that transports Mexican compositions to Europe. It is the time of the Second World War, "Bésame mucho" was playing in the United States, and "Solamente una vez" featured in Walt Disney's *The Three Caballeros*.

For Monsiváis, radio (along with music records, comics, and light theater) was the bedrock of urban culture. It provides the foundation for conceiving the city, intimacy, progress . . . Links begin to be forged with the U.S. entertainment industry. And the orchestras of English-language movies start having an impact on Mexican music. There are several consequences: the discovery of a private eroticism, produced by the insinuations of romantic songs and film. The feminine discourse grows in defiance of masculine dominance, because romantic songs begin with women singing the material that composers write for them, but then female composers begin writing lyrics with their own perspective on love.

And Monsiváis . . . he is the collector of that world, of the figures behind the microphone. But he is also the great performer of romantic songs and boleros. He knew hundreds of boleros, using them to avoid a long excursion on sensibility, because a single verse contained an atmosphere. "A dialogue with the Other": this was how he defined this world that carried over the air waves the aspirations of a class, opinions about society, and that made it necessary to build using the ear in a self-sufficient world of the radio narrative.

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VI. Composers: Boosting the Ratings of the National Soul

It is no exaggeration to say that Carlos Monsiváis's personal repertoire was essentially composed of boleros and ranchero music. For the chronicler, the music that emerged from the Golden Age of radio presented an opportunity to "read" a country: the sentimental activity of various decades. The sentimental tune: three-minute melodies that flooded the jukeboxes, housing complexes, weekly routines . . . Perhaps unwittingly, radio was the true path toward national unification, the one sought by nineteenth-century liberals when they wondered what united Mexico. Who would have guessed it would be the hit parade?

Songs serve various purposes in Monsiváis's works: they give life to a period, imbue an emotional quality, and suffuse the narrative climate required by a character. While José Revueltas is being held prisoner in Lecumberri, Benita Galeana is marching for workers' rights, Fidel Velázquez is losing

count of how many times he has been re-elected union boss of Mexico's Confederation of Workers, the CTM . . . María Luisa Landín's voice can be heard on a Rock-Ola that never stops.

For Monsiváis, songs persist, lyrics become unforgettable, but no one hears about many of the songwriters themselves. Who knows about the bard Ricardo López Méndez, whose lyrics formed the basis of Yucatecan trova and romantic boleros? And nowadays who remembers that Guty Cárdenas was born in Merida, sung on records distributed across the continent, and was murdered in a cantina in downtown Mexico City at the age of 26? Not many, because their names have been over-written by subsequent fashions. Yet the songs remained and continued to be sung in bohemian corners, in cantinas, wherever they preserve a repertoire

This section pays homage to the composers, their works, their faces, and their melodies. Monsiváis himself used to give them recognition, visiting several of them and asking them for a photo, the manuscript of one of their songs . . . or alternatively giving them an accolade by parodying them and turning them into one of the co-authors of Carlos Monsiváis.

VII. *Singers and Songwriters: Voice and Image*

Here they are then, condensed into characters, attitudes, and styles. The ones who embody the chronicler's admiration. The figures to admire on different levels: worthy of enthusiasm, love, devotion, etc., until reaching total submission, which leads to membership of the corresponding fan club. Carlos Monsiváis's collections essentially includes the singers and songwriters from radio's peak years. They included images of Elvira Ríos "La voz de humo," Chela Campos "La dama del bastón de cristal," Toña la Negra "La sensación jarocho," Néstor Mesta Chayres "Gitano de México," Chelo Flores "La flor que se tornó canción," and Lupita Alday "La cancionera de la voz que enamora," among many other artists who had to carry the weight of their artistic name.

These nicknames came out of radio programs, in particular *La hora azul* directed by Pedro de Lille. They belong to a period in which the gap between audience and idol was wide enough to engender various myths. The voice defined the inherent mythology: María Victoria's sensuality was the first step toward a release of eroticism. Javier Solís's style was the mist-shrouded bridge between the repertoire of urban barrios with the promise of Mexico's vernacular Frank Sinatra.

Each singer has his own narrative, history, and public. Which ones were the chronicler's favorites? Pedro Infante, Agustín Lara, Toña la Negra, but also, unexpectedly: Daniel Santos, Bola de Nieve, Olga Guillot, La Lupe . . . The Greater and Lesser Antilles represented in the writer's sentimental map! These sources of admiration also map out an inner continent.

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I. A Journey into the Heart of Monsiváis, or the Chronicler's Intimate Repertoire

In his precocious *Autobiografía*, Carlos Monsiváis praises the film *Singin' in the Rain*: "I am forever grateful to Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen for showing me that it is useless to say anything without music's consent." But there is something else, something deeper . . . The intellectual core of the author's work evolved from his family upbringing, his Protestant education, and the (inexorable) hit parade.

On the one hand, the radio education (the cult of language's beauty, the sentimental repertoire) and on the other, the moment that has become mythical: Carlos Monsiváis participates in the XEW radio contest, *Los niños catedráticos*: "I happened to be born on the side of the minorities." Protestantism is the church of song, of musical worship, the birthplace of gospel music and spirituals. It is not an overstatement to say that this training structured his thinking: the literary beauty of the Biblia Reyna-Valera, music as the bedrock of education, the political training in defense of the minorities . . .

But that is not all, because the completeness of Monsiváis's musical learning is visible in the (vast number) of musical references in his texts, the songs he parodied, the concerts he reviewed, the thousands of LPs that he bought and listened to, his program on Radio UNAM (*El cine y la crítica*) when he kicked back with an hour's slot every week. This section includes those intimate, family moments: the pleasure that jazz, Bach, English-language music gave him . . . But this space would be incomplete without listing his musical maestros, which he once did in his conference as part of the *Los narradores ante el público* series in 1968: "Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Leadbelly, Barbara Streisand, Bessie Smith, Billy Holliday, Elvira Ríos, Cannonball Adderley, Bill Evans, Lucha Reyes, Erik Satie, Petula Clark, The Beatles, The Abyssinian Baptist Gospel Choir, Little Richard, El Trío Garnica-Ascencio, Benjamin Britten, Chad Mitchell Trio, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Marlene Dietrich, Edith Piaf, Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, Sonny Rollins, Bix Beiderbecke, João and Astrud Gilberto, Mahalia Jackson and the Águila sisters."

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