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## **The *Fandango* and Shared Music Making among Mexican Immigrants in the *Son Jarocho* Community of New York City**

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The number of Mexican immigrants in New York City has grown rapidly in recent decades. According a report from the Latino Data Project, the population has increased from roughly 100,000 in 1990 to over 600,000 by 2010.<sup>1</sup> These numbers undercount the overall Mexican population because they may exclude undocumented people, and they show that Mexicans are the fastest growing Latino group in the New York City area. Unlike many Mexican populations in major cities in the United States, which tend to be concentrated in specific neighborhoods—like Pilsen, Chicago—Mexicans in New York are dispersed across all five boroughs. In the city, Mexican communities have integrated with other immigrant neighborhoods, and many live in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. The areas with higher concentrations of Mexican immigrants include Sunset Park and Bushwick, Brooklyn; East Harlem and Washington Heights, Manhattan; Crotona and Jackson Heights, Queens; and Mott Haven, Bronx.

Despite the dispersed nature of the Mexican population, there have been efforts to create social networks and encourage cultural activity across the city. For instance, the Mexican Consulate supports social organizations such as soccer clubs that provide men and women team networks and access to competition and organized games.<sup>2</sup> For musical activity, the Ballet Folklórico Mexicano de Nueva York and the Mariachi Academy of New York have been educating and entertaining Mexican New Yorkers for decades. Aside from mariachi and ballet folklórico, which are closely connected to the Mexican state's national canon, there are also active commercial scenes of Mexican music ranging from DJ parties that feature *cumbia* to *norteña* and *banda* concerts. However, because of the dispersed nature of New York's Mexican population, the limited reach of institutions like the Mexican Consulate, and the current hostile political climate toward immigrants, some Mexicans have sought alternative musical and communitarian experiences for social support.

Since the early 2000s, *son jarocho* has been integrated into New York's Mexican musical *mélange*. By 2011, a cohesive community of professional and amateur *son jarocho* musicians emerged through organized weekly music workshops, monthly community gatherings called *fandangos*, and annual celebrations. All the musical workshops and gatherings for the community are held in different locations across the city and are low cost (about \$10–15 per lesson) or free, allowing for maximum access across social classes.

*Son jarocho* is a music, dance, and poetic tradition originally from a cultural region called the Sotavento that spans the modern Mexican states of Veracruz, Tabasco, and Oaxaca. It is a string-based music with guitar-like instruments in a variety of sizes. *Son* is the Spanish word that can be loosely translated to “sound,” but that hardly encapsulates its entire meaning. *Son* is closer to an aesthetic practice rather than a distinct sound or individual song. Each *son* has a harmonic and rhythmic structure and carries with it a poetic repertoire.

The principle instruments of *son jarocho* include the *jarana*, *requinto*, and *zapateado* on the *tarima*. The strummed *jarana* is an eight-stringed chordophone with five courses. The three, center courses are double-

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Fandango at El Kallejon Lounge in East Harlem  
Photo by Author

stringed. The *jarana* is strummed up and down with the nails of the fingers and thumb and is part of the harmonic and rhythmic foundation of the music. The *requinto* typically has four strings in single courses and is plucked with a plectrum that is usually carved from animal bone or horn. This melodic instrument begins a *son*. Aside from the rhythm of the *jarana*, *son jarocho* includes a dance tradition called *zapateado* that is performed on top of a *tarima*, or wooden platform, where dancers execute rhythms with their heels.

The traditional setting for *son jarocho* is the *fandango*, which is a musical celebration or *fiesta* rooted in participatory music making. The *fandango* illustrates a principle of *son jarocho* known as *convivencia*—participation, coexistence, and shared experience. Mem-

bers of the *son jarocho* community feel strongly that this shared experience of music making subverts and allows them an escape from an alienating, consumer-driven society. They are creating music and meaningful relationships in an environment that respects and values Mexican culture.

Since 1978 musicians and intellectuals of *son jarocho* have been reviving the traditional *fandango* practices, which had dwindled by the middle of the twentieth century. The revival—called the *movimiento jaranero*—has disseminated *son jarocho* from its homeland in the Sotavento region to urban areas in Mexico and internationally to major cities in the United States by the 2000s.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by the *movimiento*'s commitment to rescuing the *fandango*, the *jaraneros* of New York continue to practice the *fandango* with the guiding principle of *convivencia*.

The *son jarocho* community in New York City comprises men, women, and children, ranging in ages from ten to seventy-five years old. Most community members are Mexican immigrants, but there are also Mexican Americans and non-Mexicans of Latin American descent, as well as Anglos. The members of the community also come from diverse educational and class backgrounds, but they gather in the *son jarocho* community out of a desire to play music together, embracing the idea of sharing musical experiences.

At a typical fandango in New York City, members of the community form a circle around the *tarima*. Participants face inward, able to see each other to communicate and musically interact. A *fandango* begins with an opening *son*, “Siquisiri.” The *requinto* declares the *son* by playing an introductory phrase. Next, the *jaranas* join and provide a rhythmic base and harmony. After several rounds of the harmonic and rhythmic cycle, someone from the circle spontaneously calls out and sings a *verso* (verse). In the opening “Siquisiri” [link 1], the singer will commonly offer an introductory verse, imploring the verses to begin:

*Al fin voy a comenzar*

*Que a ver si puedo o no puedo*

*Que a ver si puedo o no puedo*

*Al fin voy a comenzar*

Finally I will begin

To see if I can or cannot

To see if I can or cannot

Finally I will begin

Next, another participant from the circle must respond by repeating back the verse the first caller sang. After the response, the caller will sing the final part of the verse and the responder repeats the same:

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<i>A ver si puedo trovar</i>	To see if I can versify
<i>O a medio verso me quedo</i>	Or half a verse remains with me
<i>O a medio verso me quedo</i>	Or half a verse remains with me
<i>Sin poderlo declarar</i>	Without being able to declare it

The two participants exchange in call-and-response until they finish the verse and *estribillo* (refrain). In the *estribillo* of “Siquisiri,” the responder sings different lines from the caller that create a playful exchange between the singers, to warm up the *fandango*, and invite more verses to be sung:

Caller:	
<i>Ay que sí válgame Dios</i>	Ay, oh my God
<i>Lloré no había cantado</i>	I cried I hadn't sung
Responder:	
<i>Pues anda a Dios para hacerlo hablar</i>	Well, go to God to make him speak
Caller:	
<i>Porque le tenía vergüenza</i>	Because I had shame
Responder:	
<i>De hacerlo hablar que risa me da</i>	To make him speak, what a laugh it gives me
Caller:	
<i>Porque estoy acostumbrado</i>	Because I am accustomed to it
Responder:	
<i>De risa me da, ya se me quitó</i>	The laugh it gives me, just left me
Caller:	
<i>Primero a pedir licencia (x2)</i>	First by asking for permission
<i>Donde quiera que he llegado</i>	Wherever I have arrived
(Link 1)	

After the *verso-estribillo* finishes, the instruments increase in volume. Then, in the instrumental section, dancers step on to the *tarima* and execute rhythms with the heels of their shoes. This instrumental section continues at maximum volume until another participant calls out a new verse, restarting the cycle of call-and-response. Again, the moment a participant begins to sing a verse, the instruments soften and dancers switch from sounded steps to *mudanzas* (quiet movements). If players and dancers do not quiet their sound, the voices are not likely to be heard over the loud *fandango* circle. And importantly, dancers can only exchange places with another dancer during instrumental sections to not further disrupt the singing voices.

This ebb and flow of alternating dynamics between voices, instruments, and *zapateado* steps repeats over the internal harmonic and rhythmic cycle that also repeats ad finitum. As the *son* progresses from twenty minutes to over an hour, participants create a groove with each other, reinforcing the sociality of the music. The highly social exchange reveals the community's social structure and the principle of mutual participation—or *convivencia*—that is at the core of the *fandango* and the social life of the *son jarocho* community. As a *fandango* develops through different *sones*, the participants feel increasingly connected to the groove and to each other.

Finally, after perhaps hours and hours of playing through many *sones*, the *fandango* culminates in the final, closing *son* “La bamba.” It is the same “La bamba” interpreted and made famous by Ritchie Valens in his

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1958 rock arrangement. In *son jarocho*, “La bamba” does not have a call-and-response structure in its verses, so participants individually sing verses and *estribillos*.

On 5 March 2017, members of the *son jarocho* community gathered at the East Harlem restaurant and bar El Kallejon Lounge to participate in the monthly *fandango*. Several visitors also came from Philadelphia, Maine, and Washington, D.C. The frequent regional visitors in attendance at the *fandango* demonstrate the supportive and sharing nature of the community—anyone can join, the more the merrier. The *fandango* was well-attended with about thirty people, most of whom directly participated in the music making. The event began around 4:00 pm and lasted until about 7:00 pm. The restaurant is a



*Fandango in Central Park*  
Photo by author

small space, not much more than twenty feet wide, typical of many New York City bars and restaurants. When a *fandango* occurs in this space, most of the restaurant is occupied, leaving little room for other patrons. Nestor, the owner of Kallejon is generous to donate his restaurant space for the community’s revelry. Originally from Mexico City, Nestor loves art, music, and culture, so he sees his contribution as a way to support Mexican music and the community.

The regulars and the visitors made the *fandango* successful throughout the evening, ending with an explosive “La bamba.” During the closing “La bamba,” men and women were lining up and competing to dance on the *tarima*. “La bamba” is a *son de pareja* (partner *son*, where men and women dance in pairs). At one point, the energy from the *fandango* circle inspired a garland of verses, connected by themes of love. In this moment, Calvin, who was playing *requinto*, sang a verse:

<i>Ojos verdes y azules (x2)</i>	Green and blue eyes
<i>Mala pintura</i>	Bad painting
<i>Donde no hay ojos negros (x2)</i>	Where there are no black eyes
<i>No hay hermosura</i>	There is no beauty
Common “La bamba” <i>estribillo</i> :	
<i>Ay arriba, arriba</i>	Higher and higher
<i>Yo no soy marinero</i>	I’m not a sailor
<i>Por ti seré (x2)</i>	For you I will be

While Calvin sang, Quetzal, an eleven-year old child in the community, and Ximena, a musician from Philadelphia, were partnered on the *tarima*. As they performed *mudanzas* during Calvin’s verse, others in the circle were gathering closer to the *tarima* to have their chance at dancing. Once Calvin finished his verse, members from the circle attempted to tap Quetzal and Ximena’s shoulders to exchange places, but unexpectedly, Juan Carlos (from the New York City professional group, Radio Jarocho) called out another verse seamlessly after Calvin’s. Because dancers cannot exchange places on the *tarima* while someone is singing, the rest of the circle had to wait for this verse to end. At this point, Ximena laughed because she too, expected to exit the *tarima*.



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Juan Carlos's verse:

*Preso estoy en la cárcel (x2)*

*Por tus quereres*

*No saldré de este sitio (x2)*

*Si no me quieres*

*(Estribillo)*

I'm imprisoned in jail

For your love

I will not leave this place

If you don't love me

Then, as Juan Carlos's verse ended and the *fandango* participants tried again to exchange places with Quetzal and Ximena, another player added a verse to the ending of Juan Carlos's. Alfredo, from Washington, D.C. and the *son jarocho* collective Cosita Seria, sang another verse, further spoiling others' hopes of stepping on to the *tarima* and replacing Quetzal and Ximena. In this playful moment, participants in the circle smiled and laughed with each other, acknowledging the unexpected burst of creativity in the series of sung verses.

Alfredo's verse:

*El amor y el dinero (x2)*

*Que yo no sueño*

*Ya que ninguno tengo (x2)*

*Y lo bien que duermo*

*(Estribillo)*

Love and money

That I do not dream

Since I don't have either

And how well I sleep

By the time Alfredo finished his verse, finally, two other dancers, Sinuhé (a professional musician, jarana teacher, and lead organizer for the New York City community) and Elie exchanged places with Ximena and Quetzal. After the string of verses, which was a spontaneous and welcomed surprise contribution of voices, the *fandango* circle swelled in volume, and the dancers pounded the *tarima*. Sinuhé is an advanced dancer and his aggressive style on the *tarima* injected the fandango with more energy. Their dance on the *tarima* increased the intensity of the closing *son* "La bamba." This intensity lasted until the last verse, which in *fandango* tradition, the entire circle sings together to close the *fandango*:

¡Ay, te pido, te pido!

*Te pido de corazón*

*Se acaba la bamba (x2)*

*Y venga otra son*

¡Ay, arriba arriba!

*Yo no soy marinero*

*Por ti seré (x2)*

I ask you, I beg you!

I ask you from the heart

May la bamba finish

And let another son come

Higher and higher!

I am not a sailor

For you I will be

The intensity and excitement at the March event was emblematic of a successful *fandango*. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has identified such musical practices as "participatory performances," ones in which the roles of artist and audience are dissolved, thereby intensifying the degree of social interaction and bonding.<sup>4</sup> New York's *son jarocho* *fandangos* fit this model perfectly, revealing how music can forge new relationships, empower individuals, and foster a deep sense of community. In the sublime moments of performance that unfold during *fandango*, community members engage together in music and dance that can subvert divisive social hierarchies and unite them around their common heritage and shared immigrant experiences.

## LINK

1. "Siquisiri" by Son de Madera (*Son de Madera*, 1997) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQCGUXzwANA>

## NOTES

1. Bergad, Laird. "Demographic, Economic and Social Transformations in the Mexican-origin Population of the New York City Metropolitan Area 1990-2010," from the Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies at the City University of New York (2013): 11.
2. Smith, Robert C. "Mexicans in New York: Membership and Incorporation in a New Immigrant Community" in *Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition*, edited by Gabriel Haslip-Viera and Sherrie L. Baver (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 57-103.
3. *Movimiento Jaranero* literally translates as *son jarocho* movement. *Jaranero* is a term that describes people who play *son jarocho*, coming from the instrument *jarana*.
4. Turino, Thomas. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 28-51.