UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

April 4, 2023
Tom Jacobs

Cumbia connects nations and generations through music and dance

Some of Raquel Pacheco's favorite childhood memories are of family trips to Mexico City. The relatives they visited there were deeply religious and, as the cultural anthropologist recalled, not especially into partying.

"But I remember that when they would play cumbia, they would bust out dancing," she said. "It got them on their feet! That was the only music they would get up to dance to. So cumbia has always been a part of our family gatherings."

What is this magical music that can get the staid swinging their hips, forge generational bonds and manage to stay hip and relevant over many decades? It's cumbia, a flexible and popular genre of Latin American dance music that, like salsa, combines guitars, accordions, bass guitar and percussion.

"Cumbia is part of Latino identity now," said Pacheco, an assistant professor of anthropology at UC Santa Barbara. "It's a genre that unites immigrants from many countries." While traditionally thought of as "poor people's music," Pacheco said that, at least in Mexico, cumbia "is now making inroads into the middle and upper classes."

“This music is very important to people in Latinx communities, and barely recognized by people outside of those communities,” said David Novak, director of UC Santa Barbara’s Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Music. “It connects disparate Latinx communities around the world. It has only very recently started to break through to the dance scenes in cities like Berlin and London.”

Those curious to learn more, or try out their own dance moves, will have an opportunity to do so April 11 and 12, when the center hosts Listening to Cumbia(link is external), the first-ever symposium focusing on the sonic and visual media cultures of the genre. Free and open to the public, it will include roundtable discussions featuring an international group of scholars, artists and archivists, plus screenings of two documentaries(link is external) on the cumbia scene in Mexico City and Los Angeles, respectively.

It will conclude with a live dance event from 8 to 10 p.m. April 12 on Storke Plaza. DJs from Mexico and Southern California will play their own remixes of cumbia records, encourage dancing and provide a sense of the lively cumbia scene.

As a folkloric genre, cumbia was born in Colombia in the late 19th century. Thanks to vinyl records, the music spread widely throughout Latin America in the mid-20th century.

“It’s a very dynamic genre of music, in the sense that in different states and regions, musicians will play it using different tempos and different instruments,” said anthropologist, DJ and record label owner Alexandra Lippman, who is participating in the seminar. “It’s very open to taking on different stylistic elements. It can differ from country to country, and from city to city.”

It was particularly embraced by working-class Mexicans, who were introduced to the music by *sonideros* — DJs who took their equipment to clubs and street parties and played Colombian cumbia records while people danced. Over time, they began slowing down the records to give the music a unique Mexican sound — a modification that became so popular that new cumbia bands played the tunes at those slower tempos.

The sonideros also altered the experience of listening to this music in a different way. They began taking requests for *saludos,* or shout-outs, in which members of their audience would pay tribute to a loved one who wasn’t on hand. These became more numerous over time, as people would record the sets on cassette (and later,

CDs) and send copies to the friends or relatives who received the shout-out.

“This is especially interesting in the U.S., where bands and sonideros will give these saludos for family members who are living across the border, but may be listening on Facebook Live or another social media platform,” Lippman said. “They hear their names spoken, which is a sign they are not forgotten by family members in the U.S.”

For many, the ritual can be more emotionally meaningful than simply calling home. “It’s obviously not a very efficient way of sending a message!” Lippman said with a laugh. “But it’s done in public, and it’s done on top of, or along with, music that often holds many memories for the people who are both sending and receiving the *saludo.* So it’s emotionally charged.”

But cumbia’s appeal goes far beyond nostalgia. Somehow, this music manages to serve as a nostalgic way to connect with older relatives even as it morphs into new forms that appeal to specific populations and new generations.

“No matter where you are in Latin America, if you ask people where cumbia is from, many people will say ‘here,’” Novak noted. “There’s a lot of diversity in how it sounds. It mixes with other dance-music genres. Nowadays in Latin America, a lot of the music is *cumbia rebajada*, the slowed-down records.”

But it’s cumbia’s distinctive double beat that sets it apart from other genres. “It uses a scraper called a guiro, the sound of which is like the snare drum of cumbia,” Novak explained. “It holds the beat for the band, and for dancing. When they slow down the records in *cumbia rebajada,* they slow down the vocals also, and it can be very weird sounding. Some people refer to it as ‘psychedelic cumbia.’”

“It’s upbeat, but sometimes there’s an undercurrent of sadness or darkness,” said Lippman. “Certain sonideros emphasize that.”

The key to cumbia’s appeal “is definitely the rhythm,” added Pacheco. “It’s pretty simple to dance to — not as complicated as other genres like salsa. You just indulge in self-expression! It’s a very welcoming genre — not intimidating at all. I haven’t met anyone who couldn’t dance a few steps in cumbia. So at parties, everybody gets up to dance to cumbia.”

But it’s not merely music to move to, according to Novak. Whether they are conscious of it or not, cumbia “brings people into a relationship with another

country," he said. "In challenging contexts of global migration, it is a way to connect different times and places through sound.

"Records don't need a passport," he noted. "Records can get over walls."

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