Lalo Guerrero: The King of Chicano Music

Posted By Jimmy Franco Sr., Source: Latino Point of View, Mar 6, 2012

Lalo, a son of Arizona, was a trailblazer who synthesized different genres of music such as boleros, corridos, boogie-woogie and rhythm and blues with the struggles of Chicanos, and by doing so, he created a new Chicano musical art form and a proud and inspirational legacy.

An interview by Jimmy Franco with Dan Guerrero, son of Lalo Guerrero.



Lalo was a major contributor to the development of Chicano music and culture.

Dan, can you give me some background on your father’s younger days and family background?
Lalo was born to Eduardo and Concepcion Guerrero in 1916 in the Barrio Libre section of Tucson which is now known as the Barrio Viejo. He was part of a large family and was named Eduardo Guerrero Jr., but was called Lalo by everyone who knew him. His father was a boilermaker who worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad. Lalo developed an interest in music and films at an early age.. He would attempt to sing popular songs that he heard and expressed this budding talent in school plays and other programs.

How did your dad get involved in music?
My grandmother Concepcion used to sing and play the guitar so she taught young Lalo these skills. As he grew up, his mother became his one and only music teacher and his primary musical influence. By the time he was in his teens, Lalo had a quartet called Los Carlistas which was named after a neighborhood social club. This quartet often played at the Charro Cafe which still exists in Tucson, but is now located at a different site. My father also began to write songs and composed the classic ranchera “Cancion Mexicana” which was made famous throughout Mexico by the popular singer Lucha Reyes.

What were the early years of his career like in regard to the type of audiences he played for and the struggles that he encountered?
In 1938, a young Lalo and the popular Los Carlistas group, were chosen to represent Arizona at the World’s Fair being held in New York City. Lalo and the group drove all the way across the country in



Lalo and Los Carlistas performing in New York City during the 1930’s.

order to perform at this event. While in New York, the group also appeared on the Ted Bows Amateur Hour radio program which was held at the Radio City Musical Hall. During the depression years of the late 1930’s, my dad moved the family to Mexico City due to the dismal economic situation that they faced in Arizona. While in Mexico City, Lalo broadened out his musical knowledge and repertoire by performing and listening to popular boleros and to the music of famous contemporary artists such as Augustin Lara, Jorge Negrete and other prominent musicians. After a short period of time, my father’s family eventually returned to Tucson Arizona which they considered their permanent home.

Did Lalo encounter any discrimination or restrictions on his ability or opportunity to develop his career?
Of course. During this period of segregation within the U.S. there were certain venues and clubs, where despite my father’s talent, he was not allowed to play in due to the discrimination faced by Chicanos. I presume that it must have been frustrating for him to encounter such racial barriers that



As a band leader where he combined vocals with his rhythmic maracas.

blocked his artistic creativity and ability to perform, but those were the social obstacles that minorities faced during this period in history. He also could not get a lot of work with the popular swing bands of the time even though his English was perfect, so he decided to sing his songs in Spanish and bilingually. In reality, he suffered dual discrimination as his career was stifled here in the U.S. due to the racism, while in Mexico, his music was not totally accepted and was considered to be that of a pocho or Mexican-American. He did well as a composer during those times, but could not make a breakthrough in his career as a singer in English. My dad was not to be stopped, so he decided to broaden out his appeal by singing in both English and Spanish which was somewhat distinct at the time and this eventually became a part of his evolving musical style.

How did the move to Los Angeles during the 1940’s provide your father with more opportunities to showcase his talent?
His decision to relocate his young family from Arizona to L.A. was



Performing with his group at the La Bamba restaurant near L.A.’s Olvera Street.

based upon the premise that there would be more work available to him and that L.A. would hopefully provide an opportunity to perform before a broader audience and therefore enhance his career. My dad began singing in a duet with Lupe Fernandez at the Cafe Caliente which was located on Olvera Street. He also performed with a larger group for a number of years at the Cafe La Bamba which was on Sunset Boulevard near Olvera Street. He wore ruffled sleeves when he performed at La Bamba and sang a variety of Latino songs for an audience that included many movie stars who often frequented the club.

When did his career as a recording artist begin and with which songs?
He decided to record at Imperial records with a group named El



El Trio Imperial and Lalo record a hit song for Imperial Records.

Trio Imperial which took the name of the record label. This record company then asked him to record an Augustin Lara song named “Pecadora” as a solo and it became a big hit which greatly advanced his career. From that time forward my dad began to record more frequently and perform solo as he further developed his own style and career.

The style and lyrics of your father’s songs resonated deeply with many Chicanos during the 1950’s, where did he find the inspiration and material for many of the lyrics that he wrote?
My dad was essentially a historian through music. He wrote and performed his music for the Chicano community and others who appreciated his talent. The inspiration and lyrical content for his songs came from the culture and history that he observed around him and which he experienced on a daily basis. He created his own style of corridos that ranged from parodies of mini-skirts, tortillas and Santa Claus, to more serious lyrics about social issues that dealt with Cesar Chavez, the August 29th Chicano Moratorium and the death of journalist Ruben Salazar.



The experiences and struggles of Chicanos were the inspiration for Lalo’s lyrics and distinct musical style.

During the 1950’s while still recording for Real Records, he did a parody of the Davy Crockett song from a Walt Disney movie then being shown which one-sidedly depicted the battle of the Alamo in Texas. My dad named his satirical song Pancho Lopez and it was a Chicano response to the popular Davy Crockett song being promoted in the media that essentially demonized Mexicans. Pancho Lopez became a big hit despite being criticized by many whites as being “insensitive” to the fictional and make-believe legacy of Crockett. However, even Walt Disney finally approved of the controversial song and even received some of its royalties.

Were Lalo’s songs ever criticized by mainstream conservative music critics?
No, not very much except for the song Pancho Lopez. The reason is that his music was geared to a specific Chicano audience. Hit songs such as “Pachuco Boogie, Marijuana Boogie, Vamos a Bailar”, and other musical creations of his were essentially ignored by mainstream critics who dismissed them as part of a sub-culture type of music much like rhythm and blues was. Thus, his music was not viewed as a threat to the predominate music of the time that was performed by white musicians for a conservative white audience.

Many young Chicanos and blacks during the 1950’s listened to rhythm and blues music on the radio that was then considered “race music”, while white audiences primarily listened to popular music performed by white musicians. How did your father find his place culturally and musically within these different and separate worlds of musical genres and society?
He was able to innovate and fuse different musical genres and influences into his own style, and by doing so, he created a new bilingual Chicano form of music that



His bilingual style was constantly evolving and assimilating new musical influences.

reflected how people spoke and lived during that time in history. My dad developed a distinct new path for his music that was truly bilingual and bicultural in which he sang in Calo which was a popular form of Spanish slang that people spoke and related to. Many of his hit songs combined a hard-driving swing music and jump-blues with the jitter-bug dance style and bilingual Calo lyrics. Part of this creative style was due to the discrimination and barriers that he had encountered as an artist and which of course forced him to be even more innovative. Yet, on the other hand, he wanted to express and connect with the sentiments of his people and their struggles with a musical form that related to their experiences.

How should we view Lalo’s musical contributions and legacy within Chicano culture and within the broader American culture?
While he created a new Chicano musical form, his music was in essence a part of the mosaic of American culture just as blues and jazz are. In 1998,



Lalo and Flaco Jimenez perform in Paris France as Chicano Rock and Tejano Conjunto music are now acknowledged as a contribution to American culture.

Lalo performed with accordionist-vocalist Flaco Jiminez from San Antonio at an American Music Festival held in Paris France. Participating U.S. musicians at this festival also performed blues, jazz and other American musical art forms. So, my dad and Flaco played Chicano-Tejano music, but it was viewed and appreciated by the audience as an integral part of the family of traditional American music. In a culmination to his long and productive career, a ceremony was held at the White House in 1997 in which President Clinton awarded my father the National Medal of Arts which is the nation’s highest arts award.

How did he subsequently influence other Chicano musicians in regard to style, lyrical innovation, and the ability to connect with an audience?
His persistence and courage in struggling to overcome prejudicial obstacles to his artistic talent and career opened the doors for



A documentary depicted Lalo”s musical influence on younger Chicano musicians.’.

Chicano musicians that followed. Some of these subsequent musicians were Richie Valens in the 1950’s and the East L.A. Chicano Soul groups of the 1960’s, who were now able to perform before much broader audiences. Lalo’s main contribution and legacy that he left for us was that a Chicano musician didn’t have to be pigeonholed or be forced to totally assimilate and change their names and cultural style in order to be creative and successful. He loved his name, his culture and who he was. His musical legacy was both bilingual and bicultural and expressed the contemporary sentiments and lives of Chicanos. His audiences loved him because he was able to relate to their experiences both lyrically and musically and this instilled a positive sense of pride within them.

Before your dad passed away, I had the privilege of hearing him perform in Los Angeles and he still expressed the vibrancy and life that his music always projected. How was he able to do this at such a late age?
He was semi-retired and living in Palm Springs for a period of time



Commenting about his song’s lyrics, Lalo often said, “I only wrote about what I saw.”

where he regularly performed at the “Las Casuelas” restaurant. However, he eventually returned to Los Angeles to perform songs such as “Muy Sabroso Blues” with the same energy and enthusiasm as always. Lalo loved to play before a live audience where he could relate to them and this mutual rapport motivated and gave him the energy to continue performing all the way to the end. In 2003, he recorded some songs with Ry Cooder for a CD titled Chavez Ravine. This musical narrative depicted the unjust expulsion of Chicanos from Chavez Ravine and the destruction of their community during the 1950’s in order to make way for the building of Dodger Stadium. By 2005, after a long career of six decades, Lalo’s voice and guitar fell silent as he passed away and Chicano music lost its most creative innovator and trailblazer.

What do you think your dad’s reaction would have been to what is happening in Arizona with its present racial laws and restrictions aimed at Chicanos and other Latinos?
I am sure that he would have been very upset at what was happening in his beloved Arizona and would most likely have found a way to protest this injustice. I recently participated in a demonstration in Arizona against these racist laws with Dolores Huerta and Linda Ronstadt. I know my father would have participated and raised his voice and guitar in opposition to this growing repression against Chicanos and the violation of their basic rights in his home state.

Why is it important that we keep Lalo’s musical legacy alive and make it known and appreciated to a broader and younger audience?

My dad’s musical legacy is part of our proud history and it depicted the world around him that he observed and experienced. His music was constantly evolving in order to keep pace with changing conditions, musical tastes and people’s new experiences. Lalo’s lyrics and music projected a vibrancy and



Bill and Hillary Clinton awarding Lalo the National Medal of Arts at the White House.

feeling for life that resonated with people who saw him as one of them and who spoke, felt and understood them and their lives. My father was a socially conscious historian who expressed himself musically, and in doing so, he brought contemporary social issues to his audience in a creative and entertaining way. He was also very outspoken and proud to be a Chicano and loved his culture and utilized it musically while performing for his audiences. During the historical period that encompassed his early career, Chicano artists were extremely marginalized by society and the music industry. However, a proud and defiant Lalo Guerrero refused to have limits placed upon his talent and its development. Thus, his struggles paved the way and opened many doors for future Chicano artists as he loved to hear young talent and did his best to nurture it.



Lalo doing a gig with Los Lobos which was a continuation of the Chicano musical legacy.

For more on the legacy of Lalo Guerrero log on to the web site:
LaloGuerrero.com