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### ***3. Heard It on the X: Border Radio As Public Discourse and the Latino Legacy in Popular Music***

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“... The efficacy and social significance of mass media do not lie primarily in the industrial organization and the ideological content, but rather in the way the popular masses have appropriated the mass media and the way the masses have recognized their identity in the mass media.”

—*Martín-Barbero (1999, 346)*

In 2000, the U.S. Census determined that Latino/as (and/or Hispanics)<sup>1</sup> in the United States now constitute its largest minority, accounting for at least 12.5% of the total U.S. population (Guzmán, 2001). This news was significant in different ways, one of those being that Latino/as had surpassed blacks/African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States. Other important findings were that the Latino/Hispanic population had increased by 57.9% between 1990 and 2000 and that the Latino/Hispanic population now represents much of the total youth population (under 18) in the United States (Guzmán, 2001).

Worth noting for the controversial “Latino” category, the 2000 Census was the first to include the category “Latino” as opposed to “Spanish/Hispanic,” as in the previous Census. The salience of this fact is that it reflects a discursive change in our national constructions of race and ethnicity. Of course, such discursive slippages have been a consistent part of the U.S. Census for decades. Census categories before 1970 did not even include “Hispanic.” Moreover, the censuses of 1950 and 1960 considered only “persons of a Spanish surname,” although the 1930 Census treated “Mexican” as a racial category instead of the more specific cultural/ethnic category that it is today.

Other issues surrounding the Census included the construction of categories such as “Spanish,” “Hispanic,” and “Latino.” These three markers are collapsed as a single category (i.e., “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino”) in the most recent Census. This is problematic in that within our national discursive constructions, “Spanish” is supposed to mean the same as “Hispanic” and/or “Latino,” and yet people of these groups often differentiate them. A person who calls herself or himself “Spanish” often does so specifically because she or he dislikes other terms such as “Hispanic” and/or “Latino/a.” Likewise, while some people dislike the term “Hispanic” because it either essentializes or it is a word that exists only in U.S. English, others dislike the term “Latino” for its essentializing nature or because it is a word more commonly used in Spanish. Further complicating this situation, some people eschew either “Hispanic” or “Latino” in favor of more specific identity signifiers and markers, opting for “Puerto Rican,” “Cuban,” “Nicaraguan American,” or perhaps “Mexican American” (to name just a few). In any case, I propose that this evidence reveals how U.S. culture is ambivalent about where Latino/as fit in and about how to deal with a burgeoning U.S. Latino/a population.

Although the issue of Latino/a identity is beyond the scope and spatial constraints of this chapter, I submit that the issue of Latino/a identity in the United States is an issue that warrants further investigation with regard to the question of how Latino/as fit into mainstream U.S. culture and to the role that mass media such as radio have played in cultural processes. In this chapter, I use *Heard It on the X*, a 2005 compact disc release by Los Super Seven, as an entry point into the conversation about Latino/as and American culture, as well as the role of border radio as public discourse that informs the discussion.

### ***Revisiting the “X” stations and Border Radio***

The “X” radio stations, as they were known, were the high-powered AM radio stations whose call letters began with X because they were broadcasting from the Mexican side of the United States/México border, from high-powered transmitters that would have made them illegal in U.S. territory. Sometimes reaching as much as a million watts of radio power, the X stations such as XER (which later became XERA), XEG, XERB, XERF, XEAW, XEMO, XEMU, XEAK, XTRA, and XELO were among various “out-law” X stations, considered as such also because of how they defied the logic of borders and other practical limitations for broadcasting in a time when radio practices were still being defined.

Country music legend June Carter Cash, in an anecdote about when she and her family lived in Del Rio, Texas, tells that by blasting so much wattage the X stations were so powerful that you did not even need a radio

to listen in: you could hear border radio “on any barbed wire fence in Texas” (Fowler & Crawford, 2005). The stations were known to be so powerful that they could blast radio power far beyond the Texas/México border and far up into the U.S. plains states, into the Midwest, and “anywhere in the nation.” Others attest that the X stations reached as far away as Canada, Europe, Japan, and New Zealand, while still others jokingly suggest that the stations were putting out so much wattage that they affected birds as far away as Australia, Finland, and Java. A more interesting fact, I contend, is that the X stations played music that could not be heard on mainstream radio stations in the United States. In addition to the religious orientation and commercial pitches for many outlandish products that dominated airtime on the X stations, the X stations exerted a different kind of power when they began to play music to attract listeners and became the first radio stations on Earth to play “western” and “hillbilly swing,” along with blues, R&B, and other “race” music. Regional Mexican and other Latin American music was sometimes heard as well, and the fact that listeners were exposed to all of these contributed fundamentally to the new popular music genres that resulted (e.g., country and rock ‘n’ roll).

In the spring of 2005, the Grammy Award-winning supergroup Los Super Seven (or, Los Super 7) released a compact disc as a tribute to “border radio.” *Heard It on the X* was the third album by Los Super Seven, and the title was culled from a somewhat famous but now forgotten song from 1975 called “Heard It on the X” by the Tex-Mex rock/blues band ZZ Top:

Do you remember, back in 1966,  
Country Jesus, hillbilly blues, that’s where I learned my licks.  
Oh, from coast to coast and line to line, in every county there,  
I’m talking ’bout that outlaw X, that’s cutting through the air.  
Anywhere y’all, Everywhere y’all,  
I heard it, I heard it, I heard it on the X.  
 (“Heard It on the X,” from 1975’s *Fandango!* by ZZ Top)

Although the collaborative effort of Los Super Seven acknowledged ZZ Top through liner notes, the version by the popular music supergroup is more noteworthy as the lasting acknowledgment of and testament to the role of border radio for the community of listeners formed by it between the 1930s and 1960s as well as border radio’s impact on American culture.

Although the details and implications of border radio have been discussed previously in radio studies (Fowler & Crawford, 2002), (Kahn, 1996), the current analysis focuses on *Heard It on the X* as a contemporary cultural text and a form of intercultural public discourse that further illuminates the Latino/a legacy in American popular music as well as the effect that border radio had on the radio listening community and even

race relations in the United States. Widely acclaimed and much loved, *Heard It on the X*'s most remarkable aspect was the disc's focus on paying tribute to the influence of border radio on country and rock 'n' roll music (and popular music in general) and on U.S. culture in general. As Bentley (2005) notes about the disc,

The dozen songs on the album cover the entire breadth of the lone star state in such a way that listeners get a direct blast of history from artists that helped create it, as well as those who learned from its roots. The way those lessons are taught is musical heritage at its most heartening.

As *Heard It on the X* suggests, and as the following analysis reveals, the X border radio stations were integral to the changes taking place in an ever-growing and rapidly evolving U.S. culture between the 1930s and 1960s and a great deal of popular music that followed. By featuring the music of poor and working-class whites along with blacks/African Americans and Latino/as, the X stations allowed radio to become the first mass medium that was truly multicultural, and therefore allowed border radio to have a lasting effect on American culture.

Radio and communication scholar Michael Keith (septemper, 2007) asserts, in connection with the role of radio in the United States, that "the world's first electronic mass medium had performed a unique, if not profound, role in the life of Americans for three quarters of a century." Rothenbuhler and McCourt (2002) tell us, "By providing new venues for expression of regional, class, and ethnic identities, radio played an instrumental role in a series of major transformations, if not revolutions, in American culture" (p. 368). Likewise, Benedict Anderson makes the following argument about radio and nationalism:

Invented only in 1895, radio made it possible to bypass print and summon into being an aural representation of the imagined community where the printed page scarcely penetrated. Its role ... generally in mid-twentieth-century nationalisms, has been much underestimated and understudied. (2006, 54)

It could be said, therefore, that border radio deserves further attention as a public discourse that was produced by a multicultural setting in Texas and that it anticipated and likely contributed to multiculturalism and intercultural communication in the United States in the decades that followed. The implications, of course, are that *Heard It on the X* represents a radio listening community that anticipated the end of the Jim Crow South and preceded the integration of U.S. culture and society, and thus signifies the lasting impact of the sound medium of radio on American life.

Moreover, a deeper analysis of *Heard It on the X* (and the border radio that it commemorates) reveals significant connections to Latino/a music

and culture. I propose a corollary that it also should be recognized how Los Super Seven's *Heard It on the X* simultaneously recalls the "Latin" legacy in U.S. popular music and its effect on American culture as it was mediated through radio. Thus, *Heard It on the X* also provides an opportunity to reconsider the history and role of Latino/as in U.S. culture. In a time of burgeoning significance of Latino/a peoples in the United States—from the emergence of Latino/as as the nation's largest minority to irrational fears about a growing number of Spanish speakers (and "losing English"), from political efforts to capture Latino/a voters to the building of border walls, from heated debates about immigration reform to questions about the value of ethnic assimilation in a time of intense globalization—*Heard It on the X* illuminates an important radio community (an integrated culture predating modern country music, rock 'n' roll, and other popular music), serves as a vital corrective to radio and popular music history with regard to the contributions of Latino/as and Hispanics, and provides a rich background for the conversation about the place of Latino/as in the United States.

### ***Los Super Seven***

All-star supergroups in popular music have been around for decades, and bands such as Blind Faith in the 1960s, the Traveling Wilburys in the 1980s, the Texas Tornados and Damn Yankees in the late 1980s/early 1990s, Los Super Seven and Audioslave in the late 1990s, and contemporary rock bands Velvet Revolver and Scrap Metal in the 2000s continue to be well received by fans. Most of these bands received much critical acclaim and made mountains of cash in the process, yet music critic Ed Ward describes Los Super Seven as "the only supergroup that doesn't suck" (2005). Although such a candid characterization might be based upon esoteric aesthetic judgments, I would suggest that if such a statement has any truth, it might be related to Los Super Seven's far-reaching musical range as well as the diversity of artists and musicians who are part of the collective. Los Super Seven could actually be called Los Super 75-or-more, and their musical styles include country, blues, folk, Tex-Mex rock, *corrido*, *cumbia*, *mariachi* and *ranchera*, *norteño*, *jarocho*, *bolero*, *son*, and many others.

Los Super Seven began in 1998 with the release of their self-titled first disc, which featured the first lineup of seven main artists.<sup>2</sup> In the 13 songs on the first album, which were mostly in the vein of regional Latin music—*cumbia*, *ranchera*, *conjunto norteño*, *tejano*, and combinations thereof—the artists blended the sound of different Latin music genres into a contemporary musical effort that recognized the importance of traditional music and important artists of the past.<sup>3</sup> For the second album by Los Super Seven,

*Canto* (released in 2001), producers reshuffled and came up with another all-star lineup.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the addition of three international music stars, the 12 songs on the second disc featured a more expanded version of Latin music, including Brazilian, Peruvian, Cuban, and other Latin American songs in addition to the regional Mexican styles that were already part of the supergroup's repertoire. Likewise, the influence of U.S. country music remained strong, as did the tendency toward genre blending.

When *Heard It on the X* was released in 2005, Los Super Seven all but gave up the façade of being an all-star band of just seven members. Not only was the deck reshuffled once again, but previous members returned and the new lineup included more Super Seven newcomers (but established stars).<sup>5</sup> The result was a list of at least ten "Super Seven" members, although that number also underreports the numerous other musicians, producers, and contributors who were part of the *Heard It on the X* effort. And this fact, I contend, is significant given that the tribute disc invokes a radio community that was influenced by border radio and Tex-Mex culture, which included Latin music alongside hillbilly and western swing music and even blues. In the following pages, I describe some important songs from *Heard It on the X* that reveal intriguing connections to Latino/as in U.S. culture and simultaneously signify the place of Latino/as in contemporary U.S. culture.

### ***Blues Music and Tex-Mex Culture***

One of the important social-cultural connections illuminated on 2005's *Heard It on the X* is a song by the aging blues musician Clarence "Gate-mouth" Brown, who covers the song "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean." While the musicians and producers of *Heard It on the X* were wise to include Brown, an important link to blues music and African Americans on border radio of years past, they might not have been aware that the significance could be extended to include the Mexicans and Latin Americans who influenced early blues artists. While the predominant influence of African/African American culture is obvious in histories of blues music, a lesser-known fact remains that early blues musicians were also influenced, albeit ever so slightly, by Mexican culture.

For example, the song "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" was actually written by one of Texas's original blues musicians, Blind Lemon Jefferson, who is considered one of the main figures in "country blues," one of two central figures of "Texas blues," and one of the earliest and most important bluesmen of the 1920s. Existing evidence suggests that various unknown guitarists among Mexican workers in the rural Texas area where he was raised likely influenced Jefferson and that those Mexican musicians probably played intricate *flamenco* guitar patterns that contributed to what was

known as Jefferson's unique playing style. Although Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown's song on the *Heard It on the X* album was just a cover of an old blues classic, the significance is such that Brown's song connected him and the other artists on *Heard It on the X*, as well as a larger community of listeners to the border X stations, to the earliest of African American blues musicians but also to unknown Mexican and Latin American musical influences.

As I recalled this historical footnote about Blind Lemon Jefferson, I was reminded that when it comes to the legacy of African American and Latin influences and the multicultural dialogue that defines U.S. popular music, some historical clues shift the conversation to include the legacy of Robert Johnson. The blues music legend has been noted by scholars to have had tremendous influence on popular music in the United States and especially rock 'n' roll (Garofalo, 1997; Marcus, 1997), although he is probably best known for the Faustian legend of having sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads in exchange for being the world's greatest blues guitarist. Yet historical evidence surrounding some of his recordings tells us that Johnson might also be considered important for how he forged his own dialogue with Latin music culture in South Texas through the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Years ago, I took notice of a small part of Robert Johnson's musical legacy, a 1930s song titled "They're Red Hot," in which Johnson can actually be heard singing about a traditional Mexican food—hot *tamales*. "They're Red Hot" is a song that has been performed and recorded countless times by blues artists, so, on the surface, Johnson's interpretation sounds like another version of a timeless blues classic that has been reworked and recorded by several different musicians over several decades. However, it is intriguing that despite this question about Johnson, the words "hot *tamales*" do not appear in similar songs by other artists. In other artists' interpretations of "Red Hot," the line "Hot *tamales* and they're red hot" is replaced by "My gal is red hot." So for others, "red hot" is a reference to the physical beauty of the singer's "gal," whereas for Johnson, "red hot" is a reference to hot *tamales*. Today, the song can be heard with "hot *tamales*" in more recent renditions that follow Robert Johnson, such as Eric Clapton's tribute to Robert Johnson, *Me and Mr. Johnson* (2004). Yet, I continued to wonder why Johnson was singing about hot *tamales*, and questions emerged. What could account for Johnson's lyric—using a Spanish word denoting Mexican food in a blues song? Is there any explanation for the change in the lyrics? Why would Johnson, a black man from Mississippi who played blues, be singing about traditional Mexican food?

To put these questions in better light through an interesting connection to border radio, Fowler and Crawford (2002) recall how former Texas governor W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel actually used border radio to further his campaigns for the governorship in the 1930s. As Fowler and Crawford note, it was quite natural that public figures with access to high-powered radio