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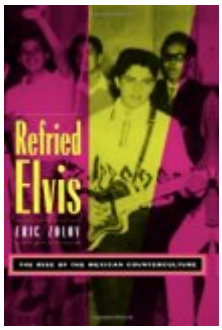
Eric Zolov. *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999. vii + 349 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-20866-7.



Reviewed by Kristina A. Boylan

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During a year of field research, a colleague and I rented a congenial apartment in a pleasant, lower-middle-class neighborhood in central Mexico City; the only proverbial flies in the ointment there were our next-door neighbors. We had been warned by the previous tenant (also a young, foreign, female student) that the family next door tended to pry, but she neglected to mention that they also enjoyed hosting fiestas, playing music--loudly--until all hours. Concerned about rising early to get to the archives on time, we investigated and found that the culprits were not the two children of the family, twenty-somethings closer to our age, but were their fifty-something parents. Several times, the father of the family answered our protests by shouting "TENGO FIESTA!", as if that were an adequate justification for our windows vibrating to their music. After a particularly nasty altercation, the parents exacted their revenge by calling our landlords to report: "There's a *strange man* staying in the apartment with those girls." Despite all attempts at explaining that my brother had come for a conference and a brief visit, we were roundly scolded by the landlords AND the parents for putting our moral standing into question with the rest of the building, if not the entire neighborhood. However, we achieved a certain detente the evening we attended the fiesta commemorating the renovations they had carried out in the apartment. My German roommate kept a straight face as the father asked her if she didn't think the kitchen looked "European." My turn to practice diplomacy came as he pointedly explained to me, the American, that not only was the inventor of color television a Mexican whose ideas had been stolen by the gringos, but so was Elvis Presley, who had had to hide his Latino identity to achieve success in the USA. The parents then demonstrated that they danced the jive far better than I ever could. In the interests of keeping the peace, I did not dare disagree, but for long afterwards wondered just what they had been on about.

Eric Zolov's *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* provides a rich explanation, not only about the late 1950s-early 1960s generation to which my neighbors belonged, but about the place that rock music and youth culture have had in Mexico for the past forty years in discours-

es of nationality, modernity, class, social customs, gender and family. Initially, rock-and-roll music was seen as a harbinger of modern culture, one that Mexico ought to have alongside other industrialized nations in Europe and the Americas. Zolov convincingly demonstrates that ***rocanrol*** threateningly violated the codes of the patriarchal, authoritarian 'Mexican family,' on the micro level, as young men and especially young women dispensed with traditions to try new lifestyles, and on the macro level, as alternative models of what it meant to be 'Mexican,' divergent from that offered by the institutionalized Revolution, emerged and were expressed in music, literature and other media. Post-1950 youth culture thus triggered authoritarian responses from patriarchally-organized institutions such as Mexico's ruling party, the Catholic Church and traditional families. Through meticulous research in a wide variety of archives, periodicals, business reports, films, recordings, and personal interviews, Zolov shows that time and time again the vehement censure of ***rocanrol*** and its accompanying youth culture was consistently couched in familial and gendered terms. Whether questioning the masculinity of Elvis Presley or the Beatles, whether decrying rising rates of divorce and women 'forced' to work outside the home or rising hemlines, the stern and ever-watchful state, like its parallels in the clergy and the 'fathers of the family,' acted to clip the wings of countercultural youth. Although Mexican ***rocanrol*** was not always overtly political, Zolov disputes the view that it was apolitical, instead documenting its continual controversiality. Contrary to the impression that Western commercial and consumer culture (mostly imported from the United States) had displaced Mexican Revolutionary culture and depoliticized the populace, Zolov argues that the "emergence [of the Mexican counterculture] also marked the beginning of a new ideological questioning of authoritarian practices, not its death knell" (p. 9). Repressive tactics often made outright political and social challenge difficult, if not dangerous; thus ***rocanrol*** may have seemed at times escapist, but it was neither a tool of the ruling regime nor of foreign agents. Mexico's own countercultural heritage, including 1950s ***rebeldismo***, an 'Avandaro generation' contemporary to that of Woodstock, and student movements paralleling those in Czechoslovakia, France, the United States and other countries, has been silenced in official attempts to present the 'Mexican family' as seamlessly unified, at least until the economic crises and political upheavals of the 1980s and1990s rent it. Though erased not only from textbooks but also from many annals of Mexican culture, Zolov has reassembled evidence from myriad, scattered sources to recount the history of the Mexican counterculture from its inception to its current forms.

Refried Elvis opens with a detailed account of 1950s Mexico, when conservative forces in Mexico, terrified of the detrimental effect that rock music might have on the proper order of political, social and familial life, sought to contain rock-and-roll's rebellious side (chapters 1 and 2). Whether by elevating the cost of imported records and films, censoring Spanish translations of foreign hits (or not translating them at all), or, eventually, sanitizing home-grown products, it was insisted that in Mexico there would be no ***rebeldismo sin causa*** (p. 37). Although at times lyrics in English slipped by the censors (covers of popular foreign songs in English or Spanish were called 'refritos' (p. 72), hence Zolov's title), the only acceptable outlet, it seemed, was for youngsters to play their music loudly when they attended parties held at middle- and upper-class homes (pp. 84-85). They at least had their noise, or as my neighbor most likely said back then, "TENGO FIESTA."

Mexican counterculture did not remain in this restricted state. As Zolov demonstrates in chapter 3, both rhetoric of international exchange amongst 'modern' nations and individual interest kept a chink open for rock-and-roll influences

from outside Mexico. Meanwhile, Mexico's working classes, not cowed by scoldings against immorality, kept playing their own music and supporting their own bands, despite arbitrary busts of dance halls and basement clubs. Hints of '60s pop and psychadelia began to creep into the Mexican music scene, whether from imported Rolling Stones albums bought dearly or from reports from Huautla de Juárez, Oaxaca, where foreign hippies came in droves to try hallucinogenic mushrooms used in Mazatec religious culture (Elvis may not have been Mexican, but psilocybin, the organic model for LSD, was! p. 107). By 1967, 'La Onda' was a widespread, identifiable trend; many young Mexicans sought to change their hairstyle, their clothes (their 'ethnic' garb, notably, did not come from India, but were the huaraches, yaxqui necklaces and embroidered shirts repopularized by countercultural tourists and then reembraced by Mexicans), their reading material, and their attitudes towards social mores, notably in matters of authority and obedience (p. 113).

Chapters Three and Four examine the Mexican music scene during and in the wake of the 1968 student protests which were ended by the Tlatelolco massacre of 2 October 1968. Despite the fact that student demands did not fundamentally challenge the Mexican constitution or the upper echelons of social structure, from the outset, virtually every student protester was labelled a 'hardliner.' Women's participation in the protests was especially suspect; despite messages from music, literature and radical politics about their liberation, all-too-traditional assumptions about their activities in mixed, unsupervised company and their contravening parental, university and government authority brought especial condemnation upon them, from within and outside the student movement (one public employee commented on the whole affair, "Its the miniskirt that's to blame." p. 131). Also threatening to patriarchal authorities were the links which developed among upper, middle and working class students and activists; finding common ground in cultural idols and social protest, they occupied the university and sacrosanct public spaces such as the Angel of Independence and the Zocalo together (pp. 120-128).

The backlash against La Onda and related youth movements was fierce. One of the repercussions of Tlatelolco in Mexican popular culture was that, although a small segment of the student movement became more radicalized, many protesters became convinced that the oppressive political system, and the familial structure that paralleled it, were too powerful to be confronted. They opted to 'tune in, turn on and drop out,' calling themselves *jipis* (or further Mexicanizing the moniker to *xipitecas*), and joined foreign travellers on journeys to rediscover their own countryside. This move was widely criticized, both by conservatives ("Mexico needs men, not hippies," read one editorial) and by the Mexican left, which condemned the trend as escapist and a 'cheap imitation' of the Western countercultural ideal it otherwise admired (pp. 132-134).

Despite the backlash, a new musical genre emerged, called "La Onda Chicana," in which native bands fused Mexican and Latin American elements with foreign counterculture. Groups such as La Revolución de Emiliano Zapata, División del Norte, and Reforma Agraria appropriated and subverted the state's iconic figures; they recorded original compositions as well as covers, achieving several international hits (pp. 169-171). National and transnational recording companies tentatively lent support, and new radio stations and a music magazine, ***Piedra Rodante*** (closely modelled on ***Rolling Stone***) followed the scene. The success of La Onda Chicana was short-lived, plummeting precipitously after a mass concert held in September 1971 alongside a car race in Avandaro, Valle de Bravo, Mexico State. Zolov painstakingly combined periodical surveys, oral history, and detective work in private collections to reconstruct this event in Chapter Six, as it has been all but erased from popular memory. Avandaro bore strong sim-

ilarities to the USA's Woodstock in that several hundred thousand people in miserable, rainy weather attended it. Avandaro also provoked an extraordinary backlash from government officials and social conservatives against drug use, bad language, sexual licentiousness (though the great majority of those in attendance were male), occasional mild political statements and other symbolic misdemeanours (such as waving *tricolor* flags with a peace sign replacing the eagle and nopal). Unlike Woodstock, the recording industry did not capitalize on the event, but again censored itself, bowing to state pressure to cease publication of any material from Avandaro, and to cut off the production, distribution and consumption of Mexican *rocanrol* in the interests of social stability (pp. 217-224).

Neither national nor transnational companies suffered much from this policy, as the proportion of their assets invested in La Onda Chicana was small. Instead, they promoted *'nueva cancion'*, Latin American folk music. Although also imbued with statements of protest, this music was deemed *lo nuestro* and more acceptable by the Mexican authorities, who again sponsored folk music festivals, as they had in the 1950s to counteract the influence of Elvis Presley and his ilk (pp. 53-54). One of the main propellants of the new musical trend, ironically, was Americans Simon and Garfunkel's 1970 recording of the Peruvian "El Condor Pasa"; nevertheless many Mexican elites, students and intellectuals as well embraced *nueva cancion* and rejected rock-and-roll as "imperialist" (p. 226). *Rocanrol* was driven back into the barrios and the *hoyos fonquis*, not able to compete in the mainstream with *nueva cancion* or with foreign pop bands (which benefited from the restrictions on rock's development in Mexico), until the mid-1980s. Once again, a wedge had been driven between the youth of different classes, musical trends dividing the *fresas* and the *burguesia* from the *nacos*.

Before concluding his study on Mexican pop culture, Zolov brings in what at first seems to be an unrelated topic, the work of the United States Information Agency over the time period covered by *Refried Elvis*. Yet Chapter Seven is enormously useful in that it demonstrates that the USIA did not have a clue about what was going on in Mexican youth culture; nor was it ready or able to launch any imperialist plots via a cultural idiom such as rock-and-roll. The USIA dedicated substantial time and energy to composing *Protestas y estilos* ,a Spanish-language pamphlet describing the protests and social movements of the 1960s in very sanitized terms. Never intended for wide distribution, its aim was to "explain America" to the Latin American elite youth who would grow up to be their country's cultural intermediaries. Zolov contends that *Protestas y estilos* validated La Onda in that, even in its careful terms, it presented trends in music and student activism that had identifiable counterparts in Mexico. It also underscored the USIA's failure to recognize the transformation of Mexican youth culture that had already taken place in its own cultural idiom (p. 245). There was no need for the USIA to 'inform' nor to 'convert' Mexican (and other Latin American) youth about dissent, "healthy" or otherwise (p. 240). In light of the USIA's naive information campaign, the assertions made by the Mexican left and right that the USA was actively scheming to undermine Latin American or Mexican culture via rock music seem at best shrill.

In the Conclusions, Zolov adds a detailed postscript about the survival of *rocanrol* in Mexico, mostly due to the continued support of the urban lower classes, whose numbers swelled as Mexico's economic miracle went bust in the early 1980s. In the face of economic crisis, catastrophes such as the 1985 earthquake, and the delegitimizing of Mexico's political elite, rock music served a cathartic function. As Alejandro Lora (of Three Souls In My Mind and later the TRI) points out, while not 'conscienticizing' the people *per se*, listening to rock has been a way of confronting soci-

ety and its ruling institutions. Punk rock did quite well in the barrios, as did local ***chavos banda***. In the wake of economic and political crisis, the de la Madrid and Salinas de Gortari administrations sought the support of youth and were prepared to allow for a controlled form of youth culture, through sponsorship of recorded music and concerts by its Consejo Nacional de Recursos para la Atencion de la Juventud (CREA) and campaign promises to lift bureaucratic constraints on the holding of 'cultural events.' However, the government's efforts to incorporate rock, which for the most part it had vehemently excised over the past three decades, into its version of national culture, failed, as it could not compete with the autonomous Consejo Popular Juvenil and other independent groups and followings.

The lifting of bans on mass concerts and increased radio play benefited both native and foreign musicians, but several nongovernmental factors have contributed to the recently increased success of ***rocanrol***. Youth and student culture now embrace a fusion of traditional corridos, nueva cancion and foreign and national rock along with other genres. Rock music's appropriation of national events and symbols and its identification with protest movements such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas go almost unquestioned. Finally, ***rocanrol*** no longer has to face onslaughts from the Mexican left; its cultural critics have accepted the ***'onda'*** as part of Mexico's ***'cultura'*** or ***'musica popular'***.

Zolov's study is well-written and informative; sources ranging as widely as from RCA and DIMSA reports to interviews with ***ex-jipis*** are integrated into a highly credible, readable text. Like many historical works on Mexico, ***Refried Elvis*** mainly looks at that country's counterculture from Mexico City outwards, although Zolov admirably includes regional influences (for example, the influence of the Mazatec culture in Huautla, or the impact of ***rocanrol*** bands like Los Dug Dugs and Santana that honed their skills in Tijuana and the southwestern USA before reemerging on the Latin American scene) where relevant (Ch.3). Zolov's call for further research to be carried out on Mexican rock music and counterculture might prove difficult, as ***Refried Elvis*** leaves the reader with few questions about the material it covers. It should inspire regional investigations, in-depth examinations of different contributors, and a closer look at ***rocanrol*** and alternative cultural expression during the 1980s and 1990s in historical perspective. As ***Refried Elvis*** only covers up to the 1970s in great detail, I wondered how the recent craze in ***musica ranchera*** would fit into Zolov's paradigm. Possibly akin to the infiltration of country music in American yuppies' CD collections, with exhortations that it represents 'the real America,' ***musica ranchera*** being played at universities and extolled as ***'muy mexicana'*** might be an attempt to absorb rural, working-class and migrant culture into the Mexican mainstream, to incorporate it into a 1990s vision of what it means to be 'Mexican,' as part of the continuing search for the 'real' Mexico. For this and for many other research topics, ***Refried Elvis*** will surely serve as a firm basis upon which to base further explorations.

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