

Surf, Sun, and Smog: Audio-Visual Imagery + Performance in Mexico City's Neo-Surf Music Scene

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Class, Cultural Studies



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Riding the Surf Wave in a City Without a Seashore

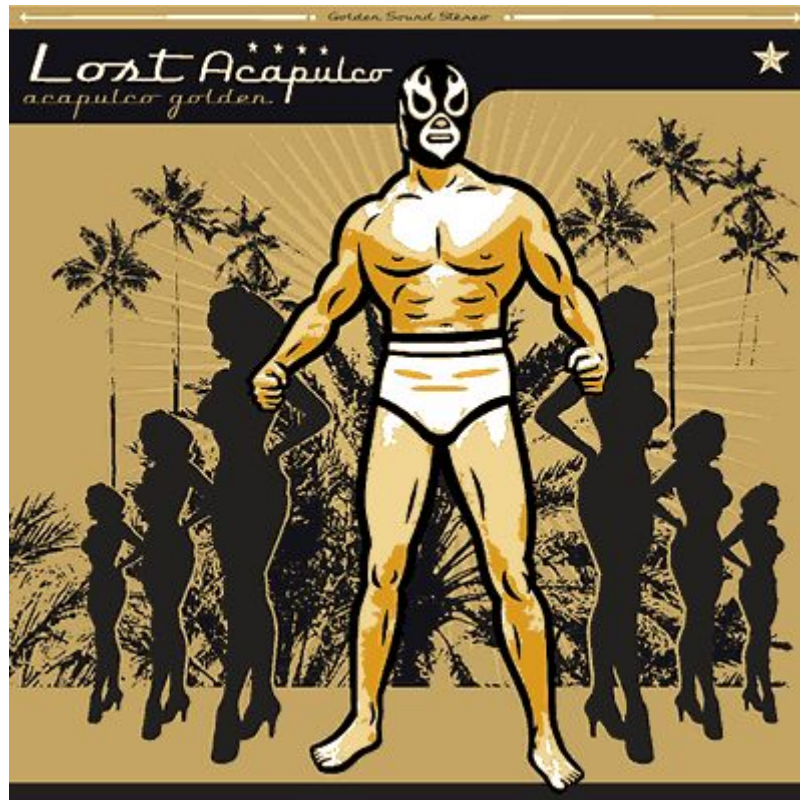
On April 24, 2005, at Zócalo square in downtown Mexico City, the Surf y Arena music festival gathered around 100,000 people and nine bands, ranging from local, barely known groups to big names in the new-wave surf music scene: [Fenómeno Fuzz](#), [Los Magníficos](#), [Perversos Cetáceos](#), [Espectroplasma](#), [Los Elásticos](#), [Yucatán A Go-Go](#), [Sr. Bikini](#), [Lost Acapulco](#), and [Los Straitjackets](#), the latter being the only U.S. band in the festival. One year before, hardly more than a thousand people attended the event, organized in a smaller venue at Alameda del Sur, a few hundred yards south of Zócalo square. Perhaps not even the bands were prepared for the huge response in 2005. [Interviewed by local newspaper La Jornada](#), Fenómeno Fuzz lead guitarist stated, “It’s the first time we see something like this, with so many people. Surf is an instrumental rock genre that was played in the 50s and 60s. There is no sand or sun here as in Acapulco, but we’ve brought downtown a bit of the beach vibe. In Mexico City there must be some 40 bands playing to this rhythm.” In the same interview piece, Lost Acapulco lead guitarist El Reverendo considered, “this festival is a success, for you realize this music is going up. People are on the same pitch. This is not a movement, but a style with many followers. [...] It doesn’t matter if there is no beach here—you have to imagine it.”



Sr. Bikini at Rock and Road on 30 de Marzo 2013, Image by Flickr User José Miguel Rosas ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

The bands who played at the 2005 Surf y Arena Festival wondered whether the success was transitory or would endure. More than a decade later, some are still active, most notably Lost Acapulco, whose singles and compilations have been released in countries like Spain, Italy, and Japan; they have toured around the world, and have released a new EP, [Coral Riffs \(2015\)](#). Los Straitjackets lead guitarist Danny Amis has collaborated with local surf bands like Lost Acapulco

and [Twin Tones](#); after surviving a hard battle against cancer, he moved to Mexico City's Chinatown. Los Elásticos also released a new album, *Death Calavera 2.2*, the Espectroplasma members formed Twin Tones and have played, toured and participated in the short film inspired by their first record, *Nación Apache*. In 2016, the [Wild'O Fest](#) brought together [old and new surf stars](#), starring [The Fleshtones](#) (U.S.) and [Wau y los Arrrghs!](#) (Spain), as well as local legends [Los Esquizitos](#) and Lost Acapulco. In February 2017, the Russian band [Messer Chups](#) [toured across Mexico](#), playing with local bands in several cities. So it seems the scene is alive and kicking.



Lost Acapulco's LP Acapulco Golden cover art by Dr. Alderete (2004). Masks became a famous trait of Mexican surf music. Danny Ams from Los Straitjackets and some Lost Acapulco members wear them on stage, as well as many other surf bands. This cover echoes films from the 50s and 60s featuring wrestlers like Santo and Blue Demon.

Today we can listen to how surf music shaped part of Mexico City's underground music scene in the last decade of the 20th century and the early 21st. Being 235 miles away from Acapulco, one might wonder how wearing sandals, short pants, floral print shirts, plastic flower necklaces, and dark sunglasses became trendy in the country's capital city. To this beach imagery, surf bands and fans added references to classic Mexican media icons, like wrestler [Santo](#), comedian [Mauricio Garcés](#), and black and white sci-fi movies. The work by visual artists like [Dr. Alderete](#)—who has designed covers and posters for many surf bands, such as Lost Acapulco, Fenómeno Fuzz, Telekrimen, The Cavernarios, Los Corona, among others—has been crucial for this imagery cross-reference process.



Lima-based visual art magazine Carboncito cover art by Dr. Alderete (2012). The cover features Kalimán, main character of an old Mexican comic strip, as well as other characters associated both with surf imagery (the Rapa Nui statue, oddly resembling a bamboo Tiki figure) and spy films like James Bond.

In this article I portray the neo-surf music scene in Mexico as a cultural-musical set of audiovisual and performative traits shared, modified, and transmitted by the scene's partakers. It cannot be said there is a surf music "urban tribe" (a trendy concept for several years in Mexican youth studies), but rather shared "aesthetic" expressions of cultural syncretism, responding to the increase of atomization and alienation in Mexico City.

Just as in ska, punk, or hardcore rock, a number of surf concert attendees participate in typical genre-related rituals like moshing. Surf fans, however, are more "performatic" in the way Diana Taylor understands this term in *The Archive and the Repertoire* as "the adjectival form of the nondiscursive realm of performance" (6). Several surf concert goers wear masks, originally worn by notorious Mexican wrestlers like Santo, [Blue Demon](#), and [Rey Misterio](#) (whose son would later become a [WWE star](#)). At the concert, when a song's tempo suddenly stops or changes, masked dancers pose as if weightlifting, jump and crowd surf, stage fights, and mimic swimming movements. Surf music is the lyric-less soundtrack for the intertwined performance of different cultural traits, portraying a prolific tension between a hedonistic attitude associated with an invented nostalgia for West Coast surf culture, and the halo of exoticness surrounding Mexican

culture in the U.S. imaginary, as portrayed by surf bands and artists (just to name a few, Herb Albert's "Tijuana Taxi," Link Wray's "Tijuana," and Los Straitjackets' "Tijuana Boots").



<https://youtu.be/K5aKVLhiGl8>

Mosh pit with masked participants. On stage, Lost Acapulco plays "Frenesick." Multiforo Alicia, Mexico City, March 20 2009.

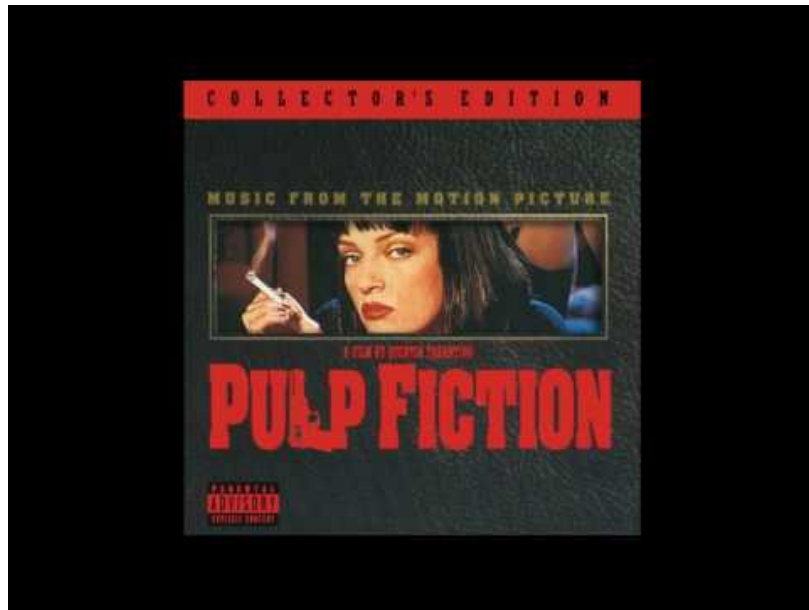
Tracing the Origins of Mexican Neo-Surf Music Scene

1960s Mexican rock and garage bands do not usually have instrumental songs in their repertoire, as is the case with [Los Sleepers](#), or [Los Rockin' Devils](#). However, there are some examples of incursions in surf-related instrumentals, such as [Los Teen Tops'](#) "Rock del diablo rojo," or Los



Locos del Ritmo's "Morelia." It was not until Toño Quirazco (1935-2008) formed Quirazco y sus Hawaian Boys, though, that we find a Mexican instrumental song, "Surf hawaiano," explicitly using the noun "surf" as an identity marker, just like "Traveling Riverside Blues," or "Jailhouse Rock". The use of a pedal steel guitar (portrayed in their 1965 eponymous album cover photo), and its association to Hawaiian music through the slide guitar method, makes exoticism an early sonic feature of Mexican surf. Born in Xalapa, Veracruz, Quirazco was not as famous as Los Teen Tops or Los Locos del Ritmo, but he is a key forerunner not only of surf music, as he is also known for having introduced ska to Mexican audiences, with songs like "Jamaica Ska" and "Ska hawaiano," both off his album *Jamaica Ska*, also from 1965.

Although surf music bands suffered heavily with the arrival of the British Wave, not all of them disappeared. Bands such as [The Ventures](#) became famous for covering surf standards. Others, like The Beach Boys, eventually migrated to different music styles. Later in the 1970s and 80s, bands like [The Cramps](#), [The Stray Cats](#), and [The Go-Go's](#) kept alive surf-related styles, so that by the time [Pulp Fiction](#) appeared, in 1994, there were some interesting bands we already can consider "neo-surf," such as [Man Or Astroman?](#) and [The Tantra Monsters](#); Los Straitjackets re-formed and [Dick Dale](#) began touring again. Quentin Tarantino's soundtrack to *Pulp Fiction* (including songs by Southern California surf rockers Dale, [The Tornadoes](#), [The Revels](#), [The Centurians](#), and [The Lively Ones](#)) contributed to bringing surf music back to mainstream attention, now as a vintage sound commodity (Norandi, 2002).



<https://youtu.be/xzLhT0LLP3Y>

We might call this “the Pulp Fiction effect,” a phenomenon recognized by stakeholders in the scene, like Los Esquizitos guitar and theremin player Güili:

One day Nacho came up with the idea that we should play surf, because it was the moment in which [...] in Satélite [a northern Mexico City neighborhood] all bands wanted to play funk like Red Hot Chili Peppers or Primus. It became a virtuoso slap competition, and precisely no one was playing surf [...]. Shortly afterwards, Tarantino's Pulp Fiction was released and surf exploded impressively with the movie's theme. But we were already riding the surf wave.

<https://vimeo.com/47921450>

Multiforo Alicia has been an important venue for the consolidation not only of a surf scene, but also of other emerging movements at the time. Founder and owner **Ignacio Pineda** remembers,

When we started Multiforo Alicia [in 1995], there was a generational shift. There were a lot of new bands that didn't fit into what had been going on in the last 10 or 11 years, and they were the punk rock, ska, hip-hop, transmetal, emo, and nu metal movements, which nowadays are quite normal. [...] Luckily for us, [Alicia] was like home for all of them.



<https://youtu.be/-Sy6oUPglPU>

Interview with Multiforo Alicia owner Ignacio Pineda, 2011

It is a common venue for surf bands (Norandi, 2002, Caballero, 2012), and through their recording label, Grabaxiones Alicia, they have produced albums for some of the most interesting instrumental rock projects in Mexico, among them Twin Tones/Espectroplasma/Sonido Gallo Negro (three groundbreaking bands with the same members), Los Esquizitos, Los Magníficos, Telekrimen, The Cavernarios, and Austin TV. Massive festivals and concerts, like Vive Latino or Surf y Arena, have also contributed to positioning neo-surf as an ongoing trend in alternative rock.

Masking Identity, Performing Difference

While the emergence of Mexican neo-surf was contingent upon local and international music trends in the mid-90s, its permanence has been due to processes of cultural syncretism and appropriation. Wrestler masks are a good example. Worn first by Danny Amis, and later on by Los Esquizitos and Lost Acapulco, masks quickly spread out as a neo-surf visual icon. Los Esquizitos drum player, Brisa, doesn't remember there being an aesthetic justification behind the masked man using a chainsaw portrayed in their first album cover. Nacho complains, "Argh! We created a monster unawares! Ah, I sometimes regret that. I really regret having worn masks at a concert."

Los Esquizitos greatly contributed to blend a Mexican surf flavor through their imagery on stage, as well as with their most emblematic song, "Santo y Lunave." One of the few songs with lyrics in the scene (and with spoken word rather than singing), it tells story of how Santo got lost in space, turning him into an important figure of Mexican neo-surf imagery. As Güili recognizes, "I think it was after the 'Santo' song when all the Tetris pieces fit perfectly into place—wrestling, masks, floral print shirts, surf— everything in the same box."



<https://youtu.be/dPNCIKlv7Mw>

Live version of “Santo y Lunave” by Los Esquizitos, Vive Latino Music Festival, Mexico City, May 17, 2009. The song was originally released in their first LP (1998)

“Performatic” moshing is another example of cultural appropriation. The apparently random movements of moshers in heavy metal concerts have been compared to the kinetics of gaseous particles (as in Silverberg, Bierbaum, Sethna & Cohen’s “[Collective Motion of Moshers](#)”) but in surf concerts their movements cannot be reduced to the categories of “self-propulsion,” “flocking” and “collision.” Here moshers interact in more complex ways, mimicking wrestling movements to the rhythm of the song in turn, enacting fights between masked and unmasked opponents, and helping other moshers to jump over the audience and crowd surf. They consciously perform the icons they associate with surf culture. They are aware of the differential traits existing between this and other rock sub-genres, and they externalize them through ritualized behaviors. In other words, Mexican surf concert goers adopt moshing to participate in simulacra about stereotyped representations of Mexican culture and subjects.

Dancing Desires

In his book *Popular Music: The Key Concepts* (2nd ed), Roy Shuker describes surf as “Californian good time music, with references to sun, sand and (obliquely) sex” (2005, 262). This sexual suggestiveness is still present in Mexican neo-surf, as can be noticed in songs like Fenómeno Fuzz’s “El bikini de la chica popof” [“The Snob Girl’s Bikini”]:

*Ella viene caminando en su bikini de color,
ella viene caminando y a todos nos da calor,
y sus piernas bien bronceadas me hacen suspirar.
Ella viene caminando y no ve a nadie más.*

*[She's walking by, wearing her colorful bikini,
she's walking by and everyone gets hot,
and her well-tanned legs make me sigh.
She's walking by and doesn't look at anyone else]*

Other bands seem to reinforce this fetishization. Sr. Bikini have sometimes hired women dancers wearing masks and bikinis for their shows, and Los Elásticos have a permanent member, La Chica Elástica, who dances in every live show.



<https://youtu.be/ypB69yC732E>

[Final part of a Los Elásticos concert in 2012, featuring La Chica Elástica. All-men and all-women mosh pits can be seen at 0:40 and 3:36.]

However, even though sometimes subject to hedonistic and stereotyped representations, women participate in every level of the scene, expressing agency as band members, scenemakers, and/or fans. Women play in the most representative bands, such as Fenómeno Fuzz's former singer and bass player, Biani, or Los Esquizitos drummer, Brisa. There are also all-woman bands, such as Las Agresivas Hawaianas (whose brief existence is [scarcely documented](#) on the internet), rockabilly trio [Los Leopardos](#), and garage-oriented [Ultrasónicas](#), whose members have continued playing solo, most notably [Jessy Bulbo](#).



<https://youtu.be/GjM3iapvPMw>

Offstage, both genders wear masks and enter the pit. Sometimes, when there are many moshers, men and women gather in separate pits. Dancing is much more prominent in the surf scene than in punk; participants appropriate a go-go, swing, rock 'n' roll, and ska dancing moves, mixing them with wrestling and weightlifting positions. The attendees accomplish their middle-class expectations of leisure and entertainment by showing off their outfits, feeling desire, desired and/or admired (even if ironically) through dancing and moshing—literally by performing such expectations *in situ*.

The scene overall, has been critiqued for being too retro and insulated from political critique. As *La Jornada's* Mariela Norandi points out, "an element that the Mexican movement has inherited from the origins of surf is the lack of ideology. Curiously, surf is reborn in Mexico in a moment of political and social unrest [in the mid-90s], with the Zapatista uprising, the peso devaluation, Colosio's murder, and Salinas' escape" (2002, 6a). The fact that this scene has survived for over two decades, despite the many economic and political crises Mexico has faced ever since, suggests it works as an ideological outlet for scene partakers to elude their social reality. Just as it happened in the 60s with the Vietnam War, once again surfers stay away from social and political problems, and reclaim their right to have fun and dance. They wear their floral print shirts and dance a go-go style, remembering those wonderful 60s (6a). For Norandi, the lack of lyrics in surf music may be partly responsible for most surf bands seemingly uncritical position.

Into the Surf Sound

Although half of Mexico's states have a seashore, surf music in the capital is related to everything but actual surfing. The imagery built around it, considered "[surrealistic](#)" by Norandi (6a), is the most visible novelty in the new scene, since melodically and rhythmically speaking surf remains fairly simple, like garage or punk. However constrained, like other genres, to the 12-bar blues progression, it is in timbre where we appreciate how surf sound has been defined by several generations of music bands and players. A triple-level approach to surf music (timbral, melodic,

and stylistic) can account for the creation and development of several genres or scenes associated to the rise of Mexican neo-surf, like chili western (Twin Tones, Los Twangers, The Sonoras), space surf (Espectroplasma, Telekrimen, Megatones), garage (Ultrasónicas, Las Pipas de la Paz) and rockabilly (Los Gatos, Eddie y Los Grasosos, Los Leopardos, [among many others](#)).

Appropriation, practiced through covering standards and imitating riffs and melodies, has been always crucial for shaping the surf sound, just as it was in preceding genres that influenced rock 'n' roll, like blues, twist, and jazz. Although not exactly referred to as “surf standards,” there are some foundational songs that shaped the surf sound. Three pieces nowadays still debated as the first surf song—[Duane Eddy's “Rebel Rouser,”](#) [Link Wray's “Slinky,”](#) and Dick Dale's “Miserlou”—influenced not only contemporary bands and their immediate successors, but also musicians in the '90s wave.

https://youtu.be/-y3h9p_c5-M

These and other composers contributed collectively to establishing surf music's standard traits: the 4/4 drum beat (whose earliest template may be [Dale's “Surf Beat”](#)), the “wavy guitar” riff (perfectly illustrated in the beginning of [The Chantay's “Pipeline”](#)), an extensive use of reverb, and the appropriation of “exotic” tunes (such as the Lebanese melody that inspired Dale's tremolo style in “Miserlou”). Many surf songs contain, in particular, traits from “Slinky's” guitar and “Surf Beat's” drums. Both are simple and repetitive, but can be combined with other arrangements at will. This formula has been used in countless surf songs ever since.



Covering is a way of making connections with specific songs, and paying homage to (or deflating) admired bands and musicians. Links between a band and certain collaboration networks are thus established. Sr. Bikini covered Alpert's instrumental version of The Beatles' “A Taste of Honey,” setting up a dialogue with a musician that played a lot with Mexican stereotyped imagery and sounds (like the trumpets, substituted by electric guitars in Sr. Bikini's version).



<https://youtu.be/4UDraYKVyPE>

Lost Acapulco renamed [The Trashmen's "Surfin' Bird"](#) as "Surfin' Band," participating in a long chain of covers (including The Cramps and The Ramones) of a song that in turn was the result of mixing two pieces by The Rivingtons, "Bird's The Word" and "Papa Oom Mow Mow." Los Esquizitos have their own covers of [The Cramps' "Human Fly"](#) ("El moscardón") and [Rory Erickson's "I Walked With A Zombie."](#)

<https://youtu.be/OvNKZ79Q7rE>

Los Magníficos' "Píntalo de negro," after The Rolling Stone's "Paint It Black," shows that, just as in punk, any piece can be turned into a surf song.

Sometimes it is just a trait (a riff, or a beat) that is referenced. [Fenómeno Fuzz's initial riff in "Tiki Twist"](#) resembles [Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode,"](#) whereas two chili western songs ("Transgenic Surfers" by Los Twangers and "Skawboy" by [The Bich Boys](#)) echo The Ramrods' harmonic and timbral arrangements for "[Riders In The Sky](#)," another song with a long cover history, including Dale, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley. A surf version of this song was familiar to Mexican TV viewers in the 90s, since it was a regular soundtrack of furniture store [Hermanos Vázquez spots](#).

Surf was born at a time when stand-alone effects units were just about to change the way music was made, taking audio manipulation off the studio and bringing it to the stage. For example, The Shadows are known for having used the tape-based Watkins Copicat, "the first repeat-echo machine manufactured as one compact unit" [according to Steve Russell](#), responsible for the guitar delay effect in their 1960 rendition of Jerry Lordan's "Apache," since then a surf standard. In his book [Echo and Reverb](#), for example, Peter Doyle examines how effects like echo/delay and reverb shaped sonic spatiality in 20th century popular music recording in the U.S., from hillbilly, country, blues, and jazz to rock 'n' roll.

Although Doyle only dedicates a few paragraphs to Dale, Wray, and surf instrumentals, acoustic effects greatly contributed to characterize their styles as well. Some traits are intricately related to genre specific manifestations, like the double bass in rockabilly, or the twang effect in chili

western. Timbre, then, is the aural counterpart to the scene's visual aspect, "invoking the rich semiotic traditions that wove through southern and West Coast popular music recording" (Doyle, 2005, 226). It has become a way both to continually define the genre and, in the Mexical neo-surf scene in particular, to overcome melodic and harmonic limitations. Thanks to timbral play, what used to be a blind alley in rock history became in the 1990s a mirror for young generations of Mexicanos to create and feel aligned with fashionable trends, and a sonic filter enabling them to examine their social situations and, sometimes, to willfully sidestep them.

Featured Image: Lost Acapulco in Estadio Azteca 2009, Image by Flickr User Stephany Garcia (CC BY-ND 2.0).

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