Boom! Boom! Boom!: Banda, Dissident Vibrations, and Sonic Gentrification in Mazatlán

Sounding Out! Authors

Blog post published September 23, 2024 in *Sounding Out!*
https://doi.org/10.59350/astzz-ep180

Abstract

This series listens to the political, gendered, queer(ed), racial engagements and class entanglements involved in proclaiming out loud: La-TIN-x. ChI-ca-NA. La-TI-ne. ChI-ca-n-@.

Keywords

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



Recommended citation

Authors, S. O. (2024, September 23). Boom! Boom! Boom!: Banda, Dissident Vibrations, and Sonic Gentrification in Mazatlán. *Sounding Out!*. https://doi.org/10.59350/astzz-ep180

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This series listens to the political, gendered, queer(ed), racial engagements and class entanglements involved in proclaiming out loud: La-TIN-x. ChI-ca-NA. La-TI-ne. ChI-ca-n-@. Xi-can-x. Funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as part of the Crossing Latinidades Humanities Research Initiative, the Latinx Sound Cultures Studies Working Group critically considers the role of sound and listening in our formation as political subjects. Through both a comparative and cross-regional lens, we invite Latinx Sound Scholars to join us as we dialogue about our place within the larger fields of Chicanx/Latinx Studies and Sound Studies. We are delighted to publish our initial musings with Sounding Out!, *a forum that has long prioritized sound from a queered, racial, working-class and "always-from-below" epistemological standpoint.* ***—Ed. Dolores Inés Casillas***

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Boom! Boom! Boom! Da-da-da-da-da— The unmistakable blast of the tuba and the resounding crash of cymbals, embedded in *banda sinaloense*, reverberate through the narrow streets of Mazatlán, Sinaloa. It's a sound that shakes you to your core, quite literally—a sound that some may find overwhelming but for others, it's the heartbeat of the city. Yet, this very heartbeat is increasingly at odds with a new rhythm, imposed by the influx of white American settlers (retirees, snow birds) and tourists who prefer quieter, more sanitized (less sucio) soundscapes. Public debates about sound – its volume, its rightful "place" – demonstrate how sonic gentrification displaces local, cultural identities and highlights the impact of globalization on indigenous soundscapes.. In a city where culture has always been expressed loudly and proudly, this clash is more than just about volume; it's about identity, survival, and the right to exist audibly.

Banda is unapologetically brass-heavy with its tubas, trumpets, clarinets, and trombones–direct inheritances from the German brass bands brought to Mexico in the late 19th century by German immigrants and traders. Helena Simonett's hallmark book, *Banda: Mexican Musical Life Across Borders*, details how the influence of polka is unmistakable in the rhythmic patterns of banda, with its characteristic 2/4 meter and the upbeat, driving rhythms that push the music forward. Both styles share repetitive rhythmic, danceable, lively tempos and showcase the tuba's full, resonant sound. In polka, the tuba provides a consistent "oom-pah" bass line, while in banda, the tuba drives the harmonic structure with deep, grounding tones that propel the music forward, often in a steady and rhythmic pulse that mirrors the polka bass line. The accompanying tambora, a large bass drum unique to the genre, adds an unmistakable Mexican flair, infusing banda music with rhythmic accents that tie it back to the Mexican dance traditions of sones and norteños. With the loud combination of brass and tambora blaring through the city, it's understandable that white tourists and settlers would feel a dissonance between the soundscape and their Western settler notions of respectability.



The tambora leads Banda La Amistad in NYC, Image by Chris GoldNY, ***CC BY-NC 2.0***

Sonic gentrification refers to the process in which local auditory cultures are marginalized or displaced by soundscapes that cater to the preferences of more affluent or dominant groups as Marie Thompson discusses in *Beyond Unwanted Sound* (2017). This concept aligns with Stoever's "listening ear," which privileges certain auditory experiences—such as quiet and controlled soundscapes favored by Western tourists—while marginalizing others. This phenomenon in Mazatlán manifests through tensions surrounding the sounds of banda, increasingly heard as incompatible with the tranquil settings promoted by the tourist industrial complex. To Western ears unaccustomed to such instruments blaring through their environments, banda is heard as intrusive or abrasive. Yet, banda was never meant to be quiet or contained; it's a celebratory proclamation of life itself.

As a symbol of the region's cultural, namely working-class identity, banda's shaky acceptance dates back to when nobility regarded banda as music of the commoners. It is often mariachi music, with its more melodic and string-dominated compositions, that is seen as "easier on the ear" and perceived as a more sophisticated representation of Mexico's soundscape— incidentally hailing from a racially whiter region of Mexico. Reclaiming banda as a proud symbol of Northern Mexican culture is a direct challenge to both the casteism of Spanish settlers and the sonic imperialism imposed by white American settlers.

The response by local musicians to new ordinances aimed at limiting live banda performances on Mazatlán's beaches are being met with "dissident vibrations." Or, as I describe, when a musical collective effervescence can be harnessed to challenge dominant structures and create spaces for

marginalized voices to assert their rights and identities. In Mazatlán, these dissident vibrations took on a visible and visceral form when a viral video showed tourists enjoying a classical guitar performance inside a hotel while the energetic sounds of banda blasted from the beach just outside.

> *Y hoy los músicos de Mazatlán tomaron las avenidas principales del puerto 🙌 pic.twitter.com/6LOQ8axGu7— Revista ESPEJO (@EspejoRevista) March 27, 2024*

This video sparked a heated online debate about noise levels, with some tourists and local authorities advocating for more restrictions on banda music. Soon after, the conversation escalated with a public notice at a condominium complex prohibiting the hiring of live bands in the beach area—a move that directly impacted local banda musicians who depend on beach performances for their livelihood.

The tensions culminated in a nine-hour protest, during which hundreds of musicians marched through the streets of Mazatlán, playing their instruments in defiance of the regulations that aimed to control the noise. Their march, which eventually turned into a riot after clashes with police, was a sonic manifestation of resistance, challenging the regulations that limited not only the number of live banda performances but also attempted to regulate the very essence of Mazatlán's cultural identity. These acts of dissident vibrations served as powerful counter-narratives to the dominant discourse that seeks to sanitize public spaces from their vibrant soundscapes. These musicians not only contested their economic marginalization but also championed the existential right of their culture to flourish in its native setting, resisting efforts to reduce their sound to mere noise in favor of tourist comforts. Their defiance highlights the complex interplay between cultural and economic survival, identity, and resistance within the broader context of globalization and cultural homogenization.



https://youtu.be/mwNxzkVmfwI

Critics who dismiss banda often fail to appreciate its rich harmonics and historical significance in the cultural landscape of Mazatlán. By reducing this music to mere noise, they overlook the deep-

rooted connections it fosters within local communities and its role as a communal bond reflecting the spirit and resilience of the people. Such dismissals prioritize the comfort of tourists over the cultural rights of the local population, further entrenching inequalities between those who advocate for cultural integrity and those who perceive the city merely as a short-term, leisure destination.The role of banda in Mazatlán, an exemplary case of sonic gentrification, raises essential questions about who has the authority to define the cultural and sonic boundaries of public spaces.

Sonic gentrification in Mazatlán serves as a poignant example of global discussions on cultural identity, heritage, and the impacts of globalization on local communities. But this isn't just a local issue; banda has followed the Mexican diaspora, becoming an audible assertion of identity in cities across the United States. The call to action is clear: to preserve banda not as a relic of the past, but as a living, breathing sound that defines working class public spaces of color far beyond Mexico's borders. Whether in Los Angeles, Chicago, or Houston, these vibrant sounds demand to be heard, and more importantly, understood. The beat of the tuba and tambora still thunder on, daring us to listen.

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Featured Image: "Todos dorados" by Flickr User Juanantibes ***CC BY-SA 2.0***

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Kristie Valdez-Guillen, PhD, is an interdisciplinary scholar whose work bridges the fields of musicology and decolonial studies. With a PhD in Musicology from UCLA and advanced training in American Studies and Ethnicity at USC, her research delves into the critical intersections of decoloniality, music, and politics across the Americas and the Caribbean. Currently, she brings her expertise to USC's Writing Program, where she teaches first-year and first-generation students, with a focus on writing across disciplines. Dr. Valdéz-Guillén is dedicated to fostering critical thinking and empowering the next generation of scholars and writers.

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