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## Two Countries, Two Cultures - But One Tijuana

By Anne-Marie O'Connor  
Los Angeles Times

TIJUANA, Mexico - Eliot Garcia, 23, says he learned English from "Batman" reruns. Now he sings Spanglish rock anthems about police brutality, drug-related violence and the O.J. Simpson media circus. His Tijuana band, Nessie, has already cracked Los Angeles' Whisky nightclub and MTV Latino.

Claudia Sandoval, 21, edits the Dream of Venus, one of dozens of underground 'zines, small low-budget publications that fuse kaleidoscopic graphics, modernist poetry and provocative essays on everything from the drug-culture movie "Trainspotting" to border identity issues.

Their generation of rockers, poets, artists and writers are the youthful heralds of Tijuana's collision with the future, the privileged and articulate bohemians of Baja California fronterizos, or borderlanders.

Members of an unusually well-educated, middle-class society, these fronterizos have grown up with U.S. popular culture.

They have come of age far from the institutional and traditional pull of central Mexico, in a region steeped in the free-wheeling history of the individualistic norteno border culture.

As permanent spectators to the great hemispheric exodus, from the impoverished south to the prosperous north, they draw from a ceaseless caravan of human dreams and tragedy.

Captive audience to the bloody machinations of Tijuana's famed drug godfathers, their vision - like the city itself - has a gritty film noir aesthetic, flavored by dark comedy.

"This is where U.S. and Mexican culture collide," says Roberto Mendoza, 27, the leader of a "techno-electronico-industrial" group, Artefakto. "You take a right and you're in the First World. Take a left and you're in the Third World."

That description might apply equally to Mendoza, with his black leather coat, heavy industrial boots, long black bob and the aquiline features of a pre-Columbian heritage. He likes to say he learned English as a child from "The Price is Right," during an era when Tijuana could tune in to 10 American TV stations but only one Mexican channel.

Academics say the Tijuana counterculture scene gets its ironic urban edge from its unique position as the only border city anchored to one of America's most culturally potent urban corridors. Perhaps that is why the look of Tijuana's neighborhoods and strip malls owes more to suburban Los Angeles than Mexico City. And why punk rock and heavy metal coexist with the Baja rodeo season, drug pistoleros and border balladeers.

Says Alfredo Alvarez Cardenas, director of the city's cultural center: "Tijuana is definitely postmodern."

"That area is electrified with creativity," says Maria Sobek, a Chicano-studies professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and an expert on border culture.

"Because of the contact between the two cultures, there's this tremendous production of new modes of behavior, new ways of speaking, new ways of seeing. It's becoming a great center of production of literature and arts."

While the size of youth movements is hard to quantify, Alvarez Cardenas says the Tijuana scene is big enough to support a thriving music milieu and put the city on the map of global youth culture.

Local alternative bands play at thousands at concerts and festivals. There is a broad enough consumer base to draw European artists such as Miguel Bose, an ethereal progressive rock artist from Spain. Mexico City bands like Maldita Vecindad have packed 12,000 fans into Tijuana's downtown bull ring.



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And Tijuana bands such as Nessie, Tijuana No and Mexican Jumping Frijoles are among the city's most important cultural exports to Mexico City, Los Angeles and cities in northern Mexico like Monterrey, experts say.

"The Tijuana rock scene is extremely important," says Emilio Morales, the Los Angeles-based publisher of a rock-en-espanol

bible, La Banda Elastica, or The Rubber Band.

"Since the '60s, some of Mexico's most important rock bands have come from Tijuana. It is the influence of the border. (Growing up listening to) American radio gives them a fresher ear," he said.

Tijuana student Cynthia Ramirez, 26, says the local culture expresses the surreal experience of straddling two cultures.

Its totems are a New World collage in which American artist Andy Warhol and writer William Burroughs rub shoulders with Mexican painter Frida Kahlo and the Zapatista rebels. Ramirez's 'zine, La Pecera, calls her generation "mutants."

"Fronterizos don't belong to Mexican culture, but to border culture," says Ramirez, co-author of a senior thesis on the Tijuana rock scene for the communications department of the Tijuana campus of the Universidad Iberoamericana Noroeste. She also edits one of the 'zines, which in Tijuana are called fanzines. They are anything but the fawning celebrity press their name might imply. Fanzine writers sift through Mexican icons with irreverence, nurtured by a childhood in which traditional Day of the Dead festivities competed with trick or treats and Casper the Ghost.

Their cult of kitsch mocks the idiosyncrasies of both cultures, from former Simpson house guest Brian "Kato" Kaelin to the Mexican penchant for putting the Virgin of Guadalupe on everything from key chains to refrigerator magnets.

"Nothing is sacred," says Daniel Rivera, a popular deejay known as Tolo. "Every day, new people come to Tijuana with new traditions, languages and religion.

"All the icons arrive. If you don't like one, you discard it for another. There is no nationalist pressure. You don't know where your Mexican authenticity ends and your gringo influence begins."

That pluralism - demographic, cultural, religious and, to the chagrin of some, moral - is at the heart of the Tijuana youth scene and the history of the city itself, some say. While some conservative elders may disapprove of the scene, others view it as a passing phase.

Some of the fronterizos' parents and grandparents were themselves club owners or musicians during Tijuana's long era as a party town for Navy men or Prohibition refugees.

The border bohemians celebrate so-called trash cultura, a declaration of independence from the tyranny of conspicuous consumption and hypocritical moralism. "Enough already of car ads and mineral water. We don't want to smell good! We don't want to lose weight!" says Alex de la Iglesia in La Pecera.

But if they criticize aspects of American culture, their embrace of American trends and styles is unapologetic. With their black leather, chic boots, grunge wear and polyester, many of los hard-core of Tijuana would blend in well with the youth of Seattle; Austin, Texas; or Athens, Ga.

Tijuana rocker Cesar Hernandez, 21, says the U.S. influence is partly the legacy of decades of American partyers who have flocked to the city since Prohibition. Hernandez himself is the grandson of a musician who played the famed Agua Caliente Casino in its heyday. His peers, he says, are simply victims - or beneficiaries - of cultural geography.

"We are a border people, and these are our roots," he said.

Their hybrid language, Spanglish, is a linguistic ping pong employed even by those perfectly capable of using both languages properly. The fronterizos' Spanglish is not a language of ineptitude, but a slang of youth identity that, in their case, is bicultural.

Some Spanglish terms are universal, like the self-explanatory taco shop instead of taqueria. New uses constantly radiate out of youth subculture. Small-time drug thugs are los low-lives. Penniless Mexican immigrants are los Outsiders. Un Hollywood is a grandstander; un rockstar a conceited person. And there are Spanglish band names, like the Mexican Jumping Frijoles.

Yet many Tijuana bohemians deny the suggestion that they are agringados - co-opted by gringo culture. "People keep talking about the search for identity, but I think Tijuana already has an identity that is neither Mexican or American - or even Mexican American - but something else entirely," said RDD, a rock fanzine.

----- Traumatic trip -----

TIJUANA, Mexico - The monologues of performance artist Jose Hugo Sanchez, as littered with U.S. pop images as Tijuana is with Coca-Cola and Guess jeans ads, describe how poor U.S.-bound peasants trade family and roots for a traumatic journey into consumer society in the United States:

"You will leave your father, you will leave your mother, you will leave your pregnant wife/ You will cross the border on your knees . . . To the north of the future. Braving death at the border . . . Ads, slogans, McDonald's, cars and more cars . . .

"Citizen of the millennium: Listen to me! Where is your woman, your soul? In what language will you dream? In what language will you die?

Goodbye, goodbye . . . he who left and never returned/ Mother, one day I will return with my pockets full of virtual dollars . . ."

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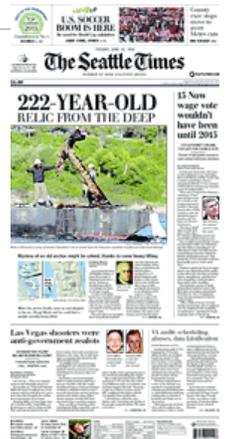
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