

Louder Than Hell: The Rise of LatinX and Indigenous Metal

Luis F. Zapata, MA¹

¹ MA, Lecturer, Bachelor's and Master's Degrees, The University of Texas, Austin

Abstract: *This is the history of Metal music from the perspective of Latinx and Indigenous Metal musicians that crossed cultural boundaries played a big role in the rise of rock 'n' roll, and all that came with it.*

Keywords: *Heavy Metal, Rock, Music, Latinx, Native American, Indigenous Metal.*

1. Introduction

Rock 'n' roll has been the soundtrack of youth rebellion for almost eight decades. It is one of the United States' most powerful cultural exports to the world. It may seem cliché to say rock 'n' roll is not just about music, but the moment it gripped a postwar generation of American teenagers, its anthems became words to live by — and future generations would never be the same.

Kids questioned the establishment and decided they did not need to follow parental rules and expectations. They stopped accepting the status quo, and their outside-the-box thinking contributed to accelerated technological advancement. Talented LatinX and indigenous musicians who crossed cultural boundaries played a big role in the rise of rock 'n' roll, and all that came with it.

When I was a teenager in the '80s in an extremely violent Peru, rock's metal subgenre provided some of us with shelter, pride, inspiration and empowerment. More than 30 years later, these musicians are still my heroes. But the tribal essence of LatinX in the metal lifestyle has not been understood properly by social scientists because its story has not yet been told^[1].

2. Era Before 1970

If country arrived on horses and blues chugged in on trains, rock 'n' roll came drag-racing on eight cylinders and roaring on motorcycles. But it spread via tiny transistor radios, which could be muffled under a pillow to allow clandestine listening to Wolfman Jack's border-radio blasts, Alan "Moondog" Freed's rock 'n' roll dance parties out of Cleveland and New York City, and the jives of Dr. Hepcat (real name: Albert Lavada Durst) in Austin, Texas.^[2] Before the transistor, radio listening was a family affair; generations congregated around a large piece of furniture and developed musical tastes together.

I like to think that Marlon Brando gave birth to rock 'n' roll in 1953, in the movie *The Wild One*. When his character is asked, "Hey Johnny, what are you rebelling against?," he answers "Whaddya got?" The more passionate, proletariat sector of '50s youth gave birth to traditional rock culture, just as the first hits of LatinX rock 'n' roll appeared. Cuban mambo (the favorite music of zoot-suited pachucos), jump blues (loved by greasers) and Afro-American rhythms (including the rhythms of sex, particularly in a car, which black teens referred to as "rock 'n' roll") were combined to create the 1958 hit, "Tequila," by the Champs.^[3]

Latin participation in rock 'n' roll occurred from the beginning with Richie Valens, Chris Montez and Little Julian Herrera (actually a Jewish Hungarian runaway adopted by a Latino family who had a No. 1 hit while impersonating a Latin rock 'n' roll singer), as urban planning dictated home loans based on skin color, mixing blacks, LatinX and Jews in the same geographical areas.^[4]

In 1958, Link Wray, a Shawnee Indian, had a hit with “Rumble,” the only instrumental song that has ever been banned.^[5] E street Band guitarist Steven Van Zandt said of its raw, angry sound, “Link Wray wrote the anthem for juvenile delinquency.”

The ferocity in the strumming and use of power chords, distorted signal and tribal drumming in the song would have a substantial impact on guitarists Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck, as well as Iggy Pop. Their influence would be felt for generations.

In the 1960s, popular music took at least two marked directions in sound and sensibility: one was the folk-oriented “wooden” acoustic music of artists such as Bob Dylan, Richie Havens, Atahualpa Yupanqui and Victor Jara; the other was the electric-charged sound of the British Invasion, delivered by the Beatles, the Kinks and part-Cherokee American guitar god Jimi Hendrix, who gained fame after moving to England.^[6] Hendrix expanded the language of guitar and immortalized himself with the instrumental anti-war hymn “Machine Gun” and his version of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” performed at Woodstock in 1969. In both the Jimi Hendrix Experience and his Band of Gypsys, Hendrix incorporated beats reminiscent of Native American tribal drumming.

One of the British invaders’ major innovations was the notion that rock ‘n’ roll no longer needed the roll; it could just rock. The distinction is later expressed in the sound of Led Zeppelin, Humble Pie, the Who and Black Sabbath.^[7] Most rock historians credit Black Sabbath with the birth of heavy metal, characterized by dark lyrics, extremely loud, distorted guitars and anti-establishment messages. When the band formed in Birmingham, England, it was still in ruins from World War II. This was the new, angry, industrial sound of the people.

3. ERA BEFORE 1970

In the ’70s, war-painted, one-quarter Cherokee New Yorker Ace Frehley became the quintessential heavy metal guitarist^[8] for the band Kiss, selling millions of albums and tickets around the world and influencing countless loud rockers. Indigenous heritage was even more apparent in Southern hard-rock band Blackfoot, in which all but one original member had Native American blood.

Although selling millions of records and concert tickets, heavy metal acts were heard mainly on college radio for years. Commercial radio actively avoided it, particularly shying away from bands like WASP, led by the politically outspoken, often controversial Blackie Lawless.

But in November of 1983, the album *Mental Health*, by Quiet Riot,^[9] a Los Angeles band including Cuban-born bassist Rodolfo Maximiliano Sarzo Lavieille Grande Ruiz Payret y Chaumont—aka Rudy Sarzo—and Mexican-born lead guitarist Carlos Cavazo, displaced the Police’s *Synchronicity* album from the No. 1 position on the Billboard Top 200 album chart, and the single “Cum on Feel the Noize” became the first heavy-metal song to reach the top five of the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Sarzo went on to perform with Ozzy Osbourne, Whitesnake, Dio, Blue Öyster Cult and many others.

Following Quiet Riot’s success, many metal bands formed, including Twisted Sister, with Cuban-born singer-guitarist Eddie Ojeda.^[10] Twisted Sister scored hits with songs about teenage rebellion, which drew condemnation from then-Senate wife Tipper Gore. In a congressional hearing, vocalist Dee Snider testified brilliantly against her censorship efforts.^[11]

Notable LatinX metal players also include Cuban Juan Croucier, RATT’s bassist; Mexican-descended Roberto Agustín Miguel Santiago Samuel Perez de la Santa Concepción Trujillo Veracruz Bautista—aka Robert Trujillo—bassist for Suicidal Tendencies and Metallica; Bon Jovi drummer Hector Juan Samuel “Tico” Torres, whose parents emigrated from Cuba; and Slayer’s Chilean-born bassist-vocalist Tom Araya and Cuban-born drummer Dave Lombardo.

Most of the top metal bands of the ’80s, including AC/DC, Ozzy Osbourne,^[12] Whitesnake, Queen and Iron Maiden, played Rock in Rio, one of the largest rock festivals in history, which debuted in 1985 as a 10-day event for which an entire City of Rock was built just outside of Rio de Janeiro. It attracted 1.5 million attendees, and has since been held in Lisbon, Madrid and Las Vegas. Iron Maiden, Scorpions, Megadeth and Sepultura (founded by Brazilian brothers Max and Igor Cavaleira)^[13] will headline night five of the seven-day Rock in Rio VIII this fall

4. More Interesting Facts

One of the most politically outspoken and influential bands in the world, Rage Against the Machine, fronted by Mexican-American vocalist Zach de La Rocha, was known for mixing rap and metal and supporting efforts such as the Movimiento Farabundo Martí de la Liberación.

Mexican death-metal band Brujeria, formed in 1989, originally included Dino Cazares, Raymond Herrera and Jello Biafra; Cazares and Herrera later formed Fear Factory. Brujeria's members use nicknames and sing about Satanism, sex and drug trafficking; many of their lyrics are about Adolfo Constanzo, the notorious Cuban-American drug smuggler, serial killer and cult leader who lived in Mexico and practiced the Palo Mayombe religion.

Tampa, Florida developed a strong death-metal scene in the mid-'80s with iconic bands Cannibal Corpse, Deicide and Morbid Angel. Salvadoran-born drummer Pete Sandoval of Terrorizer and Morbid Angel^[14] is known as "the father of the blast beat"—a rapid-fire drumming style with two bass drums, reminiscent of a semi-automatic weapon. It's the signature beat of death- and black-metal bands.

Black metal likely began in New Castle, England with Venom,^[15] an openly anti-Christian outfit, and was adopted by Scandinavian kids disgusted with the Catholic church's pedophilia scandal. They became interested in reviving Odinist culture; several were subsequently convicted of a wave of '90s church burnings and murders in Norway.

Similar philosophies have taken root in Latin- and Native American metal scenes, giving rise to Indigenous black metal and "Rez metal."^[16] Rez metal, heard mostly on Navajo reservations, is an angry and dark, yet powerful expression of longing for cultural respect and survival. (As I write this, I'm listening to the late drummer Randy Castillo, whose parents were Chickasaw; he played with Ozzy Osbourne, Lita Ford, Motley Crüe and other heavy-metal icons.)^[17]

The most successful Indigenous metal band is Cemican, which means "all the life" in Nahuatl (Aztec). Using Nahuatl instruments and names, and singing in Nahuatl, they've played the world's biggest metal festivals, including France's Hell Fest and Germany's Wacken Open Air.

5. Concluding Remarks

In a historical sense, metal and punk remain the most extreme cultural variations of rock; in a romantic sense, it seems that just as African Americans preserved gospel through rock 'n' roll, Native Americans are preserving their musical traditions through hard rock. But that theory requires further study. I hope this article inspires a new generation of social researchers to explore this topic. In the meantime, I conclude by quoting Plato: "When the modes of the music change, the walls of the city shake."

6. References

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