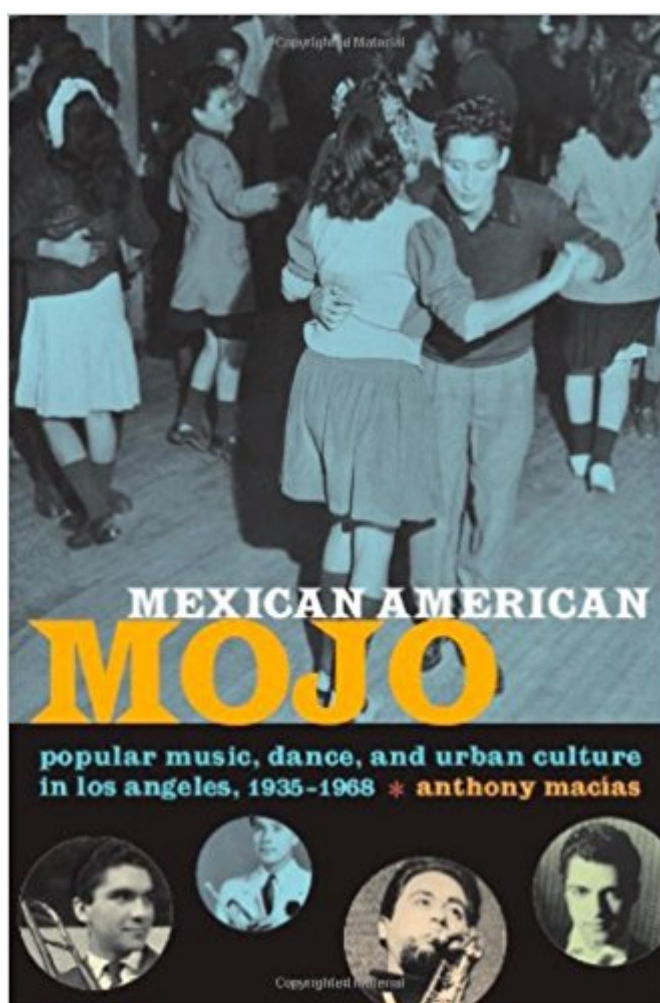


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# Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, And Urban Culture In Los Angeles, 1935-1968 (Refiguring American Music)



## Synopsis

Stretching from the years during the Second World War when young couples jitterbugged across the dance floor at the Zenda Ballroom, through the early 1950s when honking tenor saxophones could be heard at the Angelus Hall, to the Spanish-language cosmopolitanism of the late 1950s and 1960s, *Mexican American Mojo* is a lively account of Mexican American urban culture in wartime and postwar Los Angeles as seen through the evolution of dance styles, nightlife, and, above all, popular music. Revealing the links between a vibrant Chicano music culture and postwar social and geographic mobility, Anthony Macías shows how by participating in jazz, the zoot suit phenomenon, car culture, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and Latin music, Mexican Americans not only rejected second-class citizenship and demeaning stereotypes, but also transformed Los Angeles. Macías conducted numerous interviews for *Mexican American Mojo*, and the voices of little-known artists and fans fill its pages. In addition, more famous musicians such as Ritchie Valens and Lalo Guerrero are considered anew in relation to their contemporaries and the city. Macías examines language, fashion, and subcultures to trace the history of hip and cool in Los Angeles as well as the Chicano influence on urban culture. He argues that a grass-roots “multicultural urban civility” that challenged the attempted containment of Mexican Americans and African Americans emerged in the neighborhoods, schools, nightclubs, dance halls, and auditoriums of mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles. So take a little trip with Macías, via streetcar or freeway, to a time when Los Angeles had advanced public high school music programs, segregated musicians’ union locals, a highbrow municipal Bureau of Music, independent R & B labels, and robust rock and roll and Latin music scenes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Mexican American Mojo is a timely and engaging work that thoroughly demonstrates the development of popular Mexican American culture in mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles. Anthony MacÃfÃ- as has written an illuminating and remarkable study that belongs in the library of anyone interested in Mexican American culture."--Raul A. Fernandez, author of *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*"I am especially excited by the interviews Anthony MacÃfÃ- as conducted, which make central perspectives long missing from scholarship on jazz, swing, and R & B. MacÃfÃ- as's method of looking at Los Angeles's social geography of race and ethnicity through a prism of popular music will be of great interest to those interested in the histories of popular music, Mexican America, and Los Angeles."--Sherrie Tucker, author of *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s*

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This is a very good and well researched book. It sent me trying to collect the music of Anthony Ortega, Lalo Guerrero, Chico Sesma, Gil Bernal, Eddie Cano, Don Tosti and others. It's a bit academic and took me a long time to read. It definitely proves the Mexican Mojo was working (still is).

Great book!

A walk back into the old days in Los Angeles is fun

Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935 - 1968By

Anthony MacÃfÃ- as' Mexican American Mojo is a highly readable, informative, and neatly-crafted examination of the indispensable roles played by various Mexican Americans in the middle of the 20th century in Los Angeles in the popular musical culture of the time. MacÃfÃ- as self-consciously moves beyond mere presentation of the well-known figures of Mexican Angelino music (193), such as Ritchie Valens (184 - 191), and presents us with a variety of sketches of names, faces, styles, and relationships which flourished in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the period. Not strictly limiting himself to a discussion of musical style and musical figures, MacÃfÃ- as evokes full-bodied portraits of Mexican American cultural groups: squares and pachucos, immigrants and high-school kids, jazz legends and G.I.'s. In particular, MacÃfÃ- as' (Chapter 2) examination of the role of fashion as assimilation and resistance opens the book artfully and reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of his approach. While he does not address the role of formal fashion, driven by European and East-coast interests, he is constantly mindful of the larger historical context in which Mexican American fashion in music and clothes develops. His work constantly references the popular African American styles, such as those which formed the foundation of Zoot suit fashion (70 - 71), and the distinct tensions which arise between sub-groups (such as Zoot suiters) and other Mexican Americans. He refreshes his readers with brief narrations of key historical moments in Mexican Angelino history such as the Sleepy Lagoon Trial, Zoot Suit Riots, and the deportation of the Japanese (24), then places the responses of various Mexican American groups in context. MacÃfÃ- as further demonstrates a sensitivity to regional variety and geography. He notes the impact of relocated southerners (with their varied attitudes towards 'race') in WWII (68), the impact of public transportation on accessibility to communities and venues (65), and the white-flight impact of Jewish relocation from the inner city to wealthier suburbs on the demographic composition of various Los Angeles neighborhoods (122). Although music remains his focus, the author is also not afraid to connect the various sub-groups he examines to controversial issues such as gang-affiliation (75) and marijuana use (129 - 130), the latter providing fertile ground for musical exploration and creativity. Likewise he does not hesitate to show how the dynamics of race prejudice extend from the Mexican American community towards others. In one fine example he shows how the Mexican-Filipino musician, Richard Barrientos, takes an overheard criticism of Asian musicians ("los orientales no saben nada sobre nuestra musica") and turns it into his own affirmative musical anthem: "Los orientales saben los ritmos cubanos" (255 - 256). He shows the way in which Mexican Americans both submitted to and subverted popular stereotypes by portraying sombrero-wearing, serape-draped musical comics as a means of gaining cross-racial popularity (203 - 204). One of the most fascinating and consistent themes developed in MacÃfÃ- as'

book is that of race mixing and race switching. He shows how African Americans such as Babs Brown take on Mexican American identities to avoid the anti-black racism of many American institutions such as hospitals (69). Equally fascinating, he notes the ways in which racist attacks can be turned against the dominant group by the dominant group, noting cases in which individuals claim Mexicanness to avoid being hassled as white (162), on in which white kids are targeted in mixed-race neighborhoods by police as a means of preventing miscegenation (155). He further develops themes of neo-culturation and trans-culturation in his discussion of pachucos (92) and Anglo pachucos (114), demonstrating the vast variety of ways in which individuals and groups craft racial and ethnic identities for themselves. Alongside the theme of race switching, Macías presents his readers with a kaleidoscopic vision of race in America: one in which all the colors are broken and reassembled into new configurations and forms. All under the umbrella of "Mexican/Latin Americans" he presents us with cases as diverse as those of Chinese Cubans (256), Rene Bloch, a "Jewish convert" to Latin Jazz (249), Richard Barrientos, the Filipino-Mexican mentioned above (246), Victor Brac, a "Mexican Americanized Anglo" (208), Johnny Otis "black by persuasion" (184), Little Juilan Herrera -a Hungarian Jew (183), "African American cholos" (172), the Sicilian-Mexican, Gil Bernal (160), and Kay Nomura, a "second generation Japanese American who walked and talked like his black neighbors" (159). Macías provides many more intriguing examples of these varied components of racial identity. Ironically, my biggest formal criticism of this book is a back-handed criticism: it's so great to read about all these pieces of music, and so awful not to be able to hear them, that I must criticize Macías for not putting out an accompanying CD with this book. Less potent a criticism, I would have appreciated a few printed musical notational examples to better understand a few of the things he described, such as his description of the rhythmic division of claves (235). Macías excels in his use of interviews and primary ethnography, but is at times weak in his use of secondary sources. The sources he chooses are often excellent (such as the work of Ted Gioia), but he frequently lapses into reliance on citations of citations. He is particularly weak when it comes to citations of major periodicals. At times his citations do not reference the primary topic he is referencing. On page he 105 makes a reasonable assertion about segregation public facilities which discriminates against Mexican Americans, but his subsequent citations do not support the assertion. On page 145 cites Kiyō Umeda about discrimination against suspected gang members and pachucos, but gives only the unrelated Music Bureau pamphlet citation. More awkwardly when he discusses the deliberate segregation of Catholic churches, he provides a quote within a quote within a quote (137), leaving picky readers to suspect his source. On a more methodological level, my strongest criticism of Macías work is

that cause and effect are dealt with anecdotally rather than synthetically. He often raises excellent questions about the changes within the community, but does not interrogate them methodologically, and only manages to provide individual accounts, which, though valuable, do not provide a more satisfying (to me) level of analysis. His discussion of the decline of mambo (279) and the decline of jazz styles as being squeezed in the middle between black and white jazz traditions (200), or on the means in which cholos inherited a cultural (but not stylistic) mantle from pachucos (169) - in each of these cases he provides some valuable first-person accounts and views, but is thin on explanatory hypotheses. While I believe Macías tries his best to be sensitive to the roles of gender, his material in a sense tends to force him to ignore the role of women. The strongly male-gendered creation of jazz and pachuco styles leaves him with little material with which to address the role of women in creating the jazz culture of Los Angeles, aside from his (generally good) analysis of pachuca clothing and hair fashion. In this latter aspect, however, he does a nice job of discussing the androgynous character of pachuco fashion (81, 107), though, aside from a quoted epithet, makes no reference to sexual orientation (212). At one point, though, he seems to have to rely on other authors to make his gender analyses. The following example shows a weak way in which he addresses the role of women's fashion acquisition, though a decontextualized argument made by another author: "As Espinoza argues, just because young Mexican American women consumed youth culture fashions did not necessarily mean they were 'buying into' white culture and the Anglo value system." (211) I am not sure of what Espinoza's point is, but it is clear that these women are quite literally 'buying into' in white culture in the most commercial (and capitalist) way imaginable. Finally, Macías' work retains a weak ambiguity in dealing with "Anglos". This is not inherent to Macías' work, but rather to American culture and English-language (as well as to the very notion of racialization). Who are "Anglos"? In one sentence, Macías seems to distinguish them from other Euro-Americans: "Anglos and white ethnic European Americans" (139), in others he seems to impute entire sexual characteristics to them as a group, others having "a non-Anglo sexuality and sensibility" (278). Despite these nit-picky criticisms, I heartily endorse Macías' book for any readers interested in either the history of jazz, the history of Los Angeles, or the history of Mexican Americans in the 20th century.

This book and *Á Suave: How to Dress in the Existential World* are my favorite books in the category. Both are very well written and definitely worth the read!

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