

## Corazón del Rocanrol

Rubén Martínez

When most people think of Mexican music, they think of mariachi bands or romantic balladeers; some, perhaps, conjure images of jarocho singers with their white suits and harps, or corridistas with their cowboy hats and accordions. Such native musical forms are among the richest features of Mexico's cultural heritage. Rock and roll, on the other hand, is a bit more problematic. Much Mexican commercial pop music differs little from the generic product familiar in other parts of the world, which would lead many to assume that Mexican rocanrol is merely derivative. In fact, as the following article by Los Angeles-based writer Rubén Martínez and the accompanying lyrics to a hit song by the group *Maldita Vecindad* make clear, some Mexican rock bands—not unlike some wrestlers!—have emerged as significant spokespersons for a vital counterculture.

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Under a zinc-colored sky, a block away from the railroad tracks and next to a buzzing electrical substation, a young man with hair immaculately slicked back, wearing an oversize gray jacket, a starched white shirt, a fat 1940s tie and black baggies with fob swinging low, takes giant strides as he leads me down the asphalt corridor toward the crowd ahead. “Now, you’re going to see the true history of Mexican *rocanrol*!” he calls back over his shoulder, flapping along through the warm, smoggy breeze.

I scramble after him as we dive into the marketplace. Throngs of Mexico City youth in all manner of *rockero* regalia surround us: *chavas* in leather mini-skirts or torn jeans, *chavos* wearing Metallica T-shirts, James Dean leather jackets or Guatemalan-style *indígena* threads. We walk past stall after rickety stall, scraps of splintered wood and twine holding up faded blue tarpaulins, where the vendors—young *punkeros* or *trasheros* (thrash fans), leathered heavy *metaleros*, Peace and Love *jipitecas* and the working-class followers of Mexican raunch-rock heroes El Tri known as *chavos banda*—sell cassettes, CDs, LPs and singles, bootlegs and imports, as well as posters, steel-toed boots, skull



Punk-rocker leaping. (Photo by Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, from his book *The Last City* [Santa Fe, N.M.: Twin Palms Publishers, 1995.] Reprinted by permission of Pablo Ortiz Monasterio.)

earrings, fan mags, spiked bracelets and collars, incense and feathered roach clips. Ghettobusters blast Holland's Pestilence, Mexico's El Tri, Argentina's Charly García, Ireland's U2.

“¡Tenemos punk, tenemos heavy metal, tenemos en español y en inglés, tenemos al Jim Morrison y El Tri!” yells a young vendor, exactly as any one of Mexico's army of street vendors hawks rosaries or Chiclets. His is but one voice among hundreds at El Chopo, as the sprawling swap meet is known.

It's a Saturday afternoon, some ten years after this institution was born, and the vendors tell me that the crowd of about three thousand is on the light side. “What's *chingón* is that there's no divisions here between the different *rockeros*,” proclaims Ricardo, a high-school kid in a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of the punk band Lard, a Vision Streetwear beret and hip-hop hi-tops. “It doesn't matter whether you're hardcore or *trashero*.”

Mexican authorities haven't distinguished between styles either: all are equally suspect. El Chopo is often raided by police eager to club skinheads and longhairs alike, Ricardo and his young punk friends say, as a *jipiteca* strolls by with a gleaming white Fender Precision bass, telling everyone that he'll let it go for one million pesos.

It isn't long before my zoot-suited guide is recognized. “Don't you play with la Maldita?” kids inquire, before asking for autographs. Roco, the lead

singer of Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del Quinto Patio (roughly, the Dammed Neighborhood and the Sons of the Tenement) greets all comers effusively. "And don't forget to make the gig tonight! At LUCC, about midnight! ¡Ahórale hijo!"

"We've received influences from all over," he adds, the words spilling out rapid and vowel-twisted, in classic Mexico City, or *chilango*, slang. "From the North, from the South, from Europe. It might be true that rock began in the North, but now it's all ours."

"ROCK EN español," reads the publicity slogan, "Music for a New Generation." Since the mid-1980s, in Mexico, Argentina, and Spain, *rocanrol* has been billed as the perpetual Next Big Thing. Record labels, mostly the Spanish and Latin American subsidiaries of majors like BMG, Sony, or WEA, signed dozens of bands. Stadium gigs drew huge crowds at most of the big capitals in Latin America.

Key groups lived up to the advance publicity: Mexico's Caifanes, a dark-pop band reminiscent of The Cure, sold a respectable 100,000 copies of their first album; a subsequent *cumbia* single, "La negra Tomasa," moved half a million. Other acts, such as Radio Futura and La Unión from Spain, Los Prisioneros from Chile, and Miguel Mateos and Soda Stereo from Argentina, sold well and garnered airplay throughout Latin America.

Impresarios also looked toward the United States and its relatively untapped Latino youth market: there have been impressive Latin-rock gigs in Los Angeles and other major American cities since 1988. "L.A. is a meeting ground for rock from Latin America and Spain," says Enrique Blanc, a deejay at Rancho Cucamonga's KNSE, one of the few Spanish-rock supporters in the States. "And there are plenty of people with money who are interested." Marusa Reyes, a transplanted *chilanga* producer living in Los Angeles who handles both Caifanes and Maldita Vecindad, succeeded in convincing Jane's Addiction to book a few shows with a special added attraction: none other than Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del Quinto Patio.

Roco and the Chopo crowd want to shake Mexican culture down to its very roots. But these heavier *rockeros* are still on the margins—and not because they necessarily like it there. It's the pop rockers like Menudo that have become megastars. As one veteran of the Mexico City rock wars put it, "The joke here has always been that *this* is the year real *rocanrol* is going to make it—and we've been saying it for thirty years."

In the summer of 1985, a group of *chavos* from different Mexico City *barrios* began holding jam sessions: a piano player, a vocalist and six percussionists (water bottles, pots and pans), but nothing experimental about it. "Either we

waited to save up and buy equipment, or we played with what we had," recalls Roco, his leg bounding nervously up and down on the bar stool.

The city around them was on its knees, again, enduring the worst economic crisis since the revolution of 1910. A profound malaise contaminated all areas of life. Then, on the morning of September 19, 1985, Mexico City lurched over its liquid foundation, the ancient volcanic lake it was built upon.

"It was total devastation, *cabron*," Roco says, leaning into me and yelling over UB40's "Red Red Wine." "Whole *barrios* darkened, without electricity, water running everywhere, people carrying coffins, looking for their loved ones. The people of the *barrios* had to organize themselves to survive. All of a sudden, people I'd seen my entire life but didn't know, I knew."

Citizens' committees organized relief efforts much better than the government, which had spurned international aid for the first two days after the quake, claiming it had "everything under control," until a second devastating *terremoto* made it clear that nobody controlled anything.

The city was transformed by the experience. Out of the rubble there arose all manner of new populist political personalities, including Superbarrio, a masked wrestler, whom the earthquake turned into an activist/performance artist who to this day shows up in his yellow cape and red suit wherever slumlords do their foul deeds. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas nearly tossed the ruling PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) dynasty out of office. . . . In the midst of this upheaval, Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del Quinto Patio were born.

The other members of La Maldita join Roco and me at our table, weaving through a crowd whose attire would fit in well in New York's East Village or on L.A.'s Melrose Avenue. These *niños bien* have paid 50,000 pesos (about \$17) for Maldita's *tocada*, their gig. We're in the Zona Rosa, the Pink Zone, at Rockstock, a club whose logo bears a suspicious resemblance to the Hard Rock Café's.

In comes Pato, curly locks peeking out from under his trademark gray fedora, a veteran of several vanguard Mexican bands. Sax, at twenty-two the youngest of the group, is leaning toward a U2 look with long, straight hair and loose, gauzy white shirt. He's Maldita's purest musical talent, and moonlights with mariachi bands in the famous Garibaldi Plaza. Lobo, a dark, leathery *rockero*, is the quiet one who batters the congas. Elfin-smiling and clean-cut Aldo, born in Argentina but now a full-fledged Mexico City boy, is on bass. And Pacho, the oldest at twenty-nine, with head shaven close on one side and exploding curly on the other, is the drummer, an intellectual who studied anthropology at Mexico's finest university, UNAM. (Roco, too: he's finishing his degree in journalism.)

La Maldita huddle close together sipping Coronas and smoking Marlboros

in Rockstock's cagelike no-smoking section. Their look—resonances of James Dean, Tin Tan (a Mexican comedic great of the 1940s and 1950s, who popularized a Chicano/Pachuco swing style), U2, and the Mexico City barrio kids of Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*—clashes wildly with that of the surrounding scene-sters. Roco's wearing a pair of mammoth black work boots. He notices me eyeing them.

"They're just like my father's, *cabrón*," he says, lifting his foot up and inviting me to tap the steel toe. "They cost sixty thousand pesos, *cabrón*—not like those European ones that all the *niños bien* wear, that sell for three hundred thousand here in the Zona Rosa."

Maldita and other young bands, like Café Tacuba, Santa Sabina, and Tex Tex, lash out at the Americanization of the Mexican middle class, a tendency led by media giant Televisa. This corporation prides itself on nationalism, a tune that's made it millions and that the PRI government has also used to help keep itself in power for the last seventy years. It's a bastion of national pride, but Televisa is also accused of promoting "*malinchismo*," a term that goes back five hundred years to la Malinche, Hernán Cortés's Aztec translator, the most famous traitor of Mexico's history.

Televisa's is a no-lose strategy; by backing both national and gringo, mainstream and underground, it's cornered all markets. But somehow, the Americanized acts always seem to fill the screen. Pato tells the story of the time Maldita did *not* meet Madonna at L.A.'s trendy Club Vertigo. Seems that somebody told somebody that Madonna was in the club the night of the band's first L.A. appearance. Though the band members swear that they never met her, tabloid headlines hit home instantly—the blonde goddess had given the sons of Mexico her blessing. Upon returning to Mexico City, the band was deluged with press queries about their all-night party with Madonna.

"They wanted to know about her, nothing about us," recalls Aldo. Horrified, the band called a press conference to set the record straight. "But it made no difference," Aldo says, finishing his beer before he heads backstage. "They still ask us about her all the time."

When Maldita bounds on stage, they start without so much as a hello. They play with a precise fury, styles merged, overturned and burned. Ska gives way to funk, funk to rap, rap to *son veracruzano*, to *danzón*, to *cumbia* and mambo on one of their anthemic numbers, "Bailando":

No tengo ni puta idea porque quiero hoy salir  
Lo último de mis ahorros me lo gastaré en ti  
En la fábrica dijeron, "Ya no nos sirves, Joaquín"  
Para no perder dinero nos corrieron a dos mil

Hoy es viernes por la noche todos salen a bailar  
Yo me apunto en el desmoche tengo ganas de gritar:  
¡Ya no aguanto más, quiero bailar!<sup>1</sup>

A few kids sing along, some skitter perfunctorily about the dance floor. It seems the *niños bien* don't want to risk tearing a thread. But Roco doesn't care: he's bouncing up and down, splaying his legs like Elvis being chased by *la migra*, diving down and nearly kissing the floor with the mike stand. His face flashes a grin, a sneer; now he jerks his head back repeatedly, as though he's being slapped by interrogators, while rapping his way through "Apañón," a song about police abuse of *barrio* youth:

En un sucio callejón, despiertas sin recordar  
Nada de lo que pasó, te duelen hasta los pies  
No traes dinero no traes zapatos y a no traes pelo  
Sales de ese callejón ¡ODIANDO!<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, I'm thinking, Maldita have blasted on the wind of free-jazz sax past decades of balding folk trios, put the lie to the World Beaters by merging mambo, *danzón*, R&B, ska and rap—within each song—exploding it all on one stage with the rage and rapture of boys possessed by the most sacred of rock demons, and these kids (black-stockinged *chicas*, Mel Gibson *chavos*) aren't seriously dancing?

When Maldita's roadies begin to break down the equipment, UB40's "Red Red Wine" again blares through the speakers. Suddenly, five hundred Zona Rosa kids are singing along in English, dancing so cool.

While the *niños bien* pride themselves on their Americanized hipness at Rockstock, elsewhere in the city a bunch of long-haired, wannabe *gringo* kids from Tampa, Florida, are playing before another crowd, having been billed as death-metal heroes from the North. On Televisa, surely, there is a fake blonde reading the news off a prompter. And all across the city on billboards and posters hung in liquor stores, buxom blondes are tonguing beer bottles, sucking cigarettes. Looks like la Malinche is alive and well and as sexy as she was five hundred years ago.

Yo lo único que quiero hacer  
es bailar rocanrol . . .<sup>3</sup>  
—Los Locos del Ritmo, circa 1960

The battle for the cultural soul of Mexican youth may well be as old as la Malinche. And Mexico City intellectuals are only half joking when they say

that postmodernism actually originated here five hundred years ago, with the Conquest and its clash of radically different sensibilities. The tango, swing and mambo have each arrived from distant lands and transformed the city's style. Even so, most of what was promoted on radio, vinyl and the silver screen through the first half of the century was the sacred *cultura nacional*—mariachis and romantic balladeers like Agustín Lara or Pedro Infante.

When the first leather jackets and Elvis pompadours appeared on the streets of the *barrios*, the over-forty guardians of culture, nervous that Mexico City youth would arm themselves with switchblades and roar Harleys through elegant Zona Rosa establishments a la Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, mounted on an all-out assault. Films like *The Blackboard Jungle* were pulled from movie theaters and newspapers apprised the populace of the dangers of *rocanroleando*: gang violence, lax morality, and, especially, the destruction of *la cultura nacional*. Maybe the single thing the government, the Catholic Church and the Marxist Left could all agree on was that Mexican youth was imperiled by the Protestant, decadent and individualistic North. But *bandas* like Los Locos del Ritmo, Los Apson Boys, Los Hooligans, Los Crazy Boys, and Enrique Guzmán y los Teen Tops all had avid followers.

Most songs from the early years were covers sung either in English or awkwardly translated into Spanish (“Hotel Descorazonado,” “Rock de la carcel,” “Pedro Pistolas,” “Un gran pedazo de amor”). Gradually, however, the translated covers of American hits became more than literal adaptations; Mexican *rockeros* began rewriting the lyrics. “Under the Boardwalk,” for example, became “En un café.” While these tunes were often fluff, the feel of the songs was subtly shifting toward a Mexicanness that, many years later, would come to exemplify the best of the country's rock.

Lest the Old World version of *cultural nacional* be forever buried, the *oficialistas* made one final attempt to crush the *rockeros*. Elvis Presley, undisputed king in 1957, was their weapon. In what was probably an unsubstantiated story, Elvis was quoted in a border newspaper as saying, “I'd prefer to kiss three Negro women than one Mexican.”

Headlines across the country: “¡INDIGNACION POR INSULTO A LAS MEXICANAS!” “¡INICIA FUERTE BOICOT CONTRA EL INSOLENTA ARTISTA!” Radio stations sponsored massive public record-shatterings. “Love Me Tender” was yanked from playlists. But, as Federico Arana, Mexico's premier rock historian, points out in his *Guaraches de ante azul* (*Blue Suede Guaraches*), the conspiracy was bound to fail. “The best that you can do for a person or group to reaffirm their ideals is to persecute them and surround their lives with prohibitions,” writes Arana. “The story of the three kisses actually helped Mexican *rocanrol*.”

Ayer tuve un sueño, fue sensacional

Los pueblos vivían en paz . . .<sup>4</sup>

—Los Pasos (Spain), circa 1970

In the late sixties and early seventies, rock reached into every corner of Mexico, Central and South America as more bands bypassed covers and explored the peace and love idealism of the time, with original songs in Spanish. In Mexico, rock had become a solid underground christened *la onda*, or “the wave” (a term that survives today in all manner of colloquial speech: “¿Qué *onda*?” “¡Qué buena *onda*!”).

In 1971 at Avándaro, on the outskirts of Mexico City, anywhere between one hundred thousand (government figure) and half a million (*rockero* version) *chavos de la onda* attended a two-day festival featuring bands like Three Souls in My Mind, Love Army and El Ritual. The spectacle was a mirror image of Woodstock, right down to one of the organizers stepping up to the mike and warning the kids about a bad batch of LSD. The authorities braced for a predicted riot, but the *rockeros* camped out peacefully under the rain with little food or warm clothes and, yes, plenty of pot and acid.

“The fact that so many kids got together in one place really scared the government,” recalls Sergio Arau, who later formed Botellita de Jerez, one of the most important bands of the eighties. The government had every reason to be nervous. It was the first large gathering of youth since 1968, the year the army massacred several hundred protesting students in the Tlatelolco district of Mexico City. Since Avándaro, the Mexican government has rarely granted permits for large outdoor rock concerts.

For Carlos Monsiváis, one of the Mexican Left's best-known essayists, *la onda* still seemed more of an imitation of the North's hippie culture than an authentic national discovery, except in one important regard. “*La onda* was the first movement in modern Mexico that, from an apolitical position, rebelled against institutionalized concepts [of culture],” he writes in *Amor perdido*, a collection of essays on the sixties in Mexico. “And it eloquently revealed the extinction of cultural hegemony.”

THROUGHOUT THE EARLY SEVENTIES, *jipitecas* wearing *guaraches*, loose sandals with auto-tire soles, hitchhiked across Mexico on hallucinogenic pilgrimages, a tattered copy of *Las enseñanzas de don Juan* stuffed into their rucksacks. Even Joaquín Villalobos, today the top comandante of El Salvador's FMLN guerrilla army, admitted that there is room for *rocanrol* in *la revolución*—probably half the cadres of any given guerrilla army listened to groups like Los Pasos in the mid-1970s, not to mention Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. Salvadoran Marxist

friends have boasted to me of sneaking a few tokes of pot and listening to rock on battered tape recorders, breaking away from clandestine military training on El Salvador's remote beaches.

By the early eighties, however, Mexican rock was on the verge of extinction. Only a handful of Mexican bands survived the doldrums of the late seventies—punk hadn't arrived to save *rocanrol* here as it had in the North—and El Tri, formerly Three Souls in My Mind, was the only solid draw. The battle between English and Spanish, North and South, had been virtually conceded to the *gringos*. The city had a bad case of Saturday Night Fever.

After generations of *rockeros* had done their best to overthrow the *cultura nacional* by singing in English and bleaching their hair, it took a few radicals to discover the obvious—that they didn't need to go north to take back rock-'n'-roll. Botellita de Jerez announced the birth of a new sound: “*Guacarock*” (*guaca* as much a reference to *guacomole*, the sacred national snack, as to *guacateclas*, an onomatopoeic term for vomiting). Botellita reclaimed popular traditions like the *norteña* and *cumbia*, as they ridiculed American rock megaheroes and *el PRI*. Mexico City youth were joining their cultural roots with the heart of rock-'n'-roll.

Considering how well these worlds merged, one begins to wonder whether rock is really foreign to Mexico City at all. Ask Roco, and he'll say that the blues could have begun only here, what with the city's deep ties to Afro-Caribbean culture, its long-standing love affair with death. And rock itself? Where else could it have exploded into being other than in the biggest city in the world, where soot and sex and social unrest are legendary? Even rap: Roco claims the music actually originated in Mexico with Tin Tan and fellow golden-era comedian El Piporro. “Just listen to the raps on the streets of the city,” he says. “The vendors are the best rappers in the world!”

After Botellita, frenetic movements ensued: hardcore punk (Atóxxico, Masacre '68), industrial disco rap (Santa Sabina), roots rock (the perennial El Tri and younger bands like Tex Tex), dark pop (Caifanes), straight pop (Neón, Fobia, Los Amantes de Lola), and bands like Maldita and Café Tacuba, with their crazy blends of styles from North and South—all churning out Spanish-only product.

“There was an explosion,” says Luis Gerardo Salas, executive director of Núcleo Radio Mil, a network of seven radio stations in Mexico City, one of which is dedicated full-time to rock. “Everyone in Mexico seemed to want to be a *rocanrolero*. People discovered that there was rock in Spanish with the same quality as in English.”

The *hoyos fonquis*, underground clubs that spontaneously appeared in poor neighborhoods, were the heart of the new scene. Bands would set up in the

middle of the street, running electricity straight from somebody's living room. “All of a sudden, you'd see smoke rising around the stage,” says Lalo Tex, lead singer of Tex Tex. “But it wasn't from a smoke machine. It was the dust being kicked up by the kids dancing on the asphalt.”

A childlike awe overwhelms me as we pull up to the block-long monolith that houses the biggest media conglomerate in Latin America. We walk past the security checkpoint and wait in an antiseptic hallway. I glance at a pair of memoranda on the wall: one says you'll be fired if you're fifteen minutes late, the other urges employees to attend a seminar entitled “How to Enhance Your Image.” Tonight Maldita enters Televisa's domain, for a live appearance on Galavisión, a cable infotainment network.

To be inside the monster, finally! After nearly three decades of watching it in my Mexican grandmother's bedroom in Los Angeles: all those macho heroes and child stars, Jacobo Zabludowsky, the dour-faced anchor with the Mickey Mouse earphones, and Raúl Velasco, variety show host with the sweet “This is our glorious national culture” voice. Zabludowsky and Velasco are among the most powerful men in Mexico, friends to presidents and corporate executives the world over.

Though it is often considered synonymous with *el Pri*, Televisa may be more powerful than the party. It is one tentacle of the country's most powerful business cartel, the Monterrey Group, which owns over 90 percent of television outlets, numerous radio stations, an important record label, and to boot, the country's biggest brewery. If you want to reach the masses, Televisa is the only way.

Maldita lounge about smoking cigs, antsy to get the performance over with. “Our real audience is in the *barrios*, at the universities,” Pacho says, a little defensively. So entering into the realm of Televisa is a contradiction, right? “We aren't just going to do Televisa's bidding—we aren't about that,” he scoffs.

The Marxist youth of the sixties and seventies would never have walked through Televisa's glass doors—except with machine guns. Even today, some look upon *rockeros* like Maldita and Caifanes (who have been on several Televisa shows) as *vendidos*, sellouts. Maldita insist that reaching a mass audience is crucial. But what will happen on the day that they decide to sing a song, say, about political prisoners on a Televisa program? Or burn the Mexican flag? Or use profanity on a single?

While the anchors read the news off prompters a few feet away, the band takes its place on the pristinely waxed stage, before elegant bronze urns gushing water. The newscast breaks for a commercial and, a few seconds later, on a talk-show set at the other end of the studio, entertainment hosts Rocío Villa

García and Mauricio Chávez (she an aging, tall fake blonde in a red dress, he a light-complected innocent in preppy sweater and black tie) shuffle papers and listen to the countdown. “And now, with us tonight is a group of fine young men . . .” The studio fills with a loud recording of the only song that’s gotten airplay, “Mojado,” the tale of a father who makes the perilous journey to the USA but dies along the border “like a pig, suffocated in a truck.” These tragic lyrics are set, somewhat bizarrely, to a blend of highly danceable tropical and flamenco rhythms.

Televisa staffers crowd the plate-glass windows that seal off the newsroom, watching the band make an only half-serious effort to lip synch to the recording. Restrained at first, Roco begins jumping tentatively, but it’s not until the second song, the Veracruz-style “Morenaza,” that the band really loosens up. Sax spreads his arms and snaps his fingers, twirls about. Pato sneers, scratching ska-ishly at his guitar. Pacho and Lobo are bashing away on percussion—which, apparently, you’re not supposed to do when lip-synching—you can hear the skins being pummeled even above the deafening monitors. Aldo plucks his bass with a vengeance. And Roco is now all over the waxed floor, collapsing his legs, flailing them outward in a leap, skidding and sliding. This image is being seen live all over Latin America and Europe, I’m thinking, but twenty minutes from now, it’ll be back to the soap operas and wheezing professors discussing the Aztec legacy. And then I notice it: from the moment he hit the stage, Roco’s black work boots (just like his father’s) have been scuffing the Televisa floor like jet tires on a runway. Rocío Villa García is drop-jawed in horror. Technicians are making exaggerated hand signals, trying to settle Roco down. But no! Roco is blind to the world, on the verge of knocking himself out dancing as the song slowly fades.

Out bounds Villa García, all smiles for the interview. “Roco,” she bubbles, “just how is it that you can dance around with those heavy boots?” Roco looks down at them and for the first time notices the dozens of black streaks radiating out from his mike. Before he can answer, Villa García is already into her next question.

“Now just what is this about Madonna showing up at your concert in Los Angeles?”

IN THE LATE 1980s, encouraged by the success of such Argentine *rockeros* as Soda Stereo and Charly García, as well as by the birth of *guacarock* in Mexico, the labels began signing again. BMG’s Ariola led the way, producing Mexican acts Los Caifanes, Maldita Vecindad, Fobia, Neón, and Los Amantes de Lola. A suspiciously supportive Mexican government also helped by allowing a few

rock acts from Argentina to stage large outdoor gigs. At the Plaza de Toros in 1987, twenty-five thousand *rockeros* attended the biggest *rock en español* gig since Avándaro.

In 1988, the hit that promoters, label execs, radio program directors and *rockeros* had all been waiting for arrived: “La negra Tomasa” by Caifanes. The song was a slightly electrified, *cumbia*-style cover of an old Cuban standard, and it sold over half a million copies—more than any other Mexican single in the thirty-year history of *rocanrol*. It seemed as if rock’s Latin hour had finally come.

Not quite. No other band came close to matching the sales of “La negra Tomasa”: most acts topped out at well under 50,000 units. Maldita barely managed 25,000. “There was a crash,” says Jorge Mondragón, a Mexico City rock promoter. “People were saying that *rock en español* had only been a fad.”

The reasons cited for the crash were familiar: bad label promotion, unscrupulous concert promoters, conservative radio, government censorship.

“Let’s face it,” says Giselle Trainor, an Ariola label manager. “It’s not as easy to sell this concept as it is to sell Lucerito.” The teen star’s voice is non-existent, but her long legs and fair hair have made her a Televisa darling. “And if other labels don’t start supporting rock, it’s going to collapse.”

Soon after the initial boom, pop rockers like “Mexican Madonna” Alejandra Guzmán (daughter of Enrique Guzmán of Los Teen Tops, the *rockero* heroes of the sixties) achieved stardom, propelled by Televisa’s massive promotional machine.

“Rock was taken over by people who aren’t *rockeros*,” says Núcleo Radio Mil’s Gerardo Salas. “Sometimes I think that the whole *rock en español* movement was planned and promoted in such a way that pop rockers like Timbiriche and Menudo would end up winning.”

Pop rock, one Televisa promoter told me, is most successful with the middle class, Mexico’s strongest consumer force, and the bulwark of the PRI. Working-class *chavos de banda*, who are more likely to listen to the underground, are not part of the equation. “They’re dirty, violent,” I was told by the promoter, who complained about violence at *hoyos fonquis* and at some of the few larger-scale concerts (a violence, *rockeros* say, that is usually provoked by the authorities). “The underground may just as well roll over and die. We don’t want to have anything to do with that crowd, and we never will.”

BOUNCING AROUND EL LUCC, a dingy concrete vault light-years away from Rockstock in the south of the city, Roco has his arm around Saúl Hernández, lead singer of Los Caifanes, slurring: “Come on, *cabrón*, admit it. You guys

sound like The Cure. *Ya no mames, güey.*” And Saúl comes back, rocking back and forth on his heels: “Not everything has to be so obvious like in your songs. There’s an interior landscape, too, *cabrón.*”

By the time Maldita stumbles onto the stage, the walls of the club are sweating. Everyone’s hair is pasted onto their foreheads in the dripping-wet air. I inch my way through the crowd, slipping on stray bottles on the unseen floor below. The balconies seem on the verge of collapse, dozens of kids hanging over the railing.

The sound coming from the stage convulses, lurches: Roco, Sax, Pato, Aldo and Lobo are floating away on tequila-inspired riffs (they’ve been partying since early afternoon), steam rolling crazily toward a great abyss, drunk boys daring each other as they look down into the darkness and laugh. The anarchy doesn’t perturb the crowd in the least. On the dance floor a thousand bodies match Maldita’s wild energy leap for leap.

Roco loses his breath during the melodramatic held note on “Morenaza.” Sax stumbles through solos, barely keeping up with the rushed rhythms, flapping across the stage in his loose shirt, waving his arms, giggling. Lobito is oblivious of everything but his own private torpor, slamming away at bloodied congas (he ripped his hand open during the second song).

Punkish youths leap on stage and tumble back into the crowd. Now Roco himself takes a diving leap of faith into the mass of steaming bodies. Now Sax. Now Roco is pushing Pato, guitar and all, into the pit.

The band launches into “Querida,” a hardcore cover of pop megastar Juan Gabriel’s hit. Roco leaps skyward so high that he bangs his head on the red spotlight overhead. Saúl Hernández suddenly climbs onto the stage in all his tall, dark elegance, plays with a microphone-become-penis between his legs, hugs Roco like a long-lost brother, throws his head back, closes his eyes, and then without warning he too dives out onto the dance floor, where the slamming youths edge ever closer to absolute madness.

As the crowd files out afterward — punks, ex-hippies, ex-Marxists, kids from the *barrios* — Lobo is nursing his hand, bleary-eyed in the arms of his girlfriend. Aldo is downing more beer at the bar. Pacho, the only one who played the gig straight, is talking with a small group of fans. Roco is nowhere to be found. Sax is back behind the percussion section, weeping into a friend’s arms — in a few minutes he’ll make a bizarre attempt at taking off his pants and pass out.

Tonight, Maldita have fallen apart. Tomorrow they’ll wake up, hungover as hell, in the city where *rocanrol* never quite dies.

### Notes

1. I don’t have a fucking idea why I want to go out tonight / But I’ll spend the last of my savings on you / At the factory they said, “We don’t need you anymore, Joaquín” / They fired two thousand so as not to lose any more money / It’s Friday tonight, everyone’s going out to dance / Sign me up in the madness, I really want to scream: / I can’t stand it anymore, I want to dance!
2. In a dirty alley, you wake without remembering / Anything about what happened, even your feet hurt / You don’t have a jacket, you don’t have money, you don’t have shoes and you don’t even have hair / You leave that alley, HATING!
3. The only thing I want to do / is to dance rock & roll.
4. Yesterday I had a dream, it was great / all the nations lived in peace. . . .