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Musicians in Transit

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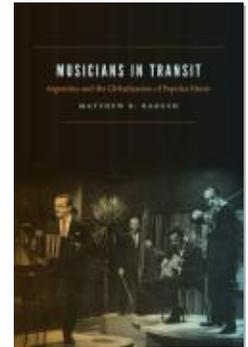
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THE SOUND OF LATIN AMERICA

Sandro and the Invention of *Balada*

In the 1960s, when Astor Piazzolla's middle-class fans were reimagining their nation in a sophisticated, cosmopolitan key, another group of Argentines were beginning to elaborate a very different identity. Rather than aim for prestige and avant-garde sophistication, these Argentines developed a preference for a new, massively popular musical genre that would come to be known as *balada*. The Argentine heartthrob Sandro helped invent the new genre and personified the identity that it made possible. Sandro's influence went well beyond Argentina. He became a star throughout the Spanish-speaking world, and his music represented a consumer preference through which a generation of Latin Americans identified themselves in opposition to North Americans. Ironically, this Latin American identity formation was made possible by the recording and marketing expertise of CBS, a multinational corporation based in the United States. Moreover, *balada* was not a musical form or style with deep roots in Argentine, or even Latin American tradition.

On the contrary, Sandro and other artists created the genre by drawing on the diverse musical styles that had emerged throughout the Atlantic World in response to the diffusion of North American rock and roll. As a result, Sandro's career offers an illuminating perspective on the globalization of rock and roll.

Given rock and roll's origins in the United States, the role of U.S.-based multinational corporations in its diffusion, and its power to reshuffle the social order in a multitude of societies, it is tempting to see it as a paradigmatic instance of cultural imperialism. However, scholars from a range of disciplines have demonstrated that rock musicians and fans from outside the United States were not merely passive recipients of an alien cultural form. On the contrary, they produced their own meanings from their engagement with Elvis Presley and other North American stars, and eventually, they generated distinctive, hybrid forms of the music.¹ The sociologist Motti Regev has recently produced a synthetic account that theorizes this more complex story. For Regev, the global prominence of "pop-rock"—that is, rock and roll and all of the other musical genres that followed from it—has produced "aesthetic cosmopolitanism."² In other words, people throughout the world increasingly express their own identities—both national and subcultural—through aesthetically similar forms and practices. Whereas musical nationalism once entailed the identification of unique properties in a society's traditional music, it is now typically expressed through pop-rock, a "signifier of universal modernity."³ Regev arguably overstates the novelty of aesthetic cosmopolitanism, since many forms of popular music were in dialogue with North American jazz as early as the 1910s and 1920s. Still, his account reveals a crucial difference: in the early decades of the twentieth century, tango, for example, bore the unmistakable influence of jazz, but it remained a distinct genre understood to express Argentine national identity in a way that jazz never could. By contrast, many contemporary Argentines express their feelings of national belonging through local versions of rock.

Though Regev and others have debunked the cultural imperialism thesis, they tend to reproduce its basic logic of diffusion: rock music is exported from the United States or, once the impact of the Beatles is taken into consideration, from the English-speaking world, and is adopted in foreign societies. In other words, the global history of rock is still generally told as a series of parallel disseminations from core to periphery, even if the agency of the periphery in this process is now much more carefully analyzed. Although scholars have explored many instances of "South-South" musical exchange—for example, the influence of Cuban *son* in the Congo or of Colombian cumbia throughout Latin

America⁴—these stories are generally segregated from the history of rock and roll. And yet from very early on, the diffusion of rock and roll was more broadly transnational than the standard narrative suggests. Throughout the world, listening to and embracing the new music entailed an engagement not only with North American and British musicians and styles but also with music generated in many other places. Regev recognizes that “pop-rock” did not become homogenous in the decades after Elvis, but the model of parallel disseminations enables only one explanation for this diversity: musicians in each country mixed rock with elements drawn from their own local traditions. That sort of hybridization undoubtedly occurred, but it was not the only, or even the dominant form. Rock and pop musicians from around the world had multiple models available to them. They borrowed liberally from these models in order to fashion their own music, and in so doing, they reshaped the transnational circuits that structured global mass culture.

Sandro’s career exemplifies this process. Sandro emerged in the early 1960s as an Elvis imitator who sang Spanish-language versions of American and British rock songs. At this point, he was part of the so-called *Nueva Ola* of youth-oriented pop music that was exploding in popularity throughout Latin America. Recorded and distributed primarily by RCA and Columbia, the *Nueva Ola* is often depicted narrowly as the means by which rock and roll from the United States was diffused in Latin America. Yet the movement was also shaped by Spanish, Italian, and French influences, and it entailed a great deal of musical interchange between Latin American countries. Attacked for its overt commercialism by a new generation of rock musicians and fans, the *Nueva Ola* disappeared in the late 1960s. Sandro, though, survived not by adopting the pose of the authentic rocker, but by developing a new musical persona as a singer of romantic ballads. He helped invent *balada* by appropriating elements from a diverse array of sources including Cuban and Mexican bolero, North American doo-wop, and European pop. Sandro’s version, infused with his distinctive brand of eroticism and his implicit lower-class affiliations, made him a huge star throughout the Spanish-speaking world, even if those class associations eventually limited his appeal at home. Sandro’s trajectory was undoubtedly shaped by global inequalities: his aesthetic choices were constrained by the preferences and strategies of his record company, and the cultural power of the United States was evident in his early embrace of rock and roll. Nevertheless, his career demonstrates that pop music in this period was a rich, transnational field that enabled a significant degree of musical heterogeneity as well as the emergence of new and unpredictable identity formations.

The Transnational Pop Field of the Early 1960s

Rock and roll arrived in Argentina in late 1955 when porteño moviegoers heard Bill Haley's "Rock around the Clock" during the opening credits of *Blackboard Jungle* (dir. Richard Brooks, 1955). Along with the spate of Hollywood teenpics that followed, the film inspired young Argentines to dance. And just as it did elsewhere, rock music's appeal to teenagers provoked alarm among parents and authorities anxious to preserve patriarchal structures and prevent juvenile delinquency. Under pressure from the Catholic League of Mothers and Fathers, the mayor of Buenos Aires went so far as to prohibit dances with "exaggerated contortions" that "could affect morals."⁵ One magazine described "el rock" as a "new delirium" affecting Argentine youth and asked whether it represented "good music or collective hysteria."⁶ Another described the "licentiousness" and "frenzy" of the new dance moves and wondered whether the new fad was "dangerous."⁷

Since the music was widely seen as a derivative of jazz, the magazine *Mundo Argentino* turned to Lalo Schifrin, the nation's most esteemed jazz musician, for an explanation of the phenomenon. Schifrin criticized Bill Haley as a "bad jazz musician," but he reassured readers that the fad did not prove the existence of a "generation of decadent youth." Schifrin argued that the music was nothing more than African American rhythm and blues with a new name, and that its popularity was due to the same sort of "large publicity campaigns" that had disseminated such rhythms as the mambo and the *chachachá*.⁸ By comparing rock to these other dances, Schifrin highlighted the music's connection to transnational cultural trends. As the magazine's reporter put it: "The United States, France, England, Italy, Brazil, Sweden, Turkey, Japan, in short, all the nations of the world are the scenes of this noisy controversy."⁹ No matter how tacky or troubling the music, the popularity of rock and roll was evidence that Argentina was a full participant in cosmopolitan modernity. Although this participation could sometimes threaten to destabilize the social order, it was very much in the spirit of post-Peronist Argentina. In this sense, rock and roll was another aspect of the middle-class aspiration to engage with the international cutting edge.

At the same time, Schifrin's reference to "large publicity campaigns" implicitly attributed the popularity of rock and roll to the marketing efforts of North American companies. In a sense, he was not far off the mark; once the Hollywood studios had sparked consumers' interest, rock music was disseminated in Argentina by a handful of large multinational corporations. This pattern was almost the exact opposite of what had happened in the United States, where

small, independent record labels released the first and most innovative rock records while the large, established companies—the so-called majors—stuck to older forms of popular music. In the early 1950s, the four North American networks had largely abandoned radio for television, creating an opportunity for local, unaffiliated radio stations and small record labels to build audiences by appealing to specific market segments.¹⁰ It was this opening that enabled the emergence of rock and roll, a music that represented a major break with the aesthetic norms of the dominant forms of pop music. After a few years of denial, the major labels recognized that the rock and roll fad had more staying power than they had originally thought and began trying to compete in the growing youth market.¹¹ By the late 1950s, these corporations—particularly the largest two, Columbia and RCA—turned their attention to foreign markets, including Latin America.¹²

While the dominant position of foreign record companies was a familiar part of the landscape in Argentina, the structure of the global record business was new. In the late 1950s, global record sales entered a period of dramatic expansion that would last until the 1980s. A product of postwar economic growth and the emergence of a youth market, this expansion was also facilitated by technological developments including the invention of the vinyl record, which was lightweight and sturdy enough to withstand long-distance shipping.¹³ At the same time, the mid-1950s success of the independents had altered the popular music market. These small companies had been able to produce highly desirable music because they were deeply rooted in geographically specific, local cultures. Forced to compete on this new terrain, the majors embraced product differentiation and market segmentation and applied that new approach on a global scale. What emerged over the next few decades were huge multinational corporations that, in the words of economic historian Gerben Bakker, “linked dispersed, idiosyncratic A&R [artists and repertoire] units, creating portfolios of innovations (protected by temporary legal monopolies) within a global distribution system.”¹⁴ In other words, to capitalize on the growth of the global market, the multinationals pursued both vertical integration and creative decentralization. They combined a vast array of locally rooted creative units with a massive distribution and promotion apparatus. Their ownership of copyrights would turn the creative innovations of their local units into a steady stream of revenue.

Argentina was at the forefront of this global process since it was one of the few countries where the major U.S. recording companies already owned local units. RCA Victor Argentina was one of six subsidiaries wholly owned by the corporation, while Columbia’s branch was one of only four.¹⁵ As a re-

sult, in Argentina these two multinationals did not need to acquire existing A&R companies or to distribute their catalogues through licensing agreements, as they did elsewhere. Both companies operated recording studios and record pressing factories in Argentina, installations that in the case of Columbia were now updated and improved.¹⁶ By the late 1950s, both corporations were greatly expanding their efforts to sell records in Argentina and to record local acts. The economic policies of the Frondizi administration, aimed at attracting foreign industrial investment while curbing nonessential imports, facilitated this expansion.¹⁷

The renewed prominence of foreign record companies did not necessarily decimate local musical genres. Just as RCA and Columbia had led the way during the golden age of tango, they now recorded Astor Piazzolla's New Tango Quintet, and they participated in the boom in Argentine folk music, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Still, the new shape of the global record business did have a major impact. In earlier decades, U.S. companies recorded Argentine tango bands in order to produce records primarily for the local market. In the late 1950s, by contrast, Columbia and RCA Victor hoped to find multiple markets for the records they produced in Argentina. As early as 1956, Columbia sent its head of international repertoire to visit the company's affiliates in Argentina and Brazil in order to identify artists and music that might sell in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, the other markets where Columbia owned subsidiaries.¹⁸ Similarly, RCA Victor brought all of its Latin American affiliates and licensees together in 1959 to consider new merchandise.¹⁹ In a piece from 1962 on Columbia's plan to market its records internationally on the new CBS label, *Variety* described the strategy: "[The company] is not only planning better worldwide distribution of its domestic product, but in the case of vital markets, it hopes to have greater involvement in the artists & repertoire production activities, creating product for the specific country itself as well as repertoire of value to the entire international area."²⁰ In the rock and roll era, multinational companies envisioned a broad, transnational market for records produced in Argentina, a vision that inevitably influenced the sort of music they decided to record.

Although the recording companies operating in Argentina had previously focused primarily on the local market, the idea of selling Argentine popular music abroad was not entirely unprecedented. In the early 1930s, Carlos Gardel was enormously popular throughout Latin America as well as in Europe, though his celebrity owed less to the efforts of his recording companies, Odeon and Victor, than to those of the Hollywood film studio Paramount. Unlike the music multinationals, U.S. film companies competed in Latin American

markets against local producers. Paramount signed Gardel precisely because the studio needed a Spanish-language movie star who was viable throughout the region; the international diffusion of tango music was something of a by-product. More recently, the bolero became a major seller throughout Latin America in the 1940s. Among the bolero singers who acquired continental fame in these years was Leo Marini, an Argentine who was drawn to the genre by the Mexican singers he heard on the radio and in films. Recognizing the commercial opportunity created by the transnational popularity of the bolero, Odeon recorded Marini in Buenos Aires and marketed his records throughout Latin America.²¹ As these histories of the tango and the bolero indicate, film and record companies first envisioned a transnational, Latin American market for popular music as they contemplated genres that were indigenous to Latin America. They recognized that Colombians and Mexicans, for example, would buy tango and bolero from other Latin American countries. The rock and roll era was different, not only because of the dramatic expansion in the Latin American activities of the music multinationals, but also because the Latin American artists whose records sold throughout the region were performing a North American form of music.

Almost immediately after the first Hollywood teenpics had exposed them to the music of Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, and other early rockers, young Argentines represented a potential audience for the music in live performance. In a process occurring simultaneously in many other countries, the first local rock bands emerged to respond to this demand. Playing primarily covers of North American hits, they quickly found their way onto the radio and into the dance halls. In 1957, Columbia moved to capitalize on the trend, recording a series of Bill Haley covers by Eddie Pequenino, an Argentine jazz trombonist who had recently formed his own rock and roll band. The following year, the label scored a major hit with Billy Cafaro's cover of Paul Anka's "Pity, Pity." Though Pequenino had sung in English, Cafaro's record was a Spanish-language version of the Anka tune, establishing a model that would be emulated over the next several years.²² Pequenino and Cafaro enjoyed mainly local success, but Columbia soon found an act well suited to its transnational strategy.

Signed to the label in 1957, the Argentine group Los Cinco Latinos were a vocal quintet led by a female jazz singer named Estela Raval. Inspired by the doo-wop craze, their first single was a cover of the Platters' 1955 hit "Only You," with Spanish lyrics by Ben Molar. As a talent scout, music publisher, and prolific "translator" of English rock lyrics, Molar was a key figure in the Argentine popular music scene. He began his career writing the lyrics to boleros by the French composer Paul Misraki for Leo Marini and other Latin American

stars.²³ To Molar and to the executives in Columbia's Argentina office, rock and roll offered the same opportunity as bolero: with Spanish lyrics, it could be a viable commodity throughout Latin America. As their name suggests, Los Cinco Latinos were created with this transnational market in mind, and the strategy worked: Columbia's parent company CBS boasted to its shareholders in 1959 that "for the first time, records from Columbia's Argentine subsidiary were sold in other South American markets."²⁴ That year, Los Cinco Latinos embarked on an extensive tour of Latin America, culminating in a six-month stay in Mexico.²⁵ On the basis of the group's success throughout the region, Columbia used a Cinco Latinos album to inaugurate its new line of LPs "for the South American market."²⁶ Although many of their first records were doo-wop tunes, the group recorded other material as well. In June 1962, their Spanish-language version of "Ballata della tromba" by Italian trumpeter Nino Rosso reached number one in Argentina.²⁷ In both their commercial appeal and their repertoire, Los Cinco Latinos were a transnational phenomenon, and in this sense, they foreshadowed the popular music scene that would crystallize in Latin America during the next decade.

RCA Victor was slower to recognize the transformations of the marketplace, but the company eventually did begin to search for local talent that could compete with Columbia's new stars. Tasked with this assignment was the new general manager of the company's Argentine branch. Ricardo Mejía was an Ecuadoran who had lived for eighteen years in the United States where he worked as a disc jockey, a nightclub master of ceremonies, and a sales manager for Sears Roebuck in Hollywood. After a stint working for Sears in Colombia, Mejía arrived in Buenos Aires in November 1959 and immediately began holding auditions. His first big discovery was a trio of siblings from Uruguay, known as Los TNT. Their recording of an up-tempo swing tune called "Eso" helped Mejía launch a full lineup of young stars, which he quickly labeled the Nueva Ola.²⁸ Although "Eso" was neither rock nor doo-wop, Los TNT's lineup of a female lead with male backup singers as well as its youthful image seemed designed to compete with Los Cinco Latinos. By October 1960, *Variety* reported that largely thanks to Los TNT, "RCA Victor is registering its biggest sales in its close to 40 years in Argentina."²⁹ Seeking to tap into the larger regional market, Los TNT launched its own Latin American tour the following year.

Molar and Mejía were the perfect intermediaries to carry out the multinational record companies' new strategy of developing product for the entire Latin American region. Molar's focus on the bolero and his partnership with Misraki showed that his conception of the Argentine popular music market was not limited to the tango or to local folk genres. Transitioning from bolero

to rock and roll, he was moving from one transnational genre to another. Similarly, RCA apparently believed that Mejía's combination of North American sales expertise and Latin American ethnicity would give him special insight into the regional market. Particularly auspicious in this regard was Mejía's experience with Sears, a company that had thrived in Latin America by reconciling itself to local culture and to import restrictions aimed at promoting domestic industry.³⁰ As a Latin American who lacked any previous connection to Argentina, Mejía embodied RCA's vision of the market: the company aimed to sell records not specifically to Argentines but to Latin Americans as a whole. Along with a handful of others, Molar and Mejía helped make Argentina an important node within a continental network of musicians and composers producing a new style of music known increasingly throughout the region as the Nueva Ola. In light of the agglomeration effects of music production—the economic benefits that accrue from locating musicians, composers, recording studios, and other inputs in the same place—it made sense for Columbia and RCA Victor to concentrate its Latin American efforts principally in the three cities where they had the longest track record: Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Rio de Janeiro.³¹

By the early 1960s, the efforts of the multinational record companies had unleashed a continental “new wave,” as established artists and newcomers from throughout Latin America jumped on the rock and roll bandwagon. Typical of the former were the Chilean singer Antonio Prieto and the Puerto Rican Bobby Capó. Both had previously specialized in bolero but now scored big hits with romantic tunes that copied the piano triplets and I-vi-IV-V chord progression typical of doo-wop.³² But it was the teen idols who made the biggest splash. Among the most successful of these was the Mexican singer, Enrique Guzmán. Guzmán began as the lead singer of Los Teen Tops, one of several Mexican bands that specialized in Spanish-language covers of U.S. rock and roll hits. In 1961, he embarked on a solo career for Columbia, scoring hits throughout Latin America, including in Argentina, with several new covers as well as his own original, “Dame felicidad.”³³

Within Argentina, the Nueva Ola reached its apogee with *El Club del Clan*, a television program developed by Mejía in order to promote RCA Victor's lineup of young stars. The show, which combined musical numbers and comedy sketches, earned high ratings by packaging the Nueva Ola as a youthful, modern musical movement that posed no threat to the social order. In Valeria Manzano's words, *El Club del Clan* encouraged viewers to “conform to established gender roles and family values and ‘have fun’—in an orderly way.”³⁴ Mejía hoped that by removing rock and roll's association with delinquency and disorder,

the program could help RCA Victor sell more records. As he explained to one magazine reporter, his strategy was to market pop idols to teenage girls who in turn would convince their fathers to buy the records, but this could only work with the most unthreatening of idols.³⁵ Ramón “Palito” Ortega, easily the biggest star to emerge from *El Club del Clan*, fit the bill. As countless articles in the fan magazines explained, Ortega was a working-class kid from Tucumán province, who had succeeded in the big city thanks to hard work and musical talent.³⁶ Typical of his repertoire was his first top ten hit, an original composition called “Dejala, Dejala.”³⁷ In this bouncy, comic tune meant for dancing the twist, the singer laments the fact that his girlfriend always brings a family member along on their dates. Ortega’s rags-to-riches story combined with his ability to compose catchy, lighthearted songs in the latest pop styles made him the most commercially viable of the new teen idols.

Promoting clean-cut stars like Ortega was one way to make rock and roll seem unthreatening. Another was to treat the new music as just one more pop genre, comparable to all the dance-based musical forms that preceded it. Even before *El Club del Clan*, RCA Victor had included Nueva Ola stars like LOS TNT on LPs that contained an international collection of the latest hits.³⁸ By featuring Argentine and North American rock and roll songs alongside Argentine tangos, Cuban mambos, and Brazilian sambas, these albums integrated rock and roll into a familiar musical menu. *El Club del Clan* deepened the strategy. Each cast member on the program tended to specialize in a particular type of music, with the result that rock and roll appeared as one of several contemporary forms of popular music. Lalo Fransen joined Ortega in performing songs for the twist, while Johnny Tedesco specialized in Elvis Presley covers. But others performed Latin American genres. Chico Novarro and Perico Gómez performed cumbias, boleros, and other “tropical” rhythms, while Raúl Cobián sang tangos. Finally, Violeta Rivas specialized in Spanish-language covers of Italian pop songs.³⁹ Through this musical diversity, the program placed rock and roll in a transnational context that shaped the music’s reception.

In the early 1960s, then, Argentine consumers enthusiastically embraced a new wave of young performers and musical styles marketed to them by U.S.-based multinational corporations. However, this trend did not amount to a simple triumph for North American cultural influence. Doo-wop, the twist, and other versions of early rock and roll were extremely popular in Argentina, but as *El Club del Clan* indicates, they did not dislodge Latin American genres. Moreover, Argentines heard rock and roll performed by artists from both the United States and from elsewhere in Latin America and Europe. Foreign members of the Nueva Ola like Enrique Guzmán became huge stars in Argentina and

starred in films alongside their Argentine counterparts.⁴⁰ Argentine consumers' exposure to a diverse, transnational musical mix was visible on the country's top ten lists. For the week of June 8, 1963, the top ten featured North American rock and roll singers Johnny Tillotson, Chubby Checker, and Dion. Paul Anka was also on the list, though his record, "Eso Beso," was not rock and roll at all, but rather an attempt at bossa nova. There was also one tango—"Frente al Mar" performed by Mariano Mores and Susy Leiva—and one Argentine folk song—"Puente Pexoa" by The Trovadores del Norte. The rest of the list was given over to rock-influenced artists from other countries: there were two songs by the Mexican Enrique Guzmán, one by the Chilean Antonio Prieto, and one by the Italian Adriano Celentano.⁴¹ Popular music in Argentina was a broadly transnational field shaped by the sales strategies of the multinational record companies in combination with a series of other factors, including linguistic affinities and existing cultural ties. In this context, local musicians were not limited to a choice between imported North American rock and traditional Argentine music; in fact, they had many more aesthetic options available to them.

Sandro: From Rock and Roll to Balada

Though every Argentine pop singer of the 1960s navigated this transnational terrain, some journeys were more consequential than others. During the second half of the decade, Sandro made a series of aesthetic choices that helped shape Argentine and, indeed, Latin American popular music for years to come. Born Roberto Sánchez, Sandro grew up in Valentín Alsina, an industrial suburb of Buenos Aires. The son of a meatpacking worker, he fell for rock and roll shortly after its introduction in Argentina. By 1962, at the age of seventeen, he and a group of friends from the neighborhood had formed a band called Los de fuego. Although they were inspired by Elvis, their most immediate model was a Latin American one. They hoped Los de fuego could follow the path opened by the Mexican group, Los Teen Tops, producing Spanish-language covers of rock and roll hits from the United States. In 1963, the group, renamed "Sandro y Los de fuego," was signed by Los Teen Tops' record company, Columbia, now operating in Latin America under the CBS label. Although the company's representatives first insisted on recording Sandro with a professional orchestra, they eventually relented and began recording the whole band. Perhaps most important, CBS connected Sandro with Ben Molar, the music publisher and lyricist who had written the Spanish version of "Only You" for the Cinco Latinos as well as many other covers. Over the next couple of years, Sandro would record a string of Molar's "translations" of rock and roll hits.⁴²

With a recording contract and a recurring spot on the popular television variety program, *Sábados Circulares*, Sandro quickly became a prominent member of the Argentine Nueva Ola. Nevertheless, his image was quite different from the clean-cut presentation of Palito Ortega and the other stars of *El Club del Clan*. With shaggy hair and long sideburns and dressed often in black boots and leather pants, Sandro was described in the press as “eccentric” or “diabolical.” Most often, he was labeled an *iracundo*, which means an “angry” or “irate” person, but in this context probably comes closest to “bad boy.”⁴³ The image was loosely based on such cinematic models as Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (dir. Laszlo Benedek, 1953) and James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955). Sandro was known for his wild performances, which began with pelvic movements inspired by Elvis and often culminated with him writhing on the floor. In 1964, he was briefly suspended by Canal 13, the channel that carried *Sábados Circulares*, for “excess” in his performance. In his defense, the singer insisted that he did not mean to offend. “When I perform, I am completely sincere. I live the song; I feel it. There is nothing prefabricated and I let myself be taken away by the rhythm, by the atmosphere, by the audience, who—judging by how they applaud—must enjoy my way of performing.”⁴⁴ Sandro here defines his own authenticity in implicit contrast to his competitors on *El Club del Clan*, who were, if anything, “prefabricated.” His overt sexuality in performance becomes a sign of his honesty, his willingness to show his true self in response to the music. The article describing his suspension was accompanied by a large photograph of the singer wearing no shirt as well as a series of pictures showing him shooting guns, his favorite hobby according to the piece. Eroticism and potential violence were the twin components of his “bad boy” image.

Notwithstanding the singer’s claims of authenticity, Sandro’s image was, in fact, carefully managed. At the time, fan magazines were filled with gossip about the love lives of the Nueva Ola stars, gossip that celebrated the power of romantic love even as it reinforced conservative attitudes toward marriage. In one typical interview, Palito Ortega bemoaned a recent breakup but struck a positive note: “The day I fall in love with a woman, I am going to dive headfirst into marriage.”⁴⁵ As his fame grew, Sandro also found himself the subject of this sort of piece. One article described his romance with an innocent manicurist, a good girl who avoided nightclubs. She was originally frightened by Sandro until “she discovered the sensitive man hiding behind the *iracundo*.”⁴⁶ Here, the bad boy image was rendered inauthentic; underneath the mask, Sandro was as romantic as Palito Ortega and just as committed to propriety. In the photos of the couple that accompanied the article, Sandro appeared in a suit

¿POR QUE SUSPENDIO EL CANAL 13 A SANDRO?

¿POR QUE SUSPENDIO EL CANAL 13 A SANDRO?

Una transmisión de "Tabarón" en el canal 13, suspendida, en un momento de su desarrollo, en un momento de su desarrollo, en un momento de su desarrollo...

EL POPULAR CANTANTE SUSPENDIDO, TRATA EL DELICADO ASUNTO CON NOTABLE SERENIDAD

Sandro: -Es posible que mi estilo pueda, en ciertos momentos, parecer "excesivo"

ACTUARE EN LA TV DE COCORA ROSA

—(Anteriormente sus salidas programadas con Canal 13)

FIGURE 4.1 • Sandro as an *iracundo*. Antena TV, December 22, 1964.

and tie. Swept away by love, he promised to marry the girl over the objections of her family. The article—with the support, presumably, of the singer’s managers—worked to make Sandro safe for consumption; his haircut and performance style made him exciting, but articles like this one made sure he was not too threatening.

Sandro’s identity as a *gitano*, or gypsy, was another key aspect of his distinctive persona. The singer’s stage name, which sounded foreign to Argentine ears, signaled his ethnic affiliation. He claimed that his parents had originally wanted to name him Sandro, a Hispanicized version of Sandor, in homage to his Hungarian ancestors, opting for Roberto only when the authorities at the Civil Registry refused.⁴⁷ In later interviews, Sandro reported that his paternal grandfather was, in fact, a gypsy from Hungary.⁴⁸ In any case, he seems to have made the decision to take on a foreign-sounding name and to publicize his gypsy roots in order to market himself more effectively. This ethnic otherness gave him a certain exotic appeal, evident in the first articles that appeared about him in the fan magazines. One piece referred to his “strange appearance, a mixture of gypsy and European *iracundo*,” while another spoke of

“his mysterious air of wandering gypsy.”⁴⁹ Although Argentina was home to a substantial Roma population, what distinguished them from other immigrant groups, including the Italians, Spanish, and Jews, was that they were perceived as unassimilated.⁵⁰ While Sandro practiced no elements of Roma culture, “el gitano” became his most enduring nickname, conjuring a vague but irreducible difference, a hint of wildness or savagery.

Just as the music press sought to manage Sandro’s dangerous image, CBS may have pressured him to tone down his performance style on his records.⁵¹ In any case, Molar’s lyrics tended to undercut the sexual innuendo of the originals. For example, Sandro’s version of Jerry Lee Lewis’s “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On,” called “Hay mucha agitación,” retained the English “Shake, baby, shake” chorus, but the Spanish verses replaced Lewis’s seductive and direct “Come on over, baby” with a description of a generic rock and roll dance: “Everyone is gathered, the dance is going to start soon / the atmosphere is tense, the band is about to take off / and when they shout ‘shake,’ the rhythm is about to begin.” By erasing the sexual innuendo of the original and employing conventional vocabulary, Molar’s lyrics avoided improbity.⁵²

Still, even if it was absent in the lyrics, eroticism was a big part of Sandro’s appeal. As on Lewis’s recording, Sandro’s version has a quiet passage in the middle, while the singer builds tension by repeating the chorus. But Sandro’s slight adjustment to the English lyrics—he sings “I gotta shake, baby, shake”—transforms the song from an insistent appeal to a woman, a request that she dance, into a display of his own physical possession by the rhythm. It is the musical equivalent of writhing on stage or appearing shirtless in teen magazines.⁵³ In this song and others, he used a range of vocal techniques to lend his versions rock and roll flavor: Elvis-style asides—“uh-huh” or “yeah”—as well as guttural growls and full-throated shouts. While Palito Ortega was singing comic originals like “Despeinada,” about a woman with unkempt hair, Sandro’s repertoire of covers made him a more authentic rocker. The advent of the British Invasion allowed him to maintain his rock and roll focus. Bands like the Beatles, the Animals, and Gerry and the Pacemakers were enamored of early rock and roll singers like Little Richard and Chuck Berry. Sandro covered both their original tunes—his versions of “Hard Day’s Night” and “Ticket to Ride” made the local top ten⁵⁴—as well as several of the early rock tunes that the British bands had themselves covered. By 1965, he had carved out a niche for himself as the leading Argentine interpreter of rock and roll.

In the mid-1960s, Sandro briefly associated with a group of young musicians who were beginning to explore the creative potential of rock music. Inspired by the growing sophistication of the Beatles, these musicians—Lito

Nebbia, Pajarito Zaguri, Billy Bond, and others—began to write and perform their own music in the style then known as “beat” and eventually described as “rock nacional.” Sandro was the only television star among the rather Bohemian group that frequented La Cueva, the now legendary club where the new music was gestating. He may even have helped pay to build the club’s stage.⁵⁵ But the association with the beat musicians was short lived; he soon began to move in a very different direction.

In the second half of the 1960s, Sandro evolved from a rock and roll singer to a romantic balladeer, a move that primarily reflected commercial calculations. In 1965, he had signed with a new manager, a former jazz singer named Oscar Anderle, who together with CBS, apparently pushed him to break away from Los de Fuego and from rock and roll. As he recalled years later, “One fine day, it occurred to the company—the producer—that I could be a soloist. They put me with an orchestra, then a natural metamorphosis came, I began to stop believing very much in what I had done with rock and roll. Times changed and I threw myself into melodic music.”⁵⁶ Over the course of a few years, Sandro not only switched from rock and roll to ballads, but he also went from singing primarily covers to performing his own original compositions (generally, he co-wrote both the lyrics and melody with Oscar Anderle). Whether the idea was first hatched by the record company, by Anderle, or by the singer himself, Sandro’s reinvention made him a massive, international star.

Sandro began to develop his new style partly by engaging with recent trends in pop music from the United States and Britain, a process that was evident on two LPs he recorded in 1966 and 1967. On these albums, he continued to record covers of up-tempo ravers like Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti” and Ray Charles’s “What’d I Say,” but he also broadened his repertoire to include slower songs, such as “My Prayer,” which had been a hit for the Platters, the Righteous Brothers’ “Unchained Melody,” and Elvis Presley’s version of “Crying in the Chapel.” Perhaps inspired by the emotional delivery of the Platters’ lead singer Tony Williams, Sandro sang these tunes with a noticeable vibrato, the first indication of what would become a trademark of his mature style. His approach to this material also reflected the influence of the pop songwriters associated with the Brill Building, whose records featured distinctively syncopated rhythms. Neil Sedaka, one of the most influential of these songwriters, was enormously popular in Argentina during the early 1960s and may well have been a model for Sandro.⁵⁷ In addition, Sandro’s covers of songs like “Ticket to Ride” by the Beatles, themselves disciples of the Brill Building sound, had given him first-hand experience with this sort of pop syncopation.⁵⁸ In any case, his versions of slow rock and roll tunes tended to make the drums more

prominent than they were in the originals and to rely more heavily on the sort of syncopated bass and guitar parts typical of Brill Building hits. Music historians have traced Brill Building rhythms back to Brazilian and Cuban roots, which suggests, ironically, that by copying North American and British models, Sandro was actually giving his music a Latin American feel.⁵⁹

Regardless of its rhythmic provenance, English-language pop music was hardly the only influence on Sandro's evolving style. In fact, Sandro's transformation into a romantic balladeer was made possible by the deeply transnational nature of popular music in Argentina. This transformation took another step forward on his next album, *Beat Latino*, released in 1967. The name of the album, and the musical project it described, clearly served CBS's goal of producing music for the entire Latin American market. Together, *Beat Latino* and its follow-up, *Una muchacha y una guitarra*, included fifteen covers. Of these, there were six U.S. tunes, three French, two British, one Italian, one Brazilian, one Argentine, and one Cuban/Mexican medley. But the influence of musicians and styles from outside of the United States was evident in more than just his repertoire. Sandro worked out his "Latin" version of pop music in dialogue with performers from around the globe, who were themselves working out a response to the challenge of rock and roll and the emergence of the youth market.

Particularly important for Sandro were European singers who provided useful models of cosmopolitan, modern pop music that fused rock aesthetics with a sweeping romanticism rooted in older styles. In Italy, the advent of rock and roll had transformed the *canzone* tradition celebrated at the annual Sanremo song competition. This transformation took off in 1958 when Domenico Modugno's "Nel blu dipinto di blu," better known as "Volare," won the contest and went on to become a massive, international hit. Modugno's success opened the doors to a whole generation of *urlatori*, or "yellers," young performers who brought the influence of rock and roll directly to bear on the melodic tradition of Italian song.⁶⁰ Among the most influential of this generation were Adriano Celentano, Tony Dallara, Mina, and Rita Pavone, all of whom had hit records in Argentina.⁶¹ Sandro's cover of the Italian singer Michele's "Quando parlo di te," which combined rock vocal stylings and instrumentation with melodrama, showed his openness to the new, Italian singers. French singers may have been even more influential: as early as 1964, Sandro listed Charles Aznavour and the *chanson* singer Juliette Greco alongside Ray Charles as his major stylistic influences.⁶² In 1967 and 1968, though, he was drawn to a less traditional French singer, covering three songs by Michel Polnareff. Influenced by hippy styles, Polnareff's melodic approach to rock bore the traces of American groups like the Mamas and the Papas. Sandro, though, chose to cover two of Polnareff's

slower, more romantic tunes, “Mes regrets” and “Ame câline,” which the French singer had recorded with orchestral accompaniment rather than with a rock band. “Ame câline,” in particular, offered Sandro a dramatic tune based on wide intervals, allowing him to escape the narrow melodic constraints of most rock and roll.

Two other European singers were crucial influences on Sandro. The Welsh performer Tom Jones became a major star in the mid-1960s with a “Las Vegas, big-band version of rock and roll” built on an aggressive vocal delivery and generous doses of brass.⁶³ Sandro often told interviewers of his admiration for Jones.⁶⁴ His cover of “The Lonely One,” originally a hit for Cliff Richard and the Shadows, closely copied Jones’s take on the song. The popping horns and the larger-than-life vocal style that were Jones’s signature were one recipe for transcending the limitations of rock’s youth appeal. Although very different musically, the Spanish singer Raphael shared Jones’s ability to attract listeners of all ages. Rejecting the stripped-down, untrained, rock and roll aesthetics of Spain’s beat bands, Raphael combined “old-fashioned romanticism,” virtuosic vocal technique, and an intensely theatrical performance style featuring dramatic gestures.⁶⁵ Raphael’s prominence throughout the Spanish-speaking world—in July 1967, he had two songs simultaneously on the Argentine top ten—must have encouraged Sandro’s evolution away from rock music.⁶⁶

Sandro’s engagement with the varied styles of this diverse, international group of popular singers culminated in the elaboration of his own distinctive sound. In October 1967, he won the first Buenos Aires Festival of Song, a competition modeled on European contests like the Sanremo festival, with his original composition, “Quiero llenarme de ti” (I want to fill myself up with you). By the end of the year, the song had reached number one on both the Brazilian and Argentine charts and established Sandro as a major star. Written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, “Quiero llenarme de ti” combined the brassy orchestration typical of a Tom Jones record with Raphael’s direct romanticism. The lyrics were a florid declaration of love: “I want to write a song to your hair / Then draw your face in the sand / Hear your name sung by the wind / See your smile playing in the sea.” The vibrato that had crept into Sandro’s vocal performances in recent years now deepened into a theatrical mannerism, an aural signifier of both emotional honesty and erotic passion. He had hit on a winning formula.

Over the next two years, Sandro followed “Quiero llenarme de ti” with a series of top ten hits that generally fell into two categories: up-tempo numbers like “Una muchacha y una guitarra,” “Rosa, Rosa,” “Ave de Paso,” and “Tengo” and slow ballads like “Porque yo te amo,” “Así,” “Penumbra,” “Penas,” and “El maniquí.” The former combined sonic references to contemporary rock music, in the form of jangly guitar, organ and drums, with more traditional orches-

tration including, most prominently, a violin section. Often, they included a more melodic bridge, in which Sandro indulged his romanticism. In his slow ballads, Sandro departed further from rock aesthetics, but even these songs included hints of his musical past: the syncopated chop of an electric guitar, lower-register melismas reminiscent of Elvis. Sandro's new songs, with their unabashed, poetic declarations of love and their lush orchestration, were a substantial departure from the rock and roll of Los de Fuego, yet the distinctiveness of his style owed a great deal to the persistence of certain elements from his earlier music.

Hints of Sandro's rock and roll past were also visible in his stage choreography, enabling him to forge a powerfully seductive performance style. Reflecting his musical evolution, he now gave up leather ensembles in favor of formal attire, at first an austere smoking jacket and later, ruffled tuxedo shirts opened nearly to the waist and brightly colored, form-fitting suits. In a manner reminiscent of Raphael but also of Carlos Gardel and other classic tango singers, he accompanied his ballads with smoldering stares and theatrical hand gestures. But for the faster tunes, he danced suggestively and sometimes quite frenetically, turning his body into an object of erotic display much as he had during his rock and roll phase. A recurring routine during the performance of "Rosa, Rosa" made this display explicit. As the band played a repeating figure, Sandro would explain to the audience that his leg was a "thermometer" that registered the intensity of the music and the atmosphere in the concert hall. He would then direct the audience's attention to his foot, which would start to shake, a quivering that would then proceed up his leg, until his whole body seemed possessed by the rhythm, and the band finally broke into the song's opening chords.⁶⁷ This performance transformed the meaning of the song, from the banal romanticism of the lyrics—"Rosa, Rosa, ask for whatever you want / Just don't ask for my love to die"—to a much more explicit eroticism.

The massive popularity of Sandro's new style helped bring about a major transformation of the Latin American pop music market. By 1969, Sandro, Palito Ortega, and newcomer Leonardo Favio, dominated Argentine popular music and were gaining popularity throughout Latin America.⁶⁸ Although their new music was not generally seen as a distinct genre—they were referred to in Argentina simply as singers—it is now often identified as an early form of balada, a new style of Latin pop music. In any case, as the multinational record companies recognized, the field of Latin American popular music was changing. *Billboard* reported that the enormous popularity of Sandro, Ortega, and Favio as well as that of other baladistas from the Spanish-speaking world, such as Raphael and the Puerto Rican José Feliciano, meant that Argentine



FIGURE 4.2 • Sandro performs at the Club San Lorenzo de Almagro, February 20, 1972.
Courtesy of the Archivo General de la Nación.

consumers were now less enthusiastic about records sung in English or other foreign languages.⁶⁹ Although the record companies hoped to respond to this new reality by convincing foreign stars to record Spanish versions of their hits, the rise of balada had begun to reshape the market. The eclectic, transnational musical field that had accompanied the rise of the Nueva Ola in the early 1960s had begun to give way to one in which consumers favored Spanish-speaking artists who performed a form of pop music unique to the Spanish-speaking world.

Sandro de América

The rise of balada, which attracted enormous audiences from throughout Latin America even as it was denigrated by most critics, has been explained in various ways. According to one interpretation, the balada of the 1960s and 1970s represented a comeback for the bolero. The bolero, as I have described, originated in Cuba, but by the 1940s, it had become denationalized, performed by artists from various Latin American countries and enjoyed by audiences throughout the region. The advent of rock and roll displaced the bolero from its position of preeminence, as young people rejected the old-fashioned music of their parents in favor of the latest rhythms. Music historian Daniel Party argues that balada was a response to this challenge:

In order to compete against rock and roll, Latin American bolero composers and musicians, most notably Mexican Armando Manzanero, modernized bolero songwriting and arrangement. The new bolero incorporated elements of rock and roll (electric guitar, drum kit, use of 12/8 meter, emphasis on teenage love) as well as the elegant orchestrations of European ballads (e.g. Charles Aznavour's collaborations with Paul Mauriat). This updating of the pop ballad occurred simultaneously in various Latin American countries, and the new genre came to be known as balada.⁷⁰

Whereas Party emphasizes the agency of bolero musicians, other scholars have seen the popularity of balada as evidence of the power of the multinational music corporations. Peter Manuel argues that the genre's lack of geographical roots made it a "common denominator," a convenient way for recording companies, radio networks, and corporate sponsors to unify the Latin market across national divisions.⁷¹ According to this view, balada outcompeted genres with stronger links to local communities because it enjoyed the backing of powerful, capitalist interests.

Both of these accounts contain illuminating insights, but Sandro's trajectory suggests that they are incomplete. By connecting balada to the bolero,

Party identifies important continuities in twentieth-century Latin American popular music. Musicians like Manzanero and the Cuban bolero singer Olga Guillot served as bridges between the romantic pop music of the 1940s and that of the 1960s and beyond. Yet most balada singers and composers had no roots in the bolero. Moreover, balada performers like Sandro were not simply hybridizing bolero and rock. They emerged from the transnational pop music field of the Nueva Ola and were in dialogue with an eclectic array of musicians from around the globe who were themselves confronting the challenge of rock music. Although Manuel exaggerates the extent to which U.S. companies could impose aesthetic preferences on Latin American consumers, he is right to point to their impact.⁷² The distribution systems and marketing strategies of the multinationals created the circuits along which musical genres circulated. Thanks to the efforts of these companies in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Latin American music markets became increasingly transnational and interconnected. As a result, new artists confronted a marketplace in which local genres competed with multiple versions of rock and roll from the United States, Europe, and throughout Latin America. Balada represented a response to this competitive environment. Sandro forged his version by drawing on elements from U.S. rock and roll as well as French, Italian, and British pop music.

Yet even if bolero was not an important source of musical ideas for Sandro, it was crucial in a different way. The long history of bolero had created a substantial Latin American audience for slow, romantic ballads sung in Spanish and identified as pan-Latin American. Sandro and the other baladistas built on that existing audience. Similarly, since the advent of mass culture in the early twentieth century, the genre of melodrama has enjoyed widespread popularity in the popular literature and film of the region.⁷³ Baladistas benefited from the existence of a substantial audience throughout Latin America for romantic love stories told in a style marked by emotional excess.

More than any other Argentine performer of the era, Sandro became a star throughout Latin America. *Sandro de América*, the title of an album he released in 1969 and from then on another recurring nickname, indicated the self-consciousness with which he pursued continental stardom. He had already performed in Brazil in 1967, but after winning the Buenos Aires Festival of Song, he dedicated himself to a rigorous schedule of international touring. Over the next five years, Sandro performed in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Chile, and Ecuador, and multiple times each in New York, Miami, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, and Spain.⁷⁴ This extensive international touring supported the aggressive efforts of CBS to market him as a star throughout the Spanish-speaking world. In this sense, Sandro de América was

made possible by the multinational corporations that dominated the global music business and by their strategy to expand the Latin American market.

One other globalized culture industry also proved vital to making Sandro a Latin American star: the film industry. In 1969, Sandro's manager sought to translate the singer's rising popularity to the screen: the result was *Quiero llenarme de ti* (dir. Emilio Vieyra), a light, romantic film whose flimsy plot afforded Sandro multiple opportunities to sing. The movie was a commercial success and was followed by a string of similar movie musicals produced at a rapid clip: *La vida continúa* (dir. Vieyra, 1969), *Gitano* (dir. Vieyra, 1970), *Muchacho* (dir. Leo Fleider, 1970), *Siempre te amaré* (dir. Fleider, 1971), *Embrujo de amor* (dir. Fleider, 1971), *Destino de un capricho* (dir. Fleider, 1972), *El deseo de vivir* (dir. Julio Saraceni, 1973), *Operación Rosa Rosa* (dir. Fleider, 1974), *Tú me enloqueces* (dir. Sandro, 1976). Crucially, Oscar Anderle did not sign Sandro with one of the more established Argentine film companies. Instead, the singer's films were financed and distributed by Pel-Mex, a Mexican company that played an influential role in the Argentine film industry of the 1960s and early 1970s. Beginning in 1964, Pel-Mex contracted with small production companies that lacked the local distribution deals enjoyed by the big Argentine studios. This arrangement allowed these small independents to flourish, since Pel-Mex had a massive distribution system that covered all of Latin America as well as the Latino market in the United States.⁷⁵ Predictably, the films produced under this arrangement were made with this transnational market in mind. Emilio Vieyra, who directed Sandro's first two movies, began his association with Pel-Mex when a friend told him that Puerto Ricans in New York loved erotic horror films. The Mexican company advanced him the modest sum he needed to make *Placer sangriento*, a film aimed specifically at that market.⁷⁶ Even though they were mostly set in Argentina, Sandro's movies were likewise aimed at the broader, Latin American market. *Quiero llenarme de ti* actually opened in New York City before it did in Argentina.⁷⁷ Sandro's association with Pel-Mex, like his connection with CBS, encouraged his evolution toward an artistic style that resonated with Latin American audiences outside Argentina.

Sandro's appeal translated well across national borders. In his first foreign performance after winning the Buenos Aires Festival of Song, Sandro sang at the Chilean equivalent in Viña del Mar. Local reporters scoffed at his performance—"As a singer, he is an excellent dancer," one declared—but grudgingly admitted that he was "the sensation" of the festival for the youth in attendance.⁷⁸ The following year, on a visit to Venezuela, he was given two awards previously won by the Italian pop star Mina and the French singer Charles Aznavour.⁷⁹ On a visit to Bogotá in 1970, the press reported that five

thousand fans greeted him at the airport and another five thousand camped outside his hotel. A Colombian newspaper published a half-page photo of Sandro hanging out in his hotel room with Brazilian soccer star Pelé—nearly twice the size of the photo of Colombian president Misael Pastrana meeting with his Chilean counterpart Salvador Allende, who was also in town.⁸⁰ In Paraguay as in Colombia, the police needed to impose special measures in order to protect him from overly enthusiastic fans.⁸¹ By 1970, his international success had led to several platinum and gold records and total record sales of 4,250,000.⁸²

Sandro was particularly popular in Puerto Rico and among the largely Puerto Rican Latino community in New York City. This popularity was facilitated by the geographical reach of both CBS and Pel-Mex and the business acumen of Oscar Anderle, but it was also advanced by the singer's own efforts at promotion. In April 1969, Sandro flew to New York City to be present for the opening of his film, *Quiero llenarme de ti*, in ten Latino theaters in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and New Jersey. Sandro made appearances in each, declaring himself moved by “the heat of Hispanic brotherhood.”⁸³ He then flew to Puerto Rico for a performance timed to coincide with the opening of the film in San Juan.⁸⁴ In September and October, he repeated the itinerary, headlining a series of shows in the Bronx that also featured Cuban salsa star Celia Cruz and then playing concerts in San Juan, Arecibo, Aguadilla, Mayaguez, and Ponce.⁸⁵ Reporters in both New York and Puerto Rico commented on the singer's ability to attract female fans of all ages. Puerto Rican sales of his latest album so exceeded expectations that local dealers were forced to import extra copies from Venezuela.⁸⁶ Sandro carefully cultivated his Caribbean fan base by speaking of his respect for local culture and even using local slang; he told one Puerto Rican reporter that his reception on the island was “chévere.”⁸⁷

Although reporters in New York and Puerto Rico did mention that Sandro was from Argentina, he was billed more prominently as a Latin American star: “the idol of America.” His performances alongside Celia Cruz reveal that his audience was expected to overlap substantially with the audience for salsa. In fact, over the next few years, he frequently shared the stage with performers of salsa, cumbia, and other so-called tropical dance musics in New York, the Caribbean, and Colombia, even though his music had little in common with those genres.⁸⁸ As a genre sung in Spanish and identified with Latin America, balada fit well with the more regional styles enjoyed by local audiences. Moreover, Puerto Ricans had been particularly enthusiastic consumers of the Nueva Ola of the early 1960s, embracing both foreign singers and local performers like Bobby Capó and Lucecita Benítez.⁸⁹ In this way, they were musically prepared for the turn to balada. Sandro's popularity on the island received

a further boost in 1970 when the New York-based Caytronics company secured the rights to distribute CBS's Latin American catalogue in the United States and Puerto Rico. Although Caytronics largely ceded the salsa market to Fania Records, the company marketed virtually every other Latin American genre. Sandro now appeared prominently in advertisements alongside baladistas from other countries as well as cumbia and regional folk music acts.⁹⁰ In 1970, his transnational star power was demonstrated when his performance before a largely Puerto Rican audience at Madison Square Garden in New York was broadcast by satellite on television stations throughout the continent.⁹¹

Sandro's identification as a Latin American singer, rather than an Argentine one, was also facilitated by the fact that he belonged to a musical movement that was emerging simultaneously in various countries throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Although he was occasionally compared to Tom Jones, he was more frequently associated with baladistas. In the early years of his career, Sandro's main competition was the Spanish singer, Raphael, whose hits of the mid-1960s had helped inspire his conversion from rocker to baladista. Raphael and Sandro were in many ways part of the same transnational cultural phenomenon: Raphael's musical arranger was the Argentine Waldo de los Ríos, who had orchestrated the *Cinco Latinos'* early hits.⁹² When the film director Emilio Vieyra needed help figuring out how to make a movie musical starring Sandro, he looked to Raphael's most recent film as a model.⁹³ In July 1969, one Puerto Rican magazine dedicated its cover article to the question of whether Sandro had "dethroned" Raphael as the most popular singer on the island. According to the article, Sandro had emerged "from the south" to challenge the Spanish singer and quickly won over Puerto Rican fans thanks to his impressive "masculinity."⁹⁴ Notwithstanding this vague allusion to Sandro's Latin machismo, the magazine presented both singers as practitioners of a common genre. Moreover, despite the singers' foreign origins, Puerto Rican music fans were expected to pass judgment between them; the genre itself was not foreign.

Sandro and Raphael did share some stylistic similarities, although Sandro's debt to rock and roll also distinguished them. More important was the fact that they moved on the same promotional circuits. Raphael's films were shown in the same theaters as Sandro's, and the Spanish singer performed at Madison Square Garden just seven months before his Argentine counterpart.⁹⁵ Later, when Raphael's popularity in the Americas began to decline, the Brazilian baladista Roberto Carlos emerged as Sandro's primary competition in many countries. In any case, fans encountered Sandro as a Latin American baladista, one of a group of similar singers from throughout Latin America and Spain. Balada constructed its audience as Latin American and constituted an

aesthetic preference that distinguished this audience from the North American one. This was particularly clear when Sandro performed in New York City; his concerts were advertised exclusively in the Spanish-language media, and even when they were held in mainstream venues like Madison Square Garden and Carnegie Hall, they attracted exclusively Latino audiences.

Sandro's popularity throughout Latin America was a product of the hemispheric reach of CBS and Pel-Mex, his own savvy self-promotion, as well as his association with the emerging genre of balada, but these factors do not fully explain it. After all, other Argentine pop singers—Palito Ortega, Leonardo Favio, Leo Dan—sold records, toured, and appeared in films outside of Argentina, but none were as successful abroad as Sandro. Sandro's ability to become "Sandro de América"—to embody a broad, Latin American persona—was enabled by the specific class and ethnic associations that attached to him. Thanks to Argentina's history of European immigration as well as its enduring racial ideologies, most of the country's popular performers were light-skinned; their whiteness marked them as different from the majority of Latin Americans. By contrast, Sandro's black hair, dark eyes, olive skin, thick lips, bushy eyebrows and hairy chest read quite differently. Revealingly, one Puerto Rican newspaper described him as "trigueño," or "wheat-colored."⁹⁶ A capacious and flexible term applied to a broad range of skin colors, trigueño signifies an intermediate racial status; it lacks the upper-class associations of "white," but also the negative connotations of "black."⁹⁷ The fact that Sandro could be described this way suggests that many Puerto Ricans saw him as ethnically similar to themselves.

This way of reading Sandro's race reflected not just his phenotype, but also the way he was marketed. Sandro's films were fictional, yet because his character in the early ones was a singer named Roberto, they were also clearly about him. In the first two movies, he played a regular guy from a working- or middle-class neighborhood. But his third film, *Gitano*, evoked his nickname, an intertextuality that mobilized his specific, ethnic otherness. In the film, Sandro plays a gypsy who works at a circus and is the target of vicious bigotry. He is slandered as a "gypsy thief," and his girlfriend's parents oppose their relationship. Like his father, who died in jail, Roberto is falsely accused of murder and forced to go into hiding. Roberto gets a job singing at a circus, performing in a clown costume so that he will not be recognized by the police. The circus owner's daughter, a lawyer, falls in love with him, but Roberto tells her that his lower-class background and lack of a university education mean that "I'll never fit in your world." She tries to get him to turn himself in, but he is sure the authorities will never believe his version of events since he is a gypsy. In the end, Roberto is arrested but then exonerated by a judge, who tells him that



FIGURE 4.3 • Sandro marketed in Puerto Rico as “The Idol of America.” *El Mundo* (October 22, 1969), 1C.

his one mistake was that he did not have faith in Justice. The happy ending is complete when he reunites with his original girlfriend. With its depiction of a benevolent, patriarchal state, this ending must have pleased the dictatorship in power in Argentina. But the movie’s dominant effect was to link Sandro with marginalization in both class and ethnic terms. *Gitano* packaged Sandro as a nonwhite person of humble origins; by removing any hint of European superiority that might have attached to him as an Argentine, the film helped enable his Latin American persona.

Yet if these class and ethnic associations allowed Sandro to inhabit a generalized, Latin American identity—Sandro de América—within Argentina they particularized him in ways that were sometimes limiting. Virtually every article dedicated to Sandro in the local entertainment press described his “humble origins” in Valentín Alsina. In these, he both lamented his family’s poverty—his small, sad house, the fact that he had to give up his education and grow up too quickly—and celebrated the friendships and ordinary pleasures of barrio life.⁹⁸ These accounts were reminiscent of the press coverage of tango stars

in the 1920s and 1930s. Since tango was understood to have emerged in the poor neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, artists emphasized their humble roots in order to establish their authenticity. They crafted rags-to-riches life stories that appealed to their working-class fans without alienating higher-class audiences.⁹⁹ Yet in the post-Perón era, Argentina was much more polarized along class lines, divisions that were reflected in popular music preferences. In this context, a taste for Sandro's music implied lower-class status. Palito Ortega was also marketed as a poor boy who had achieved success, but since Ortega was from the remote province of Tucumán, his biography could be harnessed to a comforting message of national unity.¹⁰⁰ By contrast, Sandro was from greater Buenos Aires; local readers either knew Valentín Alsina or had a concrete idea of what it was like and who lived there. They inevitably associated Sandro with the residents of these areas, working-class people often insulted as *grasas*, *gronchos*, or *cabecitas negras*. By giving Sandro a racialized, subaltern identity, the movie *Gitano* reinforced this association.¹⁰¹

The very qualities that made Sandro so well suited to Latin American stardom—his apparent nonwhiteness; his humble origins; his commitment to the sentimental, overtly commercial genre of *balada*—marked him as an icon of lower-class taste in Argentina. The press often depicted a powerful bond between Sandro and the poorer elements in his audience; in one interview, the singer remarked that “the public makes, at times, great sacrifices in order to pay the cover at a club. So I have to give my best.”¹⁰² Among these fans, Sandro served as a national symbol. His triumphs abroad were endlessly celebrated in fan magazines, and his ability to surpass singers like Tom Jones or Roberto Carlos was often taken as an occasion for patriotic gloating.¹⁰³ In a letter to the editor, one reader argued that Sandro was superior to Raphael and that the fact that an Argentine had become “one of the most important artists in the world” was a source of “pride.”¹⁰⁴ But this was a nationalism imbued with class connotations. In 1972, anthropologist Hugo Ratier noted that the *cabecitas negras*, or poor mestizos, who lived in Buenos Aires were “responsible for the majority of the things sold in the kiosks around the Retiro train station: Gardel dressed as a gaucho, Perón on horseback, the passionate life of Sandro. With them arrived in the city a refreshing Latin American air that impregnates everything.”¹⁰⁵ In this formulation, poor citizens of Buenos Aires were, both racially and culturally, more Latin American than other porteños, even as they consumed distinctively Argentine cultural products. And a preference for Sandro was one of the principal ways this class-specific, Latin Americanized form of national identity was expressed.

Given these class associations, many Argentines were anxious to distance themselves from Sandro. In more highbrow publications, the sorts of magazines

that celebrated the prestigious cosmopolitanism of Astor Piazzolla, Sandro was often mocked for his intellectual pretensions: “He believes—seriously—that his song ‘Quiero llenarme de ti’ could appear in any anthology of the best universal poetry [and] that the morose melodies that accompany these lyrics are comparable to the fugues of Bach.”¹⁰⁶ At times, the criticism was more direct: “His vibrato might win him the applause of certain sectors who appreciate vulgarity, but it robs of him quality.”¹⁰⁷ For this reviewer, Sandro’s signature vocal mannerism was a sign of his low cultural status and that of his fans. Sandro became a frequent target of musicians and commentators who sought distinction for their own aesthetic preferences. The avant-garde singer Nacha Guevara argued that “Sandro is the representative in 1970 of what Libertad Lamarque was in 1930,” a “sentimental” performer successfully marketed to the masses.¹⁰⁸ Many of the most pointed critiques came from the rock nacional scene, in which authenticity and honesty were the highest values. The youth magazine *La Bella Gente* described Sandro’s songs as “conformist, sentimental, exaggeratedly passionate, obviously out of style.”¹⁰⁹ Rocker Luis Alberto Spinetta was particularly harsh: “I do not like Sandro because his songs are absolutely boring (musically and lyrically). His voice has nothing of value. It is a sweet-and-sour voice, and you never know where it is going. It is a voice that tires you. I do not know if Sandro studied music at all, but if he did, he hides it well.” Spinetta attributed Sandro’s popularity to Argentina’s cultural stagnation. With no great artists to challenge and teach them, he argued, Argentine audiences had lost their capacity for aesthetic judgment; as a result, they accepted “this mediocre music.”¹¹⁰

For middle-class Argentines who sought cultural uplift and sophistication, Sandro was anathema. And to the racial and class associations discussed, we could also add gender. As Manzano has shown, the “long-haired boys” who were inventing rock nacional in the late 1960s and early 1970s represented a new model of masculinity, one that prized romantic vulnerability, honesty, and an artistic temperament.¹¹¹ By contrast, Sandro, with his unbuttoned shirts and unceasing effort at seduction, offered a more old-fashioned, less challenging form of manliness. Sandro was a source of pride for some Argentines, but his popularity was an embarrassment to others. In this sense, his reception in Argentina was very similar to that of Roberto Carlos in Brazil. Carlos had also made the move from rock and roll to balada and had become a major star throughout Latin America. Yet he was dismissed by many middle-class Brazilians as *brega*, the musical preference of maids.¹¹² In both cases, the critique of the artist reflected a critique of his fans. Watching a group of hysterical young women fight each other in order to tear off a piece of Sandro’s clothing, one

female student commented, “It seems to me that they are playing a very sad role. There are many ways to show that one likes an artist; but never trying to cut off his tie or pulling off his pants.”¹¹³ Even as Sandro emerged as an international superstar, for some segments of his own country, he and his audience epitomized the backward and unsophisticated elements of Argentine culture.

Decline and Comeback

During the 1970s, Sandro helped make balada the pop soundtrack of Latin America. Many other Latin American genres thrived—salsa, merengue, cumbia, Mexican norteño, Brazilian MPB, folk musics of various kinds, national versions of rock, etc.—but the audience for each of these was geographically limited. Balada, by contrast, was entirely denationalized; it was Latin American music. As such, balada perfectly served the interests of the major multinational record companies, who, since the early 1960s, had pursued artists that they could market throughout the entire region. A music forged by artists in dialogue with a diverse array of styles from around the world, balada received the backing of corporations that saw Latin America as a single, undifferentiated market. With fans of Sandro and other singers spread all over the hemisphere, balada helped make this vision a reality; it helped produce a pan-Latin American musical identity. In 1975, CBS promoted Sandro and Roberto Carlos as its two biggest “Latin stars.”¹¹⁴

By the 1980s, though, balada was changing, and Sandro was increasingly left behind. Having unified the market, the multinationals now sought to concentrate production. Whereas balada albums had once been recorded in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and Madrid, as well as in Los Angeles and New York, production now increasingly centered in Miami. This change paralleled the emergence of Miami as the most desirable location for a range of multinational corporations doing business in Latin America.¹¹⁵ The Spanish singer Julio Iglesias moved to Miami in 1979, followed soon after by Venezuelan superstar José Luis “el Puma” Rodríguez. Oscar Anderle tried to convince Sandro to follow suit, arguing that as with Iglesias, a move to Miami could allow him to make inroads in the U.S. market. But Sandro refused, preferring to maintain his home in Buenos Aires.¹¹⁶ Although roughly the same age as Iglesias, Rodríguez, and Mexican balada star José José, Sandro now increasingly seemed old-fashioned. He released his last movie, *Subí que te llevo* (dir. Rubén Cavallotti) in 1980, and his pace of recording slowed dramatically. Whether because his musical persona still bore the traces of late 1950s rock and roll, because his local recordings could not match the modern production

values of records made in Miami, or because he simply lost some of his earlier ambition, Sandro was no longer a Latin American superstar.

As late as 1980 or 1981, Sandro retained a significant audience in Argentina. Even though he was no longer selling millions of records, his live performances still regularly sold out.¹¹⁷ But within a few years, his fan base had shifted geographically. In 1982, he relocated for six months to San Juan in order to star in a Puerto Rican telenovela opposite local star Gladys Rodríguez. The program, *Fue sin querer*, was a big hit on the island and in Venezuela, but it was not broadcast in Argentina until 1987, and then low ratings caused it to be cancelled within a few months. When he performed in Buenos Aires after a three-year hiatus in 1985, he did not sell out the Astros Theatre.¹¹⁸ Sandro no longer fit the Argentine cultural scene.

Unfortunately for Sandro, he did not inspire the kind of nostalgia that might have sustained his career in the midst of Argentina's transition to democracy. With the brief exception of the highly conflictive 1973–76 period, the country had been ruled by the military since 1966. In 1983, the violent dictatorship known as the Proceso finally came to an end. In this context, many Argentines felt nostalgic for the cosmopolitan and modernizing 1950s and early 1960s. As I argued in the previous chapter, some were drawn to Astor Piazzolla because his music evoked this optimistic period before the onset of military dictatorship. Many more Argentines embraced leftist artists like Mercedes Sosa who had been forced into exile during the dictatorship and now returned to the country in triumph. Similarly, rock nacional had served as an implicit soundtrack of resistance during the Proceso; it thrived in the new context of openness.¹¹⁹ By contrast, since Sandro's biggest hits and most of his movies came out during the Onganía dictatorship of 1966–73, he likely reminded audiences of a period they would prefer to forget. Even worse, some of his public statements during the more recent dictatorship suggested implicit support for the regime. After a performance in the province of Catamarca in 1980, he appeared to support the government's crackdown on militant young people, declaring that "Argentine youth really don't know what country they are living in. A privileged country."¹²⁰

Unlike Palito Ortega and others, Sandro was not generally seen as an outright supporter of the dictatorship. Yet he was associated with an intensely commercial, escapist brand of entertainment that now seemed problematic. For the most part, Sandro had always been self-consciously apolitical. Although his plebeian associations may have led some to identify him with Peronism, he had never, in fact, expressed any support for this or any other movement. As he declared in 1970: "I'm not interested in politics. I think that each person has

the right to choose what best suits him or what he likes according to his own criterion . . . I maintain my attitude of trying to get the public's vote for my songs, my performances, and everything related to my work."¹²¹ This apoliticism was in fact typical of balada and had allowed the genre to thrive in many repressive political environments, including Franco's Spain and Pinochet's Chile.¹²² Yet in the context of democratic transitions, as societies sought to distance themselves from authoritarianism, the escapism of balada was something of an embarrassment. For Argentines who had just lived through the horrors of the Proceso, memories of Sandro no longer signified fun.

At the same time, the mid-1980s, like the late 1950s, was another period characterized by middle-class cosmopolitanism. With the end of dictatorship and censorship, young, middle-class Argentines embraced contemporary global culture. Alongside older rockers like Charly García and Luis Alberto Spinetta, a new generation of modern bands emerged, most notably Soda Stereo, who developed their style in dialogue with contemporary Anglo-American pop music. Sandro's connection to balada and his popularity throughout Latin America was now a liability. Despite his roots in rock and roll, his music no longer tied him to the contemporary United States; he seemed un-hip, out of synch with the times. In this period, a preference for Sandro was labeled *mersa*, meaning that it was tacky or in poor taste.¹²³ This was merely a deepening of the lower-class associations that already attached to Sandro.¹²⁴ Critics and rock musicians had found him tacky in the 1970s; in the context of Argentina's democratic transition, this sentiment spread.

Nevertheless, Sandro soon enjoyed a comeback. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, both León Gieco and Charly García, two of the most enduring musicians from the first wave of rock nacional, declared their admiration for Sandro and recorded songs with him. With the imprimatur of these musicians, Sandro now came to be recognized as an important precursor of Argentine rock music. This recognition culminated with the 1999 album, *Tributo a Sandro: Un disco de rock*, on which rock groups from Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America performed cover versions of his balada hits, reappropriating them for rock music history. Sandro's origins with Los de fuego facilitated this resignification, but it was also made possible by an important ideological shift within the rock community. Whereas earlier rock nacional groups had looked primarily to the United States and Britain for their models, this was now changing. As I will explain in chapter 6, Argentine rock musicians increasingly saw themselves as part of a larger movement of "Rock en español" or "Rock latino." As with balada before it, this movement was promoted by the multinational record companies, who saw a large, potential market throughout Latin America for

records by Soda Stereo and other bands. This commercial strategy culminated with the establishment of the cable television network, MTV Latino, in 1993. Rock bands from throughout the region now listened to each other and considered themselves part of a Latin American musical field. Sandro's pan-Latin American stardom—his identity as Sandro de América—was now an asset. This association enabled rock musicians to recontextualize him, to identify him as a part of a common musical heritage, and to downplay the troubling class and political associations that attached to him within Argentina.

The Sandro revival went beyond the rock scene. In 1993, he developed a new show called “30 Years of Magic.” After a series of performances throughout Greater Buenos Aires, he played eighteen sold-out shows at the Gran Rex in downtown Buenos Aires, four more than the previous record, held by Soda Stereo. He repeated this feat in 1996 and again in 1998–99, this time selling out the Gran Rex forty times.¹²⁵ Part of Sandro's audience at these concerts were the so-called *nenas*, older women from the humbler neighborhoods of greater Buenos Aires, who had been fans of the singer since their youth. But Sandro clearly drew from other sectors as well. In part, Sandro's renewed popularity may have reflected what Martín Caparrós described as the “vulgarization [*plebeyización*] of taste” that occurred during the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989–99).¹²⁶ Menem's neoliberal economic policies and populist political style produced fabulous wealth for a few even as it legitimized the cultural preferences of the masses, a phenomenon captured by the Menemista phrase “pizza and champagne.”

Yet Sandro's comeback was also part of a transnational trend: as Daniel Party has described, Chile in the late 1990s also experienced “a revival of the classic *balada* genre of the 1970s and 1980s.” As in Argentina, a stigma attached to Chilean *balada* because of its association with lower-class maids and right-wing supporters of the Pinochet regime. According to Party, what made the revival possible was the detention of General Pinochet in London in 1998, which initiated a long-delayed process of coming to terms with the nation's conflictive past. In this context, it was finally possible for opponents of the dictatorship to indulge in the “guilty pleasure” of *balada*.¹²⁷ Something similar may well have occurred in Argentina during the 1990s. A decade removed from the dictatorship, it was now possible for Argentines from various sectors of society to enjoy Sandro as a nostalgic pleasure or even as kitsch. In a positive review of one of Sandro's concerts from 1998, the elitist newspaper *La Nación* described his familiar “melodramatic style” and “kitsch scenography” but emphasized his impressive ability to make women swoon. While the review dripped with condescension for Sandro's female fans, married women who threw bras and

panties at the aging object of their affections, it nevertheless celebrated Sandro as “an artist who knows all the secrets and resources of showmanship.” For his part, the singer seemed aware of the times. To great applause, Sandro dedicated one song to “those mothers who are still searching for their children and asking for justice,” a clear allusion to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo.¹²⁸ With one deft sentence, he erased the earlier set of associations that linked him to the dictatorship, repositioning his music to enable its consumption in a new era.

Quite apart from Sandro’s comeback as a rock precursor, object of nostalgia, and kitsch oddity, the musical style he elaborated in the late 1960s and early 1970s continues to have an impact on patterns of identity formation in Latin America in general and in Argentina in particular. He was a key member of a generation of performers who responded to the challenge of rock and roll and subsequent Anglo-American genres by producing a denationalized style of pop that unified its audience as Latin American. The Latin American character of his form of balada was not a result of hybridization with local tradition: Sandro did not bring the tango or any of Argentina’s folk rhythms to bear on rock. On the contrary, his music reflected a wide range of cosmopolitan influences: doo-wop and Brill-building pop, Latin American versions of rock and roll, as well as the multiple pop hybrids produced in France, Italy, and Spain. What made it Latin American was its reception. Sandro benefited from the existence of an audience throughout the region primed by the bolero and by Latin America’s long, multiple traditions of melodramatic popular culture to accept a hyper-romantic, accessible musical form as expressive of a distinctive Latin American aesthetic. His physical appearance, as well as a series of marketing strategies that highlighted the class and ethnic associations that appearance made possible, allowed him to overcome the Argentine identity that might have prevented him from becoming Sandro de América. Sandro’s Latin American stardom was a source of pride in Argentina, but it was also problematic. His success complicated the efforts of middle-class Argentines to distinguish themselves culturally from less-developed and darker-skinned Latin Americans as well as from the *negros* in their own country.

The business strategies and economic power of multinational record companies like CBS were crucial to the emergence of the Sandro phenomenon and balada in general. These companies brought rock and pop music from around the world to Argentine consumers in the early 1960s. Equally important, they sought to unify the Latin American market by promoting stars like Sandro throughout the region. Nevertheless, balada cannot be reduced to a story of cultural imperialism. Such an account would render invisible the agency of musicians like Sandro, who forged their own style on the basis of

diverse models; local intermediaries like Ben Molar and Oscar Anderle, who helped translate foreign musical trends into locally meaningful versions; and fans throughout Latin America, who embraced balada stars as their own, despite their national origins. Sandro died in 2010 after a long struggle with emphysema, but his iconicity remains intact throughout Latin America. In 2014, the winner of the popular Colombian television program *Yo me llamo*, in which contestants compete by imitating famous Latin American performers, was a Sandro de América imitator.