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## Musicians in Transit

Karush, Matthew B.

Published by Duke University Press

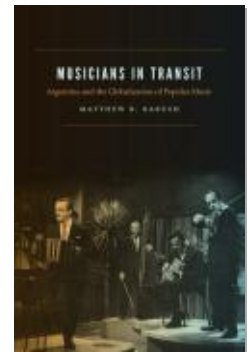
Karush, Matthew B.

Musicians in Transit: Argentina and the Globalization of Popular Music.

Duke University Press, 2016.

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## THE MUSIC OF GLOBALIZATION

Gustavo Santaolalla and the Production of *Rock Latino*

Compared to Mercedes Sosa and other folk singers, Argentine rock musicians were slow to embrace a Latin American identity. Sosa had fully inhabited a revolutionary Latin Americanism as early as 1971, when she recorded her album of Violeta Parra songs. From that point on, she claimed an affiliation with the downtrodden and oppressed from throughout the region and collaborated extensively with musicians and composers from Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, and Cuba. By contrast, in the 1970s, Argentine rock musicians listened almost exclusively to music from the English-speaking world, and they lacked a substantial audience beyond Argentine borders. While their appropriations and resignifications cannot be reduced to mere imitations, they were, fundamentally, local responses to developments in the United States and England. This contrast partly reflected the genres' very different positions in commercial networks. While Argentine folk music had been taken up in the 1950s by multinational record companies like Philips, Argentine rock music—or *rock nacional*, as it would tellingly come to be called—was distributed almost entirely by domes-

tic record labels for a domestic audience. Cut off from regional markets, the Argentine rock scene developed in isolation from the rest of Latin America.

This dynamic was definitively reversed in the 1990s, when Argentine musicians joined a movement that was reshaping rock music throughout Latin America. Marketed as *rock en español*, *rock latino*, or Latin Alternative, a host of innovative bands attracted sizeable audiences outside their home countries with music that sounded quite different from the British and North American rock of the day. Although rock attitudes and timbres were still audible in their music, these bands borrowed freely from a broad range of Latin American genres, such as *cumbia*, *vallenato*, *salsa*, *ranchera*, *candombe*, and *chacarera*. Moreover, while many bands blended rock with folk traditions from their own country, the musical mixing went well beyond this model. Rhythms and instruments from a range of Latin American locations suddenly seemed available and attractive to rockers from throughout the region. This new form of rock was a product of capitalism in an era of intense globalization. It was produced and distributed overwhelmingly by the small group of massive, multinational corporations known as the majors, often recorded in the United States, and advertised on MTV Latino, a new cable television network based in Miami. The genre's openness to musical hybridity and its framing as a Latin style partly reflected the global distribution of economic and cultural power. And yet neither the sound of the new rock nor its local reception were determined by the multinationals. Like other popular music genres, the precise form that rock latino took was shaped by a series of choices made by musicians and other key intermediaries as they navigated these global structures.

Although many Latin Americans were involved in the production of rock music during the 1990s, one person has been consistently identified by critics and scholars as “the single most important contemporary figure . . . in Latin/o rock”: the Argentine musician, composer, and producer, Gustavo Santaolalla.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, as the leader of the band Arco Iris, Santaolalla tried to create an authentically Argentine form of rock by incorporating elements drawn from local folk music. In 1978, disenchanted with life under the dictatorship, Santaolalla moved to Los Angeles. There, he was exposed to punk, new-wave, ska, and Chicano rock, and like so many other itinerant Argentine musicians, he confronted North American attitudes and stereotypes about Latin people. Santaolalla's experiences in the United States transformed his musical approach. Although he remained interested in rock music as a vehicle for the expression of identity, he left behind the folkloric concept of authenticity that had motivated his experiments with Arco Iris. He now embraced a broader, Latin American musical identity built from a wide range of commercial genres. Thanks to

this new vision as well as to the music-industry connections he forged in Los Angeles, Santaolalla became the most important and successful producer of rock latino in the 1990s and 2000s, working with many of the most influential bands and artists from Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, and Puerto Rico.

Santaolalla functioned as a key intermediary between the global music industry and the Latin American rock audience. Together with his musical partners and protégés, he created rock music that appealed both to North American critics enamored with world music and to record companies looking for a Latin product. But the new style was also useful to Latin American musicians and fans engaged in projects of self-invention. Within Argentina, rock latino promoted unprecedented identity formations and even contributed to new forms of social protest. Before this period, Argentine rockers had purposefully avoided engagement with other forms of Latin American music. They defined their music in opposition to a series of genres they considered commercial and tacky, including Sandro-style balada as well as the various forms of *música tropical*. The rock latino of the 1990s challenged this division and, in so doing, began to suggest a new way of conceiving Argentine national identity. Working with Santaolalla, the band Bersuit Vergarabat combined angry denunciations of neoliberal economic policies with a revalorization of stigmatized Latin American genres like cumbia. In this way, the rock latino that Santaolalla had helped invent contributed to an ideological transformation that culminated in the massive protest mobilizations of 2001.

### *Arco Iris and the Challenge of Authenticity in Argentine Rock*

Gustavo Santaolalla's youth was shaped by both the folk boom and the arrival of rock and roll. Born in 1951, he grew up in modest, middle-class comfort in Ciudad Jardín, a planned, suburban community in Greater Buenos Aires. His father worked for an advertising agency, gradually rising from the position of delivery boy to that of assistant manager. Santaolalla, like other kids at this time, learned folk music and dance in primary school. At the age of seven he was given a guitar. Although his private teacher quit when he refused to learn to read music (a skill he in fact never perfected), he played by ear, imitating the performers he saw on folk music television programs. By the age of eleven, he had already formed his own folk group. Yet rock and roll would exert a more powerful attraction. Santaolalla's parents avidly followed the latest musical trends in the United States, filling the house with the sounds of Frankie Laine and Dinah Shore. When rock and roll arrived in the late 1950s, they

brought home records by Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, and a bit later, Los Teen Tops, the Mexican band that specialized in Spanish-language covers of rock hits. Alongside the folk programs, Santaolalla regularly watched the *Club del Clan*. When he heard the early Beatles songs “Love Me Do” and “Please, Please Me,” his conversion to rock and roll was definitive.<sup>2</sup>

At first, Santaolalla embraced the lighthearted, unthreatening fun of the Nueva Ola, but like many other Argentines of his generation, he eventually rejected this music in favor of a more rebellious style of rock. His parents originally supported his musical interests, buying him a record player and, in exchange for earning good grades in school, his first electric guitar and amplifier. They even paid for his first recording sessions. More broadly, Santaolalla embraced his parents’ Catholicism, attending church frequently. It was through his participation in a Catholic youth group that he met his future bandmates, Ara Tokatlián and Guillermo Bordarampé. In fact, Santaolalla shared his father’s dream that he might eventually become a priest. However, his growing commitment to the culture of rock soon took on a rebellious tinge. He left the church, grew his hair long, and dedicated himself entirely to music. Although he initially acquiesced to his parents’ insistence that he attend university, he dropped out when a professor told him to cut his hair. He now fought constantly with his parents, and his mother, in particular, became “hysterical” when she saw his long hair.<sup>3</sup>

As Valeria Manzano has demonstrated, the rock scene that Santaolalla joined in the late 1960s was part of a broader “youth culture of contestation” that took shape during the Onganía dictatorship. Following the coup that brought it to power in 1966, the military government sought to prevent the spread of communism by imposing a strict social order based on patriarchal moral values. Many young people resisted this conservatism, drawing on the resources made available by the transnational counterculture, including rock music and the fashions that accompanied it. Like Santaolalla, they risked punishment by growing their hair long.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, they rejected the music of the Nueva Ola, because they heard it as both conformist and inauthentic. For young Argentines who felt oppressed by the social conservatism of the dictatorship and that of their parents, rock music—with its celebration of personal freedom and nonconformism—appeared to offer an antidote.

Yet fans of rock, or “beat” music, as it was more typically called at the time, faced something of a paradox. Their rejection of hypocrisy and conformism led them to embrace music and fashions imported from abroad, but was it possible to create an authentic lifestyle through imitation? The first efforts in this direction came from the group of musicians who hung out at

La Cueva, the club Sandro had helped create. This scene had its first big hit in 1967 when RCA sold some 250,000 copies of “La balsa” (The Raft) by Litto Nebbia’s band Los Gatos. The song featured a catchy melody and the distinctive sound of a Farfisa organ, but what struck a chord with fans were the lyrics, in which the singer declares his disillusionment with the world and his intention to build a raft and *naufregar* (be shipwrecked). In the wake of “La balsa,” the term *naufregar* became a local equivalent for “dropping out,” and a growing group of long-haired *náufragos*, also called “hippies,” began to hang out in city squares.<sup>5</sup> But even after the success of “La balsa,” young rock fans could still sound defensive about their enthusiasm for a foreign genre. One fan at a Los Gatos concert declared, “We are not ‘hippies’ nor do we want to imitate anyone. We only feel happy and at home here. . . . We are authentic.”<sup>6</sup> Another pair of young people, asked to name someone they would like to meet, responded, “The Beatles. No one from Argentina . . . because most Argentines are false with themselves. Too conventional, prejudiced, scared.”<sup>7</sup> Rock music promised these young fans freedom and an escape from hypocrisy, but it was not clear yet how to construct an authentic identity on the basis of foreign music.

For the new rock musicians, the most pressing question was whether to write and sing lyrics in Spanish or in English, which was still the language of “real” rock. The release of “La balsa” wasn’t the only noteworthy musical event of 1967; Sandro’s *Beat latino* album and his megahit, “Quiero llenarme de ti” also appeared in that year. For rockers like Santaolalla, Sandro’s turn to balada, as well as his embrace of a Latin identity, smacked of cheap commercialism; singing rock in English was a way to emphasize their distance from this model. For Santaolalla, who had attended an English primary school and visited San Diego on a student exchange, English came easy. His bands in the mid-1960s all had English names: the Rovers, the Blackbirds, the Crows. Their shows included covers like “Gloria” by Them and Hendrix’s “Hey Joe” alongside the English-language originals that Santaolalla was now writing. In 1967, shortly after “La balsa” had come out, a friend introduced him to Ricardo Kleinman, a radio disc jockey who had begun to act as a talent scout for RCA. Kleinman listened to the three songs that the band had recorded and suggested that they switch to Spanish. Santaolalla refused. Even after the success of Los Gatos, Santaolalla thought of rock music in Spanish as “grasa,” a term meaning “tacky” but also conveying lower-class associations.<sup>8</sup> Santaolalla was not alone; Luis Alberto Spinetta, who was soon to emerge as a leader of the new movement, recalled that he had written songs in both English and Spanish, but that his band, Almendra, still did not play the Spanish ones in public.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the record labels, as well as key intermediaries like Kleinman, continued to push for Spanish-language songs, probably because they saw it as the only way to expand the market for Argentine rock. Eventually, Kleinman converted several bands to his point of view, and then used his radio program, *Modart en la noche*, to build an audience for local rock in Spanish, playing the latest domestic releases alongside current British and North American hits.<sup>10</sup> For his part, Santaolalla was convinced to sing in Spanish when he heard Almendra's "Tema de Pototo," released in 1968 by RCA. A Beatlesque tune with poetic lyrics and a sophisticated arrangement including strings and horns, the song was certainly not "grasa." At the band's next audition—this one for the publicist Fernando Falcón, who worked with Kleinman—Santaolalla was again asked if he had any songs in Spanish, and this time he said yes. Having convinced Santaolalla to make rock music in his native language, Kleinman and Falcón came up with a new Spanish name for the band: Arco Iris, or "Rainbow." The band released its first single in 1969, selling some eight thousand copies in Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela, not nearly enough to be considered a hit but enough to keep RCA interested.<sup>11</sup>

The story of Arco Iris took a decisive turn when Santaolalla met a Ukrainian-born, former model named Danais Winnycka. Dana, as she was known, had traveled in India and was a practitioner of yoga, vegetarianism, and alternative medicines. Santaolalla and his bandmates, who were only seventeen and eighteen years old at the time, fell easily under her sway. Dana's appeal was rooted in the transnational moment. The previous year, the Beatles had traveled to India and made the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi their spiritual advisor; "oriental mysticism" was in style in the rock world. In any case, the band began meeting every day with Dana and eventually moved in with her, living as a spiritual community they referred to as "the Brotherhood." Under her guidance, they read the Bhagavad Gita and refrained from eating meat as well as from alcohol, drugs, and sex. Their days were given over to a strict regimen of yoga, meditation, and of course, music. This asceticism alienated them from the Argentine rock community, which was as committed to sex and drugs—"the circus" local rockers called it—as its North American counterpart. Almost as shocking as their sexual abstinence was their pursuit of good housekeeping. Reporters seemed transfixed by the image of young, long-haired men cooking, cleaning, and ironing for themselves, and one musician denigrated them as "the housewives of rock."<sup>12</sup>

The discipline of the Brotherhood proved conducive to hard work, and Arco Iris soon released an ambitious debut album that drew on elements from blues, rock, and jazz. The song "Quiero llegar" opened with a vamp modeled directly

on the Dave Brubeck Quartet's "Take Five," while "Camino" shifted abruptly from a jazz jam to a slower section based on bossa nova before ending in a driving rock rhythm. Like most progressive or art rock of the era, Arco Iris's music featured lengthy improvisations: Ara Tokatlián contributed flute and saxophone solos, and many songs ended with a long guitar solo by Santaolalla. The band's lyrics combined earnest love poetry with spacey psychedelia: one song was called "Lullabye for the Boy Astronaut." Rock critics celebrated the band's progressive music but doubted it would sell many records: "The music of Arco Iris is among the most difficult produced in Argentina. And, as a result, discographically, they will not have a massive impact."<sup>13</sup> This assessment was prescient; the band's first album sold poorly, and RCA canceled its contract. Arco Iris's subsequent albums would all be released by the domestic record label, Music Hall.

This pattern was typical: after their initial efforts with bands like Los Gatos and Almendra, the major labels backed away from Argentine rock music, focusing instead on Latin pop stars like Sandro and folk artists like Mercedes Sosa. As discussed in chapter 4, multinational record companies were, by this point, aggressively pursuing local products that could be marketed not just domestically but throughout Latin America. Both Sandro and Sosa had this sort of appeal because they each offered a type of music that could be packaged as distinctively Latin American. By contrast, Argentine rock musicians played what was understood to be a Spanish-language version of a foreign genre. Rightly or wrongly, the major labels assumed that Latin American rock fans would rather buy records by North American or British bands than by rock groups from elsewhere in the region. For the next decade, Argentine rock bands recorded primarily for domestic labels like Music Hall, Microfón, and Mandioca.<sup>14</sup> These labels likely provided musicians with more artistic freedom than the majors would have, but they lacked the capacity for international promotion. Cut off from transnational circuits, bands like Arco Iris produced music almost exclusively for the domestic market.

With the backing of Music Hall, Santaolalla hoped to make music that sounded just as good as the English-language rock he loved but that was also authentically Argentine. Toward this end, he turned to his nation's folk traditions.<sup>15</sup> On its first Music Hall album, *Tiempo de resurrección* (1972), Arco Iris incorporated Argentine folk music in two different ways. First, the band played some songs in rhythms drawn directly from Andean folklore. For example, the song "Vasudeva" set imagery drawn from Hermann Hesse's Buddhist novel, *Siddhartha*, to the huayno rhythm. Second, the band used Andean instruments in songs that had nothing else to do with folk music: Santaolalla occasionally



played charango and Ara Tokatlián played the indigenous flute known as the pinkillo.

However, it was a third, quite different type of folk rock that captured the attention of most Argentine rock fans. “Mañana campestre” (Country Morning), which would become by far the biggest hit of the band’s career, was a straightforward example of North American style folk rock with no discernible elements drawn from Argentine traditions. Accompanying himself on acoustic guitar, Santaolalla sang of enjoying the peaceful beauty of nature with his romantic partner. “Mañana campestre” owed its success to the fact that it much more easily fit the dominant Argentine rock aesthetic, based as it was on English-language models. For Argentine fans, it was “Mañana campestre” and not the band’s Andean fusions that sounded like “real” rock.

Nevertheless, Arco Iris continued to experiment with Argentine folk music on the album *Sudamérica (o el regreso a la aurora)* (1972) and its successor, *Inti Raymi* (1973). The first of these was an ambitious rock opera that told the story of Nahuel, the heir to an indigenous empire who embarks on a spiritual journey that enables him to revitalize the great civilization of his people. Released the same year as Mercedes Sosa’s *Cantata Sudamericana* and one year before Gato Barbieri’s *Chapter One*, the album had a great deal in common with these Latin Americanist projects. Like those other records, *Sudamérica* used Andean instruments, folk rhythms from throughout the continent, and a celebration of pre-Columbian civilization in order to depict a proud and unified South American culture. Described by one critic as “Indo-pop,” the music included moments of zamba, chacarera, *cueca*, *vidala*, *baguala*, huayno, *malambo*, *vals peruano*, and even Afro-Cuban rhythms alongside blues and rock.<sup>16</sup> Santaolalla’s lyrics celebrated the Inca past even as they predicted a glorious future of peace: “Perhaps the new Incas / Perhaps the new light / The promised hour / Will soon begin. / South America.”

The framing of Arco Iris’s new music as South American—rather than Argentine—reflected both local and transnational influences. Santaolalla’s musical vision was shaped by his interactions with Argentine folklorist Leda Valladares, whose experience playing folk music for Europeans had led her to dedicate her life to studying and collecting the work of unknown, amateur folk musicians in the Andean Northwest. After many conversations with Valladares, Santaolalla travelled to the small town of Casabindo, Jujuy, in order to experience indigenous culture directly.<sup>17</sup> This focus on the indigenous Andes led to an interest in the Inca Empire and, thus, helped Santaolalla formulate an identity that exceeded Argentina’s national boundaries. But even as he delved



FIGURE 6.1 • Arco Iris. From left to right: Guillermo Bordarampé, Ara Tokatlián, Gustavo Santaolalla, Horacio Gianello. *La Bella Gente* (January 1973), 8.

deeply into Andean folk music, Santaolalla was also still following musical developments in the United States. He was particularly impressed with the jazz fusion band Weather Report, which visited Argentina around this time. Commenting on that band's use of percussion and sounds drawn from nature, he noted that "Latin America is very exuberant in this sense, it has all the force of the primitive, something that the United States and England do not have. That is why Weather Report has a Brazilian percussionist, Dom Um Romão."<sup>18</sup> Santaolalla's folk explorations, like those of Barbieri and Sosa, participated in the same exoticizing, primitivist impulse that attracted North American and European musicians to Latin America. Like theirs, his approach was a product of both the stereotyping gaze of the North and the progressive Latin Americanism of the South.

Although its long hair and commitment to rock music clearly aligned Arco Iris with the counterculture, the band's political message was ambiguous. Critics in the middle-class press celebrated the group for its artistic ambition, impressive work habits, and apolitical orientation as well as for the good behavior of its fans.<sup>19</sup> Arco Iris was one of the few major bands not to perform at the rock concert held to celebrate the Peronist electoral victory in March 1973. As Santaolalla explained, "Our music is clean, it has no political undertones. The important things are peace and internal transformation."<sup>20</sup> Santaolalla even

bragged that the band had received a complimentary note from the U.S. embassy's cultural attaché.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, some elements within the revolutionary left responded enthusiastically to Arco Iris's folk-rock fusion. *Noticias*, a newspaper linked to the Montoneros, gave *Inti-Raymi* a rave review. Noting that Arco Iris was following a path opened by Gato Barbieri, the paper's reviewer praised the anti-imperialist implication of its approach: "It is not possible to achieve authentic expression through the imitation of foreign styles."<sup>22</sup>

However, for many rock critics, it was Arco Iris's folk-rock fusion that sounded inauthentic. In the late 1960s, a battle had raged between partisans of Almendra on the one hand and the blues-rock band Manal on the other. Manal's supporters disparaged Almendra as "soft" music for middle-class kids and insisted that their rougher, allegedly working-class, blues aesthetic represented "real" rock.<sup>23</sup> In this context, playing acoustic instruments, as Arco Iris usually did during the opening sets of its concerts, could be controversial. By actively incorporating folk rhythms, the band ended up alienating the critics who policed rock's generic borders. The rock magazine *Pelo*, initially a strong supporter of Arco Iris, seemed to turn against the group once it embarked on its folk experiments. Arguing that they were now "limited" by folk music, the magazine's writers did not hide their disdain: "The music lacked nuances, and the lyrics were based on the well-worn [reiteradas] metaphors used by official folk music."<sup>24</sup> The magazine's antipathy deepened when Arco Iris began displaying an Argentine flag during its live performances of "Hombre," one of the centerpieces of *Sudamérica*. Santaolalla argued that waving the flag was part of the band's effort "to exalt South American social and cultural values," an important objective at a time when too many musicians were "obsessed [with] reading foreign magazines, looking passionately at what foreign bands are doing."<sup>25</sup> But in the aftermath of a right-wing dictatorship that had tried to inculcate a conformist patriotism, the flag was a problematic symbol.

Santaolalla's comments regarding the flag controversy reveal that the turn to folk music was his way of responding to the central challenge of rock in Latin America: how to build an authentic identity on the basis of an imported musical form. Even though he was a connoisseur of rock music from the English-speaking world—he acknowledged, for example, that Arco Iris's acoustic performances reflected the influence of folk-rock bands like Crosby, Stills and Nash<sup>26</sup>—he believed that by incorporating rhythms and instruments from the Andes, Arco Iris had moved beyond mere imitation. In essence, Santaolalla had tried to introduce a new concept of authenticity to Argentine rock. The dominant rock discourse defined authenticity as the opposite of commercialism; rock bands were authentic to the extent that they resisted selling out and

made “progressive” music that expressed the values of the rock community.<sup>27</sup> During Arco Iris’s RCA phase, *Pelo* declared it “the most authentic [band] in Argentine popular music” precisely because its music was difficult and ambitious.<sup>28</sup> To this notion of authenticity, Santaolalla added a different one, rooted in the romantic nationalism that undergirded the work of folklorists like Leda Valladares. According to this concept, Arco Iris’s music was authentic because its use of indigenous elements expressed something essential about Argentine or South American identity.<sup>29</sup> For many critics, though, this sort of nationalism smacked of less progressive, “official” forms of music. In any case, Arco Iris’s folk rock fusion remained a minority taste. The band enjoyed a loyal following, but it never approached the massive popularity of groups like Sui Generis, the duo formed by Charly García and Nito Mestre.

Arco Iris moved away from folk music with its last album, *Agitor Lucens V* (1974), a concept album that explored the topic of extraterrestrial life. Although folk rhythms could still be discerned in the music, the group abandoned acoustic instruments in favor of a heavier sound modeled on the jazz fusion of John McLaughlin’s Mahavishnu Orchestra. With its odd meters inspired by Chick Corea and Don Ellis, the album was avant-garde art rock, and it managed to reconquer the critics of *Pelo*, who declared that “rarely has a group had such a great capacity for change: without leaving aside the telluric roots they have achieved a much more consistent product.”<sup>30</sup> But even though the album won over the critics, it did not attract a mass audience.

Having tired of the intense discipline of the Brotherhood, Santaolalla left Arco Iris in 1975. His new band, Soluna, represented a move away from the long-form, conceptual work he had done in *Sudamérica* and *Agitor*. Instead, he now wrote a series of more accessible rock songs featuring rich vocal harmonies. In his desire to distance himself from the experience of the previous six years, Santaolalla had abandoned the folk fusion project, at least for the time being. As he told one interviewer, “Now I would like to do all the rock songs that I could not do before.”<sup>31</sup> Soluna made an auspicious debut at the Luna Park in Buenos Aires, went on a successful tour through the Argentine interior, and recorded an album, *Energía natural*, in 1977. Yet despite favorable reviews, the record made very little impression in the market. For Santaolalla, this disappointment fueled a growing desire to leave the country. The dictatorship that had taken power in 1976 made life quite difficult for long-haired rockers. In later interviews, he mentioned the difficulty of finding places to play and even noted that he had been imprisoned several times.<sup>32</sup> In 1978, one year before Mercedes Sosa left for Europe, Santaolalla moved to Los Angeles.

On the eve of his departure for the United States, Santaolalla had big plans. He believed that the move would allow him to grow musically, and he intended to build a binational career modeled on that of Brazilian stars, Milton Nascimento and Egberto Gismonti. Describing how he hoped to sell records in the United States, he pointed to the Uruguayan brothers Hugo and George Fattorusso, whose jazz fusion band, Opa, was enjoying modest success in the North. Santaolalla argued that his new material shared a certain sensibility with Opa's music: "The idea of making music that has the musical level and swing necessary for the market over there, but at the same time reflects all the rhythmic richness of Latin American music." He hoped to connect with other Latin American musicians engaged in this project, including the Fattorussoes as well as the Uruguayan percussionist Rubén Rada and the Brazilian musical couple Aírto Moreira and Flora Purim. Citing Joni Mitchell's recent interest in Latin American music—her 1977 album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* included a Brazilian surdo played by Aírto, as well as bongos, congas and claves—Santaolalla declared, "I think the next important thing is going to come from Latin America."<sup>33</sup> Santaolalla was also well aware of Gato Barbieri, who had done as much as anyone else to promote the notion that "Latin music" had something vital and appealing to offer contemporary North American popular music. In his rock opera *Sudamérica*, Santaolalla had already conceptualized his musical identity as South or Latin American rather than merely Argentine. He now hoped that this identity would help him break into the U.S. market.

There were two problems with Santaolalla's plan to cater to the North American demand for Latin rhythm. First, his experiments thus far had been primarily with Andean rhythms like zamba and huayno, not the Afro-Cuban rhythms that listeners and musicians in the United States heard as Latin. Second, it was not clear that rock had much room for rhythmic diversity. It was no coincidence that most of the Latin American musicians whom Santaolalla listed as models specialized not in rock, but in jazz fusion. Thanks to the efforts of musicians like Barbieri and Aírto and the interest of groups like Weather Report and Return to Forever, a significant space had opened within this subgenre for the inclusion of musical elements understood as Latin. Santaolalla's reference to Latin America's "rhythmic richness" reveals that he shared the same basic understanding of what Latin America had to offer as the jazz fusion crowd, not surprising given his long-standing interest in the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Weather Report, and Chick Corea. But whereas jazz had opened up to Latin American rhythmic influences, North American rock music re-

mained rhythmically constrained. The one significant exception was the Latin rock championed by the bands Santana and Malo, but here again Latin meant Afro-Cuban rhythm and percussion. Santaolalla could have decided to follow the lead of the Fattorusso brothers, who began as rock musicians before transitioning to jazz fusion. But if he was going to remain a rock musician, he would need to find a new path.

Santaolalla's plans failed to bear fruit in the United States, and this initial disappointment pushed him to experiment with new approaches. Although his demo seemed to impress the executives at Warner-Elektra-Atlantic (WEA), he was told that he would have to wait for a contract. Meanwhile, he found himself bored by the bands who then dominated the rock charts—Boston, Kansas, Journey, Jefferson Starship—bands he suspected were created by major media corporations interested only in record sales. Instead, Santaolalla began to listen to new forms of rock music being played by lesser known bands in the Los Angeles clubs. Impressed by the punk, postpunk, and new wave music he heard, he shaved his beard and cut his hair “in order to be part of that movement.” With the right-wing dictatorship in power in Argentina, long hair still signified rebellion. But in the United States, that look amounted to living in the past, and Santaolalla wanted to be on the cutting edge. Together with Aníbal Kerpel, a fellow Argentine exile who had played keyboards for the prog-rock group Crucis, he placed ads for a bass player and drummer. The resulting band, named Wet Picnic, would play new wave music aimed at the North American market with lyrics in English. For the time being, he put aside his plan to bring Latin American rhythms to the United States.<sup>34</sup>

After several months of aggressively marketing itself, Wet Picnic gained a foothold in the major Los Angeles rock clubs: Madame Wong's, the Whiskey a Go Go, Blackie's, and others.<sup>35</sup> Santaolalla, who composed most of the band's music, listed as influences both local new wave bands like The Motels, and bigger acts like The Police, the British band that was just then on the cusp of international superstardom.<sup>36</sup> In late 1981, Wet Picnic released *Balls Up*, an EP, on Unicorn Records, a short-lived subsidiary of MCA. As the record reveals, Santaolalla's musical transformation had been every bit as dramatic as the change in his appearance. Gone were all the elements of his earlier style, rooted in the rock aesthetics of the 1960s: the psychedelic lyrics, the lengthy jams, and bluesy electric guitar of Arco Iris, the finger-picking and vocal harmonies of Soluna. Thanks to Wet Picnic's broad range of tempos—from slow ballads to songs that moved at near-hardcore speed—and to Santaolalla's accented English and dramatic vocal style, the album sounded like “an idiosyncratic brew” to critics.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the band's heavy reliance on synthesizers and on

FIGURE 6.2 •  
Santaolalla's new  
look. *Expreso*  
*Imaginario* 64  
(November 1981), 8.



clean-toned, staccato electric guitar identified it clearly as new wave. The up-tempo “Are You in Touch?” featured reggaelike syncopations that may have reflected the influence of The Police, but most of the album featured straighter rhythms. Although one reviewer claimed to hear “subtle Latin flavoring (care of singer Gus Santaolalla’s South American heritage),” this was a testament to the tendency of North Americans to hear any music played by a Latin American as Latin.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Wet Picnic’s music had none of the South American folk elements that Santaolalla had experimented with in earlier years. Singing in English for the U.S. market, he no longer felt the need to establish his Argentine authenticity.

Santaolalla’s decision to move to Los Angeles rather than Miami or New York, the other likely destinations for a Latin American musician in exile, had already begun to shape his career in ways that he could not have imagined. New York, with its large Puerto Rican and Dominican communities, was the historic home of salsa and, increasingly, merengue. But this Latin dance music was

totally disconnected from the thriving punk and new wave scene centered at the downtown club, CBGB. This gulf reflected a historic pattern: Puerto Ricans in New York had for years mostly shunned guitar-based rock as the music of the colonizer.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, by 1980, the major labels had moved their Latin American headquarters to Miami, where they sought to produce music that could unify the Spanish-language market. Toward that end, the city's recording studios produced a steady stream of homogenous Latin Pop aimed both at audiences throughout Latin America and at Latinos in the United States. The formula, devised by the Cuban-American band, Miami Sound Machine, combined vaguely Latin dance numbers with romantic tunes in the balada tradition.<sup>40</sup> As a Latin American musician, it would have been difficult for Santaolalla to participate in the cutting edge rock scene in New York or to escape the Latin Pop formula in Miami.

In Los Angeles, where Caribbean influences were overshadowed by the musical traditions of Mexico and of the historic Chicano community, the borders between Anglo and Latino popular music were more porous. Unlike East Coast Puerto Ricans, Chicanos in Los Angeles had been playing and listening to rock since the 1950s. With a few exceptions, such as Ritchie Valens's "La bamba," Chicano rock was sung in English and was often indistinguishable from its Anglo counterpart.<sup>41</sup> In the late 1970s, Los Angeles had a thriving punk and new wave scene, featuring bands like The Germs, X, and the Go-Go's. And just as they had with earlier subgenres of rock, Chicanos embraced the new music. Although they often found it difficult to break into the Hollywood clubs where Anglo punk bands played, Chicano bands like Los Illegals, The Brat, The Zeros, and The Bags played their own English-language punk music in East Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, in other words, Wet Picnic—a band led by Latin Americans playing a North American form of contemporary rock music in English—was hardly anomalous. More important, the historic engagement of Chicanos with rock music meant that Los Angeles, despite its deep racial, class, and ethnic divisions, offered rich opportunities for musical border-hopping. For example, at the very moment that Santaolalla arrived, the soon-to-be-famous Los Lobos was forging its hybrid style in the Los Angeles clubs, spicing its retro rock with Tex-Mex accordion.<sup>42</sup>

Santaolalla's encounters with the Chicano punk scene in Los Angeles reawakened his interest in Latin American music. One of the bands that had impressed him on his tours through the clubs was a punk trio called The Plugz, led by Tito Larriva, a Mexican American who grew up in El Paso.<sup>43</sup> With the exception of a hardcore version of "La Bamba," The Plugz sang in English and sounded quite similar to other punk bands of the moment.<sup>44</sup> By 1981, though,



the band was evolving, playing in slower tempos and incorporating a rhythm-and-blues style horn section. Santaolalla and Kerpel joined The Plugz in the studio for the recording of the band's second album, *Better Luck*, which Santaolalla also coproduced. In addition to bass and second guitar, Santaolalla played charango on a number of tracks, giving the band a distinctive sound and suggesting that he envisioned The Plugz as an opportunity to experiment with Latin American elements. While much of the album sounded like a bluesy punk hybrid, it also revealed the influence of multicultural Los Angeles. The ska tune "Touch for Cash" reflected The Plugz' experience performing alongside ska bands at venues like O.N. Klub.<sup>45</sup>

The one Spanish-language track on *Better Luck*, "El clavo y la cruz," would prove particularly important for Santaolalla's musical development.<sup>46</sup> On the recording, which paired high-speed punk with the Mexican *norteño* rhythm, Santaolalla played the part of a Mexican *charro*, flavoring the song with traditional *mariachi* shouts. On one level, "El clavo y la cruz" represented a return to the musical project of Arco Iris, namely the effort to blend rock with other musical elements in order to express a Latin American identity. But the song offered a new twist on that project. Santaolalla learned to imitate mariachi musicians as a child growing up in Argentina, where Mexican films were frequently shown on television.<sup>47</sup> Yet as an Argentine rocker, it never occurred to him to incorporate Mexican elements, because his musical identity was rooted in a folkloric concept of authenticity. Following the lead of Valladares and others, he sought out his own roots in the untainted folk culture of isolated, indigenous communities in Argentina. Thinking of himself as Latin American meant connecting to South America by way of the indigenous cultures of the Andes. But living in the United States had expanded his understanding of his own Latin American identity both geographically and conceptually. Years later, he reminisced about how moving to Los Angeles had affected his musical development: "It was . . . what ended up bringing me to who I am and where I am today. And it's that connection between Latin America and the United States. . . . Remember that Los Angeles is the second city with the biggest Mexican population after [Mexico City]."<sup>48</sup> Los Angeles shifted Santaolalla's frame of reference, encouraging him to look toward Mexico and not just to indigenous folk traditions, but also to the music of contemporary urbanites and migrants.

Santaolalla had also arrived at a propitious moment. As late as the 1960s, Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and Puerto Ricans—the three main Latino communities in the United States—saw themselves as distinct groups with very little in common. As the sociologist G. Cristina Mora has recently

demonstrated, the intertwined efforts of government bureaucrats, Latino activists, and the Spanish-language media diffused and institutionalized the idea of “Hispanic panethnicity” during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>49</sup> Santaolalla arrived in the United States just as these links were being forged; for the first time, communities of Latin American descent in the United States were embracing a common Latino or Hispanic identity. This context helps explain why Santaolalla now saw Chicano rock, mariachi music, as well as the Mexican films of his youth as expressions of his own Latin American identity.

For the time being, Santaolalla had few opportunities to pursue the musical direction suggested by his work with The Plugz. Instead, he began to regain visibility in Argentina as a sort of apostle for the modernization of rock nacional. The musical and technical expertise he had developed in the clubs and recording studios of Los Angeles made him an attractive collaborator for Argentine musicians seeking to make their sound more up to date. In one of the earliest examples of the transnational production of Argentine rock music, Santaolalla helped León Gieco record three songs in a Los Angeles studio in October 1980. The two had met around 1972, when the young Gieco showed up at the communal home of Arco Iris in order to take guitar lessons from Santaolalla, who was just then becoming famous thanks to the success of “Mañana campestre.” Santaolalla played him records by Joan Baez and Crosby, Stills and Nash, and convinced him not to record with RCA, which had plans to transform Gieco into a more commercial pop star.<sup>50</sup> In 1973, Santaolalla produced Gieco’s eponymous debut album, and over the next few years, Gieco emerged as a major figure, the “Argentine Bob Dylan.” Producing and performing on Gieco’s new album in 1980, called *Pensar en nada*, Santaolalla pushed his old friend in a new direction, helping to turn this 1970s-style folkie into a 1980s rocker.<sup>51</sup>

Within the Argentine rock milieu, Santaolalla now represented the promise and pitfalls of North American influence. Charly García, perhaps Argentina’s most established rock star, made fun of what he saw as new wave faddishness in “Mientras miro las nuevas olas,” a song he recorded with his band Seru Giran in 1980. Comparing new wave music to the Nueva Ola of the 1960s, García concluded, “As I watch the new waves, I am already part of the sea.” In interviews with the porteño press, Santaolalla made it clear that he felt García was talking about him. He criticized the “stagnation” of the Argentine rock scene and made his irritation with García clear: “I am still watching the new waves. I am still not part of the sea. The day I’m part of the sea, I’ll be dead.”<sup>52</sup>

In late 1981, Santaolalla returned to Buenos Aires to record a Spanish-language solo album aimed at the local market. For his new album, he avoided the idiosyncratic mannerisms of Wet Picnic and offered an up-to-date style

of rock that he hoped might appeal to Argentine listeners. Santaolalla used a clean guitar sound, adding solos and fills that seemed inspired by guitarist Mark Knopfler of the popular British band Dire Straits. The influence of The Police could be heard in the reggae rhythms that appeared throughout, and the album even included a reggae version of the Arco Iris song “Vasudeva.”<sup>53</sup> The album’s hit, though, was “Ando rodando” (I’m travelling around) a straight, mid-tempo rocker in which Santaolalla alluded to his current geographical and musical quests. In April 1982, when war with England erupted following the Argentine invasion of the Malvinas (or Falkland) Islands, the military government banned the broadcasting of music in English. This measure was a major boon to Argentine rock in general and, in particular, to “Ando rodando,” which suddenly became one of the most popular songs on the radio.<sup>54</sup>

The Malvinas War and the democratic transition that followed led to a renaissance in Argentine rock that effectively ended the music’s isolation from foreign markets. A key element in this process was the sonic modernization that Santaolalla had helped provoke. In 1983, Charly García put aside his resistance to the new trends, releasing *Clics Modernos*, an extremely influential album recorded in New York with a modern, electronic sound. The band that he used to present the album in concert included bassist Alfredo Toth and drummer Willy Iturri, the rhythm section that had played on Santaolalla’s solo album the previous year. *Clics Modernos*, in turn, helped ignite a boom in Argentine “pop-rock,” featuring danceable rhythms, synthesizers, and often, drum machines, a style that quickly attracted the interest of the multinational record companies. During the 1970s, the major labels had focused their Latin American sales efforts on balada, folk, and English-language rock, seeing little export potential for Argentine rock. But the cosmopolitan hipness of the new pop-rock changed their calculations. Bands like Virus, Soda Stereo, ZAS, and Enanitos Verdes were signed by the multinationals and toured Latin America in order to build a fan base. The results were astonishing. ZAS sold a million copies of its album *Rockas vivas* throughout Latin America. By 1988, Soda Stereo was the number one international artist on the roster of CBS Argentina, an unprecedented status for a rock act. As Soda’s manager Alberto Ohanian argued, these efforts returned Argentina to its earlier status as a major exporter of pop music to the rest of Latin America: “What we did with Soda Stereo was to recover a market that Sandro, Leo Dan or Palito Ortega dominated in the 1960s and that had been abandoned.”<sup>55</sup> Santaolalla got into the act as well, producing the second and third albums of G.I.T., a band formed by the rhythm section of Toth and Iturri alongside guitarist Pablo Guyot. Santaolalla used the technical knowledge he had amassed in the United States to give the band a

contemporary, Top 40 sound that brought it substantial commercial success throughout the region.<sup>56</sup>

Neither Santaolalla's solo album nor the new Argentine rock that he had helped inspire contained any traces of the approach he had pursued with The Plugz. Most of the new acts were uninterested in incorporating elements from Latin American musical genres.<sup>57</sup> However, in 1984, following the breakup of Wet Picnic, Santaolalla did get the opportunity to revisit Argentine folk music when his old friend León Gieco invited him to participate in an ambitious project.<sup>58</sup> Gieco was disappointed with the new direction of Argentine rock, which he heard as a pale imitation of North American trends: "I think that they are repeating the model of Sandro, Palito Ortega, and Los Teen Tops, [who] limited themselves to translating lyrics or copying foreign models. Like a cowboy movie dubbed into Spanish."<sup>59</sup> By contrast, he was inspired by the folk musicians he had encountered on a recent tour of the Argentine interior, and he now invited a group to Buenos Aires to record with him, including the violinist Sixto Palavecino from Santiago del Estero. Worried about the commercial prospects of the project, the president of Music Hall, Gieco's record label, suggested that he invite Santaolalla to help out. Santaolalla immediately embraced the project, but he argued that bringing folk musicians to Buenos Aires was "inorganic" and that the musicians would be uncomfortable. A better approach "would be to go where the music originated, with the people who are the creators of that music, and record them there."<sup>60</sup> The label agreed to finance the project, and Santaolalla and Gieco spent more than six months traveling the country with mobile recording equipment. The result was a three-volume collection named *De Ushuaia a La Quiaca*, after the southernmost and northernmost towns in Argentina.<sup>61</sup> The first volume, released in 1985, included songs composed by Gieco and recorded in a studio, but the other two, released as a double album in 1986, were recorded on location and featured collaborations with local folk musicians singing either their own material or anonymous folk songs.<sup>62</sup>

For Santaolalla, *De Ushuaia a La Quiaca* represented a return to the folkloric concept of authenticity, according to which the essence of the nation could be found in the cultural practices of its isolated, rural communities. For much of their travels, Santaolalla and Gieco were accompanied by the folklorist Leda Valladares, with whom Santaolalla had studied in his Arco Iris days. Serving as a guide to the anonymous, "deep" folk culture of the Northwest, she helped identify local collaborators and participated in many of the recordings.<sup>63</sup> But as Santaolalla later recalled, his renewed interest in folk music also reflected his exposure to world music during his time in the United States.<sup>64</sup> Though *De Ushuaia a La Quiaca* preceded the world music boom sparked by the release

of Paul Simon's *Graceland* in 1986, it is likely that Santaolalla was aware of projects like Brian Eno's and David Byrne's experiments with Afrobeat and Peter Gabriel's WOMAD festival, which brought together rock and pop musicians with acts from throughout the developing world. Elsewhere, Santaolalla explained that it was the anticorporate ethos of punk, its pursuit of musical innocence, that inspired him to look for "pure music" in the form of noncommercial folk.<sup>65</sup> In any case, the project's ethnographic impulse hearkened back to the approach he had taken in the 1970s, when he turned to Argentine folk music as a source of authenticity.

Nevertheless, the new conceptual approach that Santaolalla had developed during his time in Los Angeles was apparent in the project as well, particularly in the decision to include at least one local genre that was not typically seen as folkloric: *cuarteto* music from Córdoba. A music with a primarily local, working-class following, *cuarteto* developed in the 1940s, when quartets of accordion, piano, bass, and violin began to play the European dance repertoire with an up-tempo, oompah beat they called *tunga-tunga*.<sup>66</sup> As Santaolalla pointed out, within the rock intelligentsia "*cuarteto* music was totally devalued, considered a garbage music [*una música de porquería*], basically," and Gieco was surprised when his friend suggested they include it.<sup>67</sup> Santaolalla's interest in *cuarteto* suggests that his interaction with Chicano musicians had expanded his understanding of what constituted "folk music." It was not limited to the indigenous traditions of the Andes; any local, popular music—no matter how commercial—could count. Moreover, as he played with the legendary *Cuarteto Leo*, Santaolalla made an important musical discovery:

All of a sudden that polka-type energy started to mutate into a sort of ska. And they got into the energy that we were putting into it, for example with me playing the electric guitar because that was an instrument they didn't have. Then all of a sudden there was the electric guitar playing *upstrokes* . . . and the guys just died. And I loved it, because ska music fascinates me and polka also has that, which in the United States they call *oompah music*.<sup>68</sup>

Santaolalla connected rock to *cuarteto* via the Jamaican ska rhythm that he had learned in Los Angeles. It was a method he would return to in the future.

### *The Guru of Rock Latino*

During his first decade in Los Angeles, Santaolalla had thoroughly transformed himself. He had traded in the musical and sartorial trappings of a hippy for those of a new wave artist. He had immersed himself in chicano punk and

ska, while learning his way around a first-world recording studio. Although he maintained his earlier interest in mixing rock with Latin American genres in order to express his musical identity, both his understanding of that identity and his taste in musical genres had expanded decisively. But Santaolalla had yet to find another opportunity to make thoroughly modern yet distinctively Latin American rock music, as he had, briefly, with The Plugz. His next chance to do so would come not from Argentina, but from Mexico.

Like their Argentine counterparts, Mexican young people had embraced rock music in the 1960s and 1970s, using it to forge a counterculture to resist the conservative, patriarchal values of their parents and their government. Yet Mexico's one-party, authoritarian government repressed rock in the 1970s more effectively than the Argentine dictatorships. Following the controversial Avándaro rock festival in 1971, rock music was pushed underground, limited to semiclandestine, improvised performance spaces known as *hoyos fonquis*.<sup>69</sup> In the 1980s, Mexican rock experienced a reawakening. This revival had multiple components: working-class *chavos banda* inspired by punk music, middle- and upper-class bands imitating the latest new wave groups from the United States, new radio programs and nightclubs, as well as the movements of civic activism that emerged in Mexico City in response to the earthquake of 1985 and provided new venues for underground rock bands.<sup>70</sup>

Another key aspect of the Mexican rock revival was the influx of rock from Argentina. The new Argentine bands were particularly successful in Mexico, where their only real competition came from Spanish rock groups, then experiencing a boom of their own. Mexico accounted for fully one-third of Soda Stereo's Latin American sales.<sup>71</sup> In 1987, BMG Mexico released a series of albums by Mexican, Spanish, and Argentine acts and promoted them under the collective title "Rock en tu Idioma." Impressed by the sales figures, the multinationals began to sign Mexican rock bands. The labels needed experts to help them select bands and mold them into acts that would sell throughout the region, and they naturally turned to Argentine rock producers with proven track records. Chief among them was Oscar López, then producing Miguel Mateos, an Argentine star who had left ZAS to embark on a successful solo career.<sup>72</sup> As a result of this influence, most of the Mexican bands signed to major labels in the 1980s followed the Argentine formula: they were pop-rock bands that emulated the sounds of contemporary hits from the United Kingdom and the United States.

Gradually, a number of bands began to challenge this model by making distinctively Mexican rock.<sup>73</sup> This phenomenon gained traction in 1989, when the band Caifanes released the single "La Negra Tomasa," a Cuban *guaracha*

repurposed as a cumbia. Caifanes was a postpunk group who modeled their look and sound on the British gothic rock band The Cure. Signed to BMG by López, the band had enjoyed moderate sales of its first album. As a sort of joke, Caifanes had taken to opening its concerts with “La Negra Tomasa,” a song whose dance rhythm and lighthearted lyrics contrasted sharply with the band’s typical material. The members of Caifanes had grown up in a working-class neighborhood of Mexico City, where cumbia had long been popular dance music, and “La Negra Tomasa” was a classic. The recorded version, which actually sounded, improbably, like The Cure playing a cumbia, was a massive hit.<sup>74</sup> It proved not only that Mexican audiences craved rock in Spanish, but also that they would respond to rock music that incorporated elements from local culture.

Gustavo Santaolalla was well positioned to take advantage of this incipient trend. He had connections with Argentine rock producers like Oscar López, who had produced Santaolalla’s solo album in 1982, and who now introduced him to many of the bands in the emerging Mexican scene.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, he was based in Los Angeles and together with Aníbal Kerpel, with whom he would continue to collaborate, he had developed expertise in cutting edge recording techniques. But Mexican bands responded above all to Santaolalla’s musical interests. Unlike López, who simply promised to give bands “the American pop edge,” Santaolalla was aesthetically ambitious; he was looking for ways to blend rock with Latin American elements.<sup>76</sup> He got his chance to do so when he signed on to produce the first album by the band Maldita Vecindad y Los Hijos del Quinto Patio. With a name that evoked their working-class backgrounds—*vecindades* are converted colonial structures which serve as inexpensive housing in Mexico City, and the *quinto patio* represents the cheapest, most marginal space within the *vecindad*—the group emerged in the wake of the 1985 earthquake. Encouraged by Santaolalla to experiment in order “to find the Mexican rock sound, to invent that sound,” Maldita Vecindad developed an innovative musical style that incorporated a diverse mix of genres from Latin America and beyond.<sup>77</sup>

Maldita Vecindad created a highly influential template for the new rock latino, or *rock mestizo* as it was sometimes called. The band’s second album, *El Circo*, also produced by Santaolalla, became a massive hit, selling 200,000 units within a year of its release.<sup>78</sup> Both in its lyrics and its performance attire, the band evoked Mexican popular culture of the 1940s and 1950s, particularly the figure of the *pachuco*, a countercultural icon of “lower-class hypermasculinity” that first appeared among Chicanos in 1940s Los Angeles and was popularized in Mexico by the film actor German Valdés, known as Tin Tan.<sup>79</sup> By celebrating

pachucos, whom Mexican intellectuals had condemned for turning their back on the culture of the homeland, Maldita Vecindad built a bridge to the Chicano community in the United States.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, the song “Pachuco” drew an implicit connection between pachucos and the punks of the present day: “Hey dad, you were a pachuco / you were also scolded. / Hey dad you danced mambo / you have to remember.” Like Colombian cumbia and other Caribbean dance genres, the Cuban mambo had a long history in Mexico. Mambo pioneer Dámaso Pérez Prado first achieved stardom in Mexico City in 1949, leading a big band that featured the legendary Cuban singer Benny Moré.<sup>81</sup> Thus, even if it did not quite qualify as Mexican folk music, Cuban dance music represented an historic piece of Mexican popular culture. And since it had long been pushed off Mexican radios by baladas and other forms of Latin pop, the mambo was now available for reappropriation by young musicians looking to Mexicanize rock.<sup>82</sup>

Maldita Vecindad incorporated mambo alongside Mexican ranchera and son veracruzano as well as punk, Algerian *rai*, and the Afrobeat of Fela Kuti, but the master rhythm that made this fusion possible was ska. A precursor of reggae, ska first emerged in Jamaica in the late 1950s when record producers and musicians adapted North American rhythm and blues by introducing staccato guitar and horn parts that heavily accented the “offbeats,” the “ands” in “one-and-two-and-three-and four.” In 1979, a full-fledged ska revival emerged in the industrial British cities of Birmingham and Coventry. Known as Two Tone after the record label that disseminated the music, the revival featured biracial bands that blended the ska rhythm with the fast tempos and attitude of punk. Bands like The Specials, The Beat, The Selecter, and Madness emphasized fun, even as they disseminated an ideal of racial harmony, symbolized by an iconography that featured a black-and-white checkerboard pattern. The heyday of the Two Tone movement lasted only until around 1983, but it had a major impact across the Atlantic.<sup>83</sup>

In Mexico, the members of Maldita Vecindad came to ska by way of The Clash, the British punk band that had experimented extensively with Jamaican genres. Maldita Vecindad, who had been politicized by frustration with the government’s response to the earthquake, responded to the leftist message of The Clash. But in ska, they heard connections to the Latin American dance music their parents had enjoyed. As Roco put it, “The moment I heard it, I recognized the whole Caribbean part. From then on, we got deeper into ska.”<sup>84</sup> The syncopations and horn sections in ska provided an opening for Maldita Vecindad to explore ways of incorporating other Caribbean rhythms. They made the same sort of connection that Santaolalla had when he played a ska



guitar part while jamming with the Cuarteto Leo. Two Tone had made ska into a hip, Anglo popular music, and that in turn made it imaginable for Mexican rockers to indulge a taste for dance music played by large bands with horn sections, a model that had been completely segregated from guitar-based rock. According to Pato, the band's guitarist, "When we started to play, within rock and roll orthodoxy, it was unthinkable to say that you liked Pérez Prado or that you liked cumbia. . . . Later, it became a fad, as if all the groups were rescuing Mexican identity [*la mexicanidad*]."85 And as this narrative makes clear, the version of Mexican identity that Maldita Vecindad constructed was an inclusive one that emphasized Mexico's connections to other Latin American cultures; the band's music incorporated not only Mexican forms like ranchera and son jarocho, but also mambo and cumbia. Santaolalla's long track record of blending rock with Argentine folk music as well as his more recent experiences with The Plugz and the Cuarteto Leo made him the perfect producer to help Maldita Vecindad realize its vision. He could imagine a blend of punk and ska on the one hand with Latin American dance music on the other, and thanks to his connections in the transnational music industry, he could sell this hybrid rock to the major labels.

Santaolalla and Maldita Vecindad were not alone in forging connections between rock, punk, ska, and Caribbean rhythms. At roughly the same moment, two other influential bands were making similar aesthetic moves. The members of the Argentine band Fabulosos Cadillacs first heard Jamaican rhythms in the hits of The Police, but their direct exposure to ska came through the Argentine underground band Sumo, whose leader, Luca Prodan, had spent much of his youth in England. In the early 1980s, the Cadillacs embraced the party spirit implicit in the music and style of Two Tone bands like Madness, and they began to recruit horn players.<sup>86</sup> After recording several ska albums, Fabulosos Cadillacs began to open up to other Caribbean rhythms, particularly on the album *El León* (1992), which included salsa, calypso, bolero, and merengue. As Vicentico, the band's singer, described their stylistic evolution, "We were always close to the Latin [*lo latino*]. . . . We began to find in salsa and Latin music something similar to what we once found in reggae, soul and ska."<sup>87</sup> At the same time, Mano Negra, a French group led by Manu Chao, the son of Spanish exiles, was traversing similar musical terrain. Inspired by the mixture of punk and ska developed by The Clash, Mano Negra crafted a carnivalesque style that combined politically engaged lyrics with multiple languages and musical styles in a chaotic pastiche. The band's interest in Latin American rhythms deepened during a tour of South America in 1992. Mano Negra's European pedigree gave the band a certain stature; the group's interest legitimized local rockers' efforts

to incorporate Caribbean rhythms. As Santaolalla later argued, the appearance of Mano Negra “led bands that had begun as ska to take the same path.”<sup>88</sup> By 1992, then, Maldita Vecindad, Fabulosos Cadillacs, and Mano Negra had begun to sketch the possibilities of a rock music built on a fusion with Caribbean rhythms. While not all the rock latino bands that would emerge over the next decade shared these bands’ interest in Jamaican rhythms, ska would remain a potent source of variation within the genre. More important, ska had helped crack open the constraints on rock and opened the genre to an influx of Latin American rhythms.

Santaolalla remained at the forefront of the new rock latino. In 1992, he discovered Café Tacuba, a band from the middle-class Mexico City suburb of Ciudad Satélite, and produced their debut album for WEA. Santaolalla would go on to produce all of the group’s records, helping to make Café Tacuba the most critically acclaimed rock band in Latin America. The band’s 1994 album, *Re*, follows the lead of Maldita Vecindad, Fabulosos Cadillacs, and Mano Negra, but pushes the idea of musical fusion to an extreme. The music contains elements of an amazingly eclectic array of musical genres, from funk, disco, and speed-metal to Mexican huapango, ranchera, and mariachi to Caribbean cumbia and bolero. Moreover, as Josh Kun points out, genres and even temporalities seem to collide within the space of a single song. The song “El aparato,” begins with a strummed guitar reminiscent of traditional son jarocho and ends with indigenous-style chants over synthesizers and video game keyboard sounds. This pastiche, in Kun’s words, “recognizes the place of the local while also traveling within the space of the global, performing a transnational musical movement that begins to blur the very distinction itself.”<sup>89</sup> In its insistent juxtaposition of the local and the global, Café Tacuba’s music reflects contemporary Mexico City and indeed most Latin American cities, where cosmopolitan, consumerist modernity exists side-by-side with elements of traditional culture. It also reflects an aesthetic awakening reminiscent of that of Maldita Vecindad. As singer Rubén Albarrán put it, “At first we copied everything we could from the United States. But then we started bringing in the music our parents used to listen to, boleros and tropical stuff. . . . Eclecticism liberated us.”<sup>90</sup>

Through his work with Mexican bands, Santaolalla had begun to realize his vision of a distinctively Latin American rock music, but he had not yet been able to bring this approach to his native Argentina. He felt that most of the Argentine bands that had emerged in the 1980s were too focused on copying trends from the United States and England.<sup>91</sup> However, in 1993, Santaolalla reestablished himself in the world of Argentine rock by inviting the power trio Divididos to Los Angeles and producing their new album, *La era de la boludez*.

Divididos were founded by two of the surviving members of Sumo, which had dissolved after the death of Luca Prodan in 1987. The band specialized in a hard-rock mixture of blues and funk, but it had also shown signs of an interest in Argentine folk music, and it was that tendency that Santaolalla responded to and encouraged.<sup>92</sup> *La era de la boludez* included a blues-rock cover of Atahualpa Yupanqui's "El arriero," two decades after Gato Barbieri had claimed the song for Latin jazz, as well as a hard rock chacarera called "Huelga de amores." Nevertheless, Divididos did not limit themselves to mixing rock with Argentine folk music. In the spirit of rock latino, the band embraced other rhythms as well, including, most notably, reggae. On the album's biggest hit, "Qué ves," a reggae guitar part was set against the 6/8 rhythm typical of chacarera, while Santaolalla played counter-rhythms on the charango. The mixture of Jamaican and Andean rhythms with instrumental timbres and a vocal style drawn from hard rock sounded nothing like Café Tacuba, but conceptually it represented a similar sort of musical hybridity. Commercially, *La era de la boludez* was a triumph; it was named album of the year in several fan polls and made Divididos Argentina's biggest rock band.<sup>93</sup>

Insofar as the new rock latino was a coherent movement, genre, or style, it owed that coherence to the marketing schemes of the major labels. In informal partnership with the handful of large Latin American media companies, the six major, multinational record companies determined the shape of popular music production in Latin America.<sup>94</sup> Although the region accounted for only 6.2 percent of global music sales in 1996, its markets were the fastest growing in the world. And the Latin American markets were completely dominated by the majors, whose products accounted for 80 percent of the region's music sales. In their efforts to expand sales, the major labels focused not only on selling their North American and European artists but also on producing Latin American artists, as they had since the advent of the record industry. As a result, in the late 1990s, record sales in the largest Latin American markets were divided roughly in thirds between English-language products, domestic material, and material from throughout Latin America. This last third revealed the powerful influence of the global music industry on Latin American popular music. The major labels' efforts to find products that would appeal across the region met with significant success in the 1960s and 1970s, with the emergence of balada singers like Sandro. It was a model that remained very much in place in the 1990s. According to the director of Polygram Venezuela, "Every day it's less important where an artist comes from. . . . And since it's no longer profitable to produce only for the national market, good product has to be projected internationally."<sup>95</sup> The major labels saw the growing population of

Latinos living in the United States as another segment of the Latin American market, and they actively promoted artists who could appeal there as well. By contrast, Brazil was not integrated in this way, since the language barrier was deemed insurmountable and since Brazilians were not a significant immigrant group in the United States. The shape of rock latino reflected these ideological and commercial imperatives.

Beginning with BMG's "Rock en tu Idioma" campaign of the late 1980s, the multinationals had worked to create a unified market for Spanish-language rock among Latin Americans and Latinos in the United States, much as they had for balada. This effort got a boost in 1993 when the cable broadcaster MTV launched a new channel aimed at Spanish-speaking, Latin American audiences. (MTV Brasil, launched three years earlier, was an entirely separate network.) Broadcasting from Miami, MTV Latino used young "vjs" primarily from Argentina and Mexico to present rock music videos. The network's primary goal was to construct its Latin American audience as consumers of international youth brands like Levi's, Coca-Cola, and Reebok. Toward that end, it originally crafted a programming mix in which North American and British artists accounted for some 75 percent of the videos played, leaving only 25 percent for Latin American acts. Over time, the proportion of music from Latin America increased, though English-language rock retained its dominant position. Moreover, the network avoided all Latin American genres that were deemed to clash too much with rock; "you can't go from an Aerosmith . . . to merengue or salsa, and expect not to have a train wreck," as one executive put it.<sup>96</sup> Instead, the Latin American acts that gained heavy rotation on MTV Latino were major label rock bands like Fabulosos Cadillacs, Soda Stereo, Divididos, Café Tacuba, and Caifanes. In a very real sense, the network made the idea of rock latino viable both by enabling musicians and fans to hear bands from across the continent and by constructing the genre through its discourse and programming.<sup>97</sup> Although the vjs spoke in identifiable national accents, the network elaborated a single, homogenous Latin youth identity. There were no references to the national histories of rock or to local subgenres; instead, bands from throughout Latin America were decontextualized, or rather, recontextualized as instances of a single genre called rock latino.<sup>98</sup>

As rock latino emerged as a recognizable genre, Santaolalla became its central gatekeeper and kingmaker. In 1996, he signed an exclusive deal with MCA, soon to be renamed Universal Music, to lead the label's efforts at finding and producing "artists that will work not only in Latin America, but also in the United States."<sup>99</sup> The following year, he launched his own label, Surco Records, as an affiliate of Universal. With Surco as its centerpiece, Universal now

launched a major effort to “push into the Latin music marketplace.”<sup>100</sup> Over the next five years, Santaolalla produced hit albums by Molotov and Julieta Venegas from Mexico; Puya from Puerto Rico; Bersuit Vergarabat, Árbol, and Erica García from Argentina; Peyote Asesino and La Vela Puerca from Uruguay; and Juanes from Colombia. Thanks in part to Santaolalla’s preeminence, Los Angeles became the recognized capital of rock latino. Alongside Surco Records, the city was home to multiple recording studios and performance spaces that featured Latin American and Latino rock bands, as well as public relations and management firms, like Cookman International, that specialized in promoting the genre’s stars. Los Angeles was also home to many of the rock bands formed by U.S. Latinos in these years, as well as to *La Banda Elástica*, the leading fanzine dedicated to rock latino from both the United States and Latin America.<sup>101</sup>

In many ways, the construction of rock latino mirrored that of balada and its successor, Latin pop, yet the end result sounded quite different. By the 1990s, most Latin pop was produced in Miami, much of it by the former leader of Miami Sound Machine, Emilio Estefan Jr. The Latin pop boom of 1999, when latino stars like Ricky Martin and Jennifer López achieved unprecedented sales and visibility in the United States, was propelled almost entirely by albums produced by Estefan for Sony Records. Likewise, the biggest pop stars from Latin America, whether they aimed to cross over to the Anglo market, like Colombian singer Shakira, or merely to build their Latin American and Latino audiences, like Alejandro Fernández from Mexico, all seemed to go through Estefan. In the case of Latin pop, the concentration of the industry, its domination by a handful of companies, and its location in a North American city led to the homogenization of the product, as Estefan’s formula—Americanized balada and Caribbean flavored dance pop—became hegemonic.<sup>102</sup> Pointing to the case of Colombian vallenato singer Carlos Vives, whose musical style was transformed by his decision to work with Estefan, Ana María Ochoa argues that the prominence of Miami yielded a “global, pan-Latin sound.”<sup>103</sup> To a certain extent, the same dynamic is visible in Santaolalla’s production: he, himself, boasted that Café Tacuba’s records sounded just as good as Radiohead’s, and the emulation of first-world production standards arguably does amount to a form of Americanization.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, Santaolalla never imposed a rigid formula on the acts he produced. Not only was rock latino more diverse than Latin pop, but to most listeners, it was also more aesthetically ambitious. Moreover, in contrast to the love stories that dominated Latin pop, bands like Maldita Vecindad and Divididos often used their music to express hard-hitting social criticism.

These contrasts suggest a paradox. Rock latino was made possible by the domination of the global music industry by a handful of multinational companies based in the United States and Europe. A radically unequal form of global capitalism somehow facilitated the production of distinctively Latin American forms of rock music. Similarly, Ignacio Corona notes that rock latino expressed the cosmopolitan, consumerist impulses of Latin American middle classes in the era of neoliberal economic reforms—the desire, in other words, to consume rock that sounded as good as Radiohead—even as it also represented resistance to cultural homogenization.<sup>105</sup> How is it that the structures of global mass culture yielded homogenization in the case of pop produced in Miami but diversity and resistance in the case of rock produced in Los Angeles?

One answer is that in their pursuit of Latin American and Latino audiences, the major labels relied heavily on intermediaries with local expertise, and Santaolalla and Estefan proved to be very different sorts of intermediaries. This is not to suggest that Santaolalla disavowed commercial aims. On the contrary, he spoke the same language of market analysis as his partners at Universal: “Latinos who live in the United States spend \$292 billion annually. . . . In Mexico and Argentina markets are growing, and in all that megaspace, there will be a place for alternative music.”<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, within the commercial realities dictated by the profit motives of the majors, Santaolalla pursued his own aesthetic and ideological goals. For one thing, he never outgrew the countercultural attitude that he developed as a long-haired rock musician in Argentina. Discussing the rebellious messages disseminated by many of the bands he produced, Santaolalla revealed his awareness of the irony of his position: “I loved the idea of being able to establish Surco, a label that was financed from the first world, but we were making products that in a certain way provoked, bothered . . . with things that spoke of reality.”<sup>107</sup> Thanks to his leverage as an intermediary, Santaolalla was able to use first-world money to make music that expressed a third-world perspective.

It is difficult to pinpoint the effect of a producer, especially one who, like Santaolalla, avoided imposing a particular formula. Although some have noted the presence of a specific guitar sound on many of his recordings or a distinctive way of recording vocals, his primary channel of influence came through the selection process.<sup>108</sup> Santaolalla typically asked the bands he produced to come to the recording sessions with many more songs than would fit on a compact disc, and it seems reasonable to assume that he would tend to choose material that appealed to his own tastes. More important, Santaolalla exerted a major influence on the shape of the field by choosing which bands to work with. His access to the promotional capacity and budget of a major

label as well as his own track record for producing hits made him an extremely desirable producer who was able to work with whichever artists he wanted. Although the bands he produced all sound distinctive, they do share a tendency toward generic pastiche and the blurring of the global and the local. To cite just a few examples: the heavy metal rap band Molotov included norteño polka rhythms, *Árbol* played both chacareras and hardcore tunes, and *La Vela Puerca* juxtaposed ska-punk with murga, an Afro-Uruguayan folk form.<sup>109</sup> Santaolalla clearly used his leverage as a key intermediary for Universal to shape rock latino in this direction. As he put it, “Anyone who comes to me nowadays knows that one element that will always be present is the theme of identity . . . it is important that who you are and where you are from be reflected in what you do.”<sup>110</sup>

Santaolalla’s aesthetic was informed and enabled by the advent of world music, embraced by recording companies and retailers as a way of marketing artists from outside the United States and Europe. The fad undoubtedly primed North American critics to respond positively to the new rock latino, particularly bands that emphasized recognizably Latin elements. Following a New York double bill, one reviewer praised *Maldita Vecindad* for “mixing ska, rock, and elements of Caribbean music” while denigrating *Caifanes* for playing boring “70’s arena rock.”<sup>111</sup> Since world-music fans craved difference, they responded positively to rock latino’s use of Latin American rhythms. Santaolalla was clearly aware of his music’s appeal to world music enthusiasts; he sometimes justified his own rosy predictions for rock latino by citing David Byrne, one of the leading promoters of world music, on the originality of third-world approaches to rock.<sup>112</sup> Santaolalla’s project made sense to the major labels partly because it resonated with the discourse of world music.

Nevertheless, rock latino was different from world music. World music exoticized its objects, collapsing diversity and distinctiveness into one essential difference: us and them, Western and non-Western. Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste has identified the story of the Colombian band *Bloque* (originally *Bloque de Búsqueda*) as a paradigmatic instance of this process. After being signed by Byrne’s *Luaka Bop* label, the band was largely forgotten in Colombia. It enjoyed critical acclaim and some commercial success in the United States, but only at the cost of being “exhibited as a musical curiosity of the third world.”<sup>113</sup> Yet the case of *Bloque* is not typical of rock latino. Although both Byrne’s *Luaka Bop* and Santaolalla’s *Surco* were affiliated with major labels (Warner Brothers and Universal, respectively), the former aimed at the mainstream North American market, while the latter was created to pursue Latin American and Latino consumers. Fernández L’Hoeste reads *Bloque* as having been ripped from its original, Colombian context, but the context that

produced most rock latino was fundamentally transnational. The music was forced to fit within a box—“Latin”—that was constructed, at least in part, by the stereotyping, exoticizing North American gaze, yet the contents of the box were designed by Santaolalla and other intermediaries, together with the Latin American musicians with whom they worked. Moreover, since this music was only commercially viable to the extent that it appealed to Latin American listeners, it could not signify only as exotic.

In an interview in 1998, Santaolalla argued that his current work was a continuation of his efforts with Arco Iris, that he had been trying to use rock music to express a “Latin identity” since the 1970s.<sup>114</sup> To a certain extent, this was true, but his conception of that identity had changed. With Arco Iris, Santaolalla sought to link rock music, which expressed his sense of belonging to cosmopolitan youth culture, to Andean folk traditions, which expressed his Argentine and South American identity. By contrast, the bands he worked with in the 1990s built their music by drawing on a far wider range of music, including many commercial genres to which they had no ethnic or national connection. In this vision, a band like Maldita Vecindad could express its Latin-ness through a hybrid forged of Jamaican ska, British punk, and Cuban mambo. These genres could be heard to express a Latin identity not because they represented a deep, folk tradition but because together they comprised the sound of contemporary Latin America, a pastiche of old and new, local, regional, and global.

### *Rock Latino in Argentina*

Within Argentina, the rock latino boom inspired a certain amount of ambivalence. Although many of the bands Santaolalla produced were popular there, some observers worried that the concept erased much of the history of Argentine rock. On the eve of the Surco Festival of 1998, which brought together Árbol, Bersuit Vergarabat, Molotov, and Peyote Asesino in Buenos Aires, the rock critic Danial Amiano congratulated Santaolalla for his vision of incorporating “autochthonous rhythms” into rock. Nevertheless, he found the idea of rock latino reductive, partly because it left out so many of the giants of rock nacional, but also because it shoehorned Argentina into a version of *Latinidad* that did not quite fit: “For North Americans, Latin America has to do directly with Caribbean and Afro rhythms, something from which, certainly, we are pretty distant, but which explains clearly the success of the Cadillacs.”<sup>115</sup> Amiano’s comment begins to suggest the ways that rock latino destabilized well-established patterns of national identification within Argentine rock music. Some Argentine rock fans may have been uncomfortable with the racialization



implicit in the idea of rock latino, the way it seemed to equate Latin identity with nonwhiteness. But even for the most antiracist of Argentines, rock latino smacked of cultural imperialism, since it imposed a Latin identity conceived from a North American perspective. Argentine efforts to construct pan-Latin unity, like those of Mercedes Sosa and Arco Iris, tended to focus on the nation's connection to the Andes, the Inca Empire, and South America, and not to the Caribbean, Brazil, and Afro-Latin culture.

For most of its history, Argentina's rock nacional had been primarily recorded and distributed by domestic labels. Aiming to satisfy the domestic demand for a locally relevant, Spanish-language version of rock, the music developed by adapting the latest styles from Britain and the United States. Arco Iris challenged this model by incorporating elements from Argentine folk music, but even Santaolalla looked to artists like Crosby, Stills and Nash and the Mahavishnu Orchestra for inspiration and legitimation. More important, the reliance on domestic labels meant that there was no integrated, Latin American market for rock in Spanish, and that in turn meant that local bands generally did not forge connections with musicians and audiences in other Latin American countries. Instead, rock authenticity was defined in opposition to major-label artists like Sandro, who produced a style of music designed to appeal to broader Latin American markets. In the 1980s, Argentine rock bands modernized their sound thanks partly to Santaolalla's influence, and the major labels discovered their appeal for Latin American audiences. By creating a Latin American market for rock in Spanish, the major labels created the conditions in which rock latino, defined largely by intermediaries like Santaolalla, could emerge. But because the music was designed for the broader Latin American and Latino market and because Santaolalla's own understanding of Latin identity had shifted during his years in Los Angeles, the impact of rock latino in Argentina was unpredictable.

Rock latino intersected in complex ways with the ideological divisions that structured Argentine popular music. The conflict that had first emerged in the schism between Manal and Almendra persisted into the 1980s, when underground bands like Sumo and Patricio Rey y sus Redonditos de Ricota claimed to offer a more authentic, less commercial alternative to the massively popular Soda Stereo. By the 1990s, the heirs to these alternative bands constituted a distinct subgenre known as *rock chabón* or *rock barrial*. Bands like Divididos, Los Piojos, La Renga, and Dos Minutos played a variety of different rock styles, but their lyrics betrayed a common ideology. All of these bands responded to the deindustrialization and deepening inequality produced by the neoliberal economic policies of President Carlos Menem (1989–99). Representing an au-

dience of disenfranchised, largely unemployed youth, they glorified criminality, vagrancy, and drug use, while attacking police violence. They trumpeted their allegiance to the local *barrio* and, as an extension of that identity, their patriotism. Using a nationalist discourse drawn from historic Peronism, they condemned President Menem and his allies as “kleptocrats” and unpatriotic “sell-outs [*vendepatrias*].”<sup>116</sup> Many older fans of *rock nacional* responded to *rock chabón* with alarm, particularly since they believed that the new genre had destroyed the culture of live music, bringing the pointless violence of the soccer stadium into the nightclub and concert hall.<sup>117</sup>

In the early 2000s, *rock chabón* relinquished its status as the most notorious type of popular music in Argentina, a distinction now held by a new genre: *cumbia villera*. *Cumbia* itself had been introduced in Argentina in the early 1960s and quickly gained popularity much as it did elsewhere in Latin America. On the television program *El Club del Clan*, cast member Chico Novarro performed comic *cumbias* like “El orangután.” Later, Los Wawancó, a group of medical students from other Latin American countries, built a successful career in Argentina by specializing in the genre.<sup>118</sup> Yet fans of folk music and *rock nacional* considered *cumbia mersa*—tacky music enjoyed by the uneducated. By the 1980s, the genre had been linked to two other dance musics of low prestige, *chamamé* and *cuarteto*. Dozens of dance clubs, or *bailantas*, emerged in Buenos Aires, catering to a lower-class clientele, as well as to groups of poor immigrants from Bolivia and Paraguay, and specializing in these so-called tropical genres. By this point, *cumbia*’s status in Argentina as a music enjoyed by the poor and disdained by more middle-class and intellectual music fans was well established.<sup>119</sup> In response, the genre was adopted by the same sectors who had backed *rock chabón*: lower-class youth frustrated by their bleak economic prospects in neoliberal Argentina. Beginning in 1999, bands like *Damas Gratis* and *Los Pibes Chorros* emerged under the banner of *cumbia villera*, proclaiming their allegiance to the residents of the *villas miserias*, the shantytowns where the poorest residents of Buenos Aires lived. In their lyrics, *cumbia villera* bands glorified criminality and attacked the police in much the same way as *rock chabón* did, but to those messages they added a proud identification as “negros,” thereby embracing the racial term with which generations of elite Argentines had insulted the poor residents of the shantytowns.<sup>120</sup>

Despite the overlap in their lyrics and the fact that they drew their audiences from similar sectors, *rock chabón* and *cumbia villera* represented two quite distinct identities, and it was that division that *rock latino* seemed to challenge. One ethnography found that *rock chabón* fans were anxious to define themselves against *cumbieros*, often by arguing that while *rock* was socially

committed music, cumbia was just for fun.<sup>121</sup> This distinction built on associations that had long attached to the genre. The label “tropical” as applied to cumbia, chamamé, and cuarteto (two of which had no direct connection to the tropics) not only linked these genres to frivolity, but also had the effect of “othering” them: if they were tropical they were not Argentine. Argentine rock was “rock nacional,” but “cumbia nacional” would have been an oxymoron. By including percussion and horn sections and playing Caribbean rhythms, Fabulosos Cadillacs challenged existing models of Argentine rock and were often criticized as “uncultured.”<sup>122</sup> And yet the Cadillacs stopped short of cumbia.<sup>123</sup> By focusing their Latin American rhythmic explorations on salsa, merengue, and Brazilian *batucada*, they avoided the one Caribbean dance genre that actually had a substantial following, but also a pronounced stigma, in Argentina. Nevertheless, the advent of rock latino made a reconsideration of cumbia inevitable. The band Los Auténticos Decadentes, whose first album was released in 1989, followed the Cadillacs’ lead, but made a point to embrace popular genres that had been the target of snobbish condescension, and prominent among them, cumbia.<sup>124</sup> Los Auténticos Decadentes was a party band that avoided any sort of social criticism, but given its mix of ska and punk with cumbia and other Afro-Latin rhythms, the band fit comfortably within the rock latino template. As a result, the band was soon signed by major labels, first Sony and then RCA.

The Argentine band that most fully explored the musical and ideological potential of rock latino was Bersuit Vergarabat. Formed in 1989, Bersuit emerged from within the rock chabón movement. Its lyrics, like those of other bands in this subgenre, combined leftist politics with references to the barrio, partying, fighting, and transgressions of various types. After its first three albums, Bersuit had earned a solid following in Argentina. For their fourth album, the band accepted Santaolalla’s invitation to record with him in Los Angeles. The resulting album, *Libertinaje* (1998) made them megastars in Argentina while dramatically increasing their profile throughout Latin America. In all likelihood, Santaolalla’s interest in producing Bersuit was due to the band’s openness to a diverse range of Latin American rhythms. *Libertinaje* opened with a cumbia called “Yo tomo” and followed with a dizzying variety of genres. As *Rolling Stone Argentina* put it, “On *Libertinaje* there is not too much rock in the conventional sense of the term: there are cumbia, rap, chamamé, and Uruguayan candombe and murga.”<sup>125</sup> Thanks to Bersuit’s use of distorted electric guitar, overheated vocals and conventional drum kit, the group still sounded like a rock band, no matter how deeply it delved into other genres. But by combining an angry politics of denunciation with an adventurous musical eclecticism,

the album demonstrated the capacity of rock latino to shake up the ideological commitments of Argentine fans.

On *Libertinaje*, Bersuit implicitly connected the valorization of stigmatized genres like cumbia to a direct verbal assault on the current government in the name of the poorest members of society. The deceptively playful cumbia “C.S.M.” indulges in what Silvia Citro has described as “grotesque realism” by labeling President Carlos Saúl Menem “baboon ass commando” and fantasizing about anally raping him.<sup>126</sup> The ska workout “Se viene” denounced rising poverty and unemployment and directly predicted the overthrow of the Menem government: “The explosion of my guitar and of your government as well, is coming.” Perhaps most notorious was a cover version of “Sr. Cobranza,” a song by the underground band Las Manos de Filippi that directly accused Menem and his economics minister, Domingo Cavallo, of being drug dealers. Bersuit’s version started as a mellow rap and culminated in a hard rock tirade laced with obscenities. The final verse seemed to connect the dots between Bersuit’s multiple affiliations: “In the jungle shots are heard. / They’re the weapons of the poor. / They’re the screams of the latino.” Scandalized by the song’s violent denunciation of the president, the government banned the song, to which Universal responded by printing the lyrics on a poster and plastering three thousand copies throughout Buenos Aires.<sup>127</sup> Thanks in part to the promotional machinery of a major label, the song and the album survived official censorship and sold massively.

Referring to the group’s concerts in June 2001, one critic described Bersuit as “a rock latino band, yes, but increasingly they do rock in their attitude and lyrics and Latin in their music.”<sup>128</sup> But to the extent that this formulation relegates Bersuit’s politics to the rock side of the equation, it is not quite right. In comments from the stage and to reporters, the band’s lead singer, Gustavo Cordera, clarified the politics of the band’s music. When the band El Otro Yo declared “cumbia is shit” at a rock festival in Cosquín, Cordera responded by embracing the genre as the music of the poor: “When I paddle the Riachuelo in a canoe, in the shacks I hear a lot of cumbia, a lot of cuarteto, that’s why I have it in my heart, because it’s the music of Dock Sud [the working-class barrio where Cordera grew up] and La Boca. Long live rock and roll and long live cumbia. Cumbia rocks!”<sup>129</sup> On *Hijos del culo* (Children of the Ass), also produced by Santaolalla and released in 2000, Bersuit pushed its musical eclecticism even further, including Mexican ranchera and Spanish flamenco alongside ska, cuarteto, cumbia, and murga. While the album’s lyrics avoided the explicit messages of *Libertinaje*, the music continued to express a powerful politics. Cordera explained the album’s scatological title:

The child of the ass is the guy born out the backside, who lives in the ass of the world, who was shit on for many years, and who is fucked [*está hecho mierda*]. . . . After traveling through many countries and being abroad thanks to the *Libertinaje* tours, we could see ourselves. I could understand my place in Docke [Dock Sud], from where I tell things, know that I am a *sudaca* [derogatory word for a South American], know what it means to be an Argentine and what that means in the rest of the world. And I was able to confirm that we are children of the ass.<sup>130</sup>

Here, Cordera implicitly rejects versions of Argentine national identity premised on the country's European roots, its whiteness, and its superiority to the rest of Latin America. For Bersuit, incorporating cumbia and other, similar genres into rock constituted a political gesture, a way of embracing a rebellious, third-world identity.

In December 2001, the prediction Bersuit Vergarabat had made in "Se viene" came true: an "explosion" of protest and collective violence brought down the government of Fernando de la Rúa and ultimately ended the nation's decade-long experiment with neoliberalism. This popular uprising cut across class lines. On the one hand were lower-class sectors who had forged new organizations, known collectively as the *piquetero* movement for the road blocks that were their preferred protest tactic. On the other were largely middle-class groups threatened by the deepening economic crisis. Some of these latter groups were galvanized into action by the ban on withdrawals that the government imposed in order to prevent a bank run, while others reacted to what they perceived as the incompetence, corruption, and authoritarianism of the political class.<sup>131</sup> This complex process has been the subject of a great deal of sociological research, but we still lack a thorough account of the cultural shifts that allowed for the emergence of these new forms of organization and protest and for the construction, albeit temporary, of a cross-class alliance.

Although such an account is obviously beyond the scope of this book, it is possible to suggest that rock latino contributed to this cultural transformation. As Maristella Svampa and Sebastián Pereyra have shown, the *piquetero* movement emerged in the context of "the weakening of Peronism in the popular sectors" caused by the neoliberal policies pursued by Menem's Peronist government and by the failure of the unions to represent the interests of their members. They go on to note that Peronism's declining hold on the poor had a generational aspect: young people were less and less likely to share their parents' view that Peronism represented the best hope for social justice.<sup>132</sup> In the context of this ideological vacuum, Bersuit's angry assaults on Menem and

the band's appropriation of Latin-ness provided discursive resources for the elaboration of new identities. As Citro argues, Bersuit's concerts were highly participatory affairs, opportunities for "ritual transgression," in which young people performed the antiauthoritarianism that many of them would enact on the streets in December 2001.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, by breaking down the barriers between cumbia and rock, the band helped lay the cultural groundwork for the cross-class unity that protesters forged in the streets. Gustavo Santaolalla, who as a rock musician in the 1970s steered clear of political engagement, now produced rock music with an overt and effective antigovernment message. With the backing of a major multinational corporation interested only in its profit margins, he created music that helped young Argentines reconceptualize their national identity and motivated them to join a popular uprising.

Santaolalla's career achievements were not limited to his work as a producer. In 1998, he recorded a solo album named *Ronroco* after the eponymous Andean stringed instrument. When film director Michael Mann used a track from the album in his film *The Insider* (1999), Santaolalla began a long and productive relationship with Hollywood. He has since gone on to compose multiple film soundtracks, including those for *Amores Perros* (dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), *The Motorcycle Diaries* (dir. Walter Salles, 2004), *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005), and *Babel* (dir. González Iñárritu, 2006), winning Oscars for the last two. Although not all his Hollywood work has been in connection with films set in Latin America, enough of it has been to suggest that his reputation as a Latin American musical visionary helped him move into films. He has also remained active as a musician, launching the electronic tango collective Bajofondo Tango Club in 2002. Composed of Argentine and Uruguayan musicians, the band has earned critical acclaim for its fusion of tango with contemporary dance genres like drum-and-bass and trip-hop. On one level, the project betrays a world-music sensibility: it is a way of preserving a musical tradition by mixing it with instrumentation, technology, and other elements from the contemporary, "first-world" soundscape. And yet, some of Bajofondo's songs allude to less traditional versions of Argentine music, such as Lalo Schiffrin's "Mission Impossible" and Gato Barbieri's "Last Tango in Paris."<sup>134</sup> In this way, Santaolalla and his musical accomplices seem to convey a vision of the tango not as a folkloric tradition fixed in the past, but as a style crafted and recrafted over many years by generations of musicians in transit.