

I'LL JUST CRY—"96 TEARS"

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Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California, David Reyes and Tom Waldman, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998, xxi, 178 pp., \$18.95, paperback

For readers who follow rock and roll and the scholarship spawned by it this is a good time to be alive. Not only has the advent of the CD meant that even the most obscure early recordings could be dredged from old vaults, but DVDs have meant that even the grainy old films of early rockers performing in studios and clubs could become more easily available. Due to these increasingly available resources, as well as the nostalgia of aging baby boomers, this is hog heaven time for scholarship on all forms of popular music. A small shelf would include Nelson George's *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* and *Hip Hop America*; Peter Guralnick's *Feel Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues and Rock and Roll*, *Lost Highway: Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians*, *Searching for Robert Johnson*, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom*, and especially his two Elvis volumes, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* and *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley*; Michael Hicks's *Sixties Rock: Garage, Psychedelic, and Other Satisfactions*; and Perry Meisel's *The Cowboy and the Dandy: Crossing Over from Romanticism to Rock and Roll*, published by no less than Oxford University Press. Excellent musical/cultural scholarship is evident even in the field that would seem least promising, that of jazz, where excellent books have been written by, among others, Robert O'Mealy (*The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*), Krin Gabbard (*Jammin' at the Margins*), and John Szwed (*Space Is the Place*). That many of these books have been published by academic presses (the three listed above were published by Columbia University Press, University of Chicago Press, and Pantheon, respectively) is an indication of the seriousness of the undertakings.

Most importantly, the Rhino-ization of old songs has made even the most obscure of groups available to fans. Rhino Records has, for over a dozen years, reissued the oldies, the more obscure the better. One can search <<http://www.rhino.com>> and find "The Best of Ritchie Valens," "Pharaohization (The Best of Sam the Sham and The Pharaohs)," and even "¡Ay Califas! Raza Rock of the 70s & 80s": highlights include songs by Santana, Azteca, Daniel Valdez, War, Los Lobos del Este de Los Angeles, the Plugz, and Cheech & Chong.

While the technological resources have improved, it still takes the parallel talents of a good ear, cultural history chops, and enormous synthetic powers to write—at least, to write well—in this field. And it doesn't hurt to have an almost-exquisite low streak to appreciate the fabulous, atavistic organ riff from ? and the Mysterians' superb classic "96 Tears" or to savor the wailing guitar opening of Carlos Santana's "Black Magic Woman." The hairs on my neck always salute Tito Puente's "Oye Cómo Va," a deliciously seductive anthem. Santana's cover, as extraordinary as it is, does not improve on the original. (I saw Tito perform "Oye" in town just weeks ago, and the thrill is still there.)

None of these qualities are evident in David Reyes and Tom Waldman's 1998 work, *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California*. In it, Reyes, a record store owner in Brea, and Waldman, a Southern California writer, chronicle their childhood rock and roll roots in Southern California during the mid-fifties (the time of Little Julian Herrera, Chan Romero, and Ritchie Valens), sixties (Cannibal and the Headhunters), and the seventies (Los Lobos). For Reyes and Waldman, these were artists of the first rank, along with Thee Midneters, the Blendells, and the Premiers. Valens, the Headhunters, and Los Lobos have been the only Southern California Chicano musicians to rise above their club audiences, but to read this work, you would think this is of great significance.

True, Ritchie Valens (né Valenzuela) is remembered today as much for dying in the ill-fated flight with J. P. Richardson (the Big Bopper) and Buddy Holly as for his music. "La Bamba," his B-side release (the A-side was "Donna"), became a modest posthumous hit, but did not become a huge hit until the movie version of *La Bamba*, covered by Los Lobos. Cannibal (Frankie García) and the Headhunters had a hit single with "Land of 1000 Dances," and in 1965 toured with the Beatles, but the song was a cover, first recorded by its author Chris Kenner (with Fats Domino) in 1963, and nine out of ten people more likely remember the soulful 1966 Wilson Pickett version. Los Lobos is an excellent band and has survived twenty years and transcended East LA,¹ but these are slim pickings for a university press book.

Indeed, the University of New Mexico Press should be ashamed of itself for publishing this volume. The book has no references or bibliography, not nearly enough pictures (didn't the Beatles ever have their pictures taken with the Headhunters, Chan Romero, or Chris M^ontez, all of whom toured with them at one time or another?), an incomplete and unusable discography, and pedestrian prose throughout. Any book that considers Beverly Mendheim's book on Ritchie Valens to be excellent cannot be very discerning. (See my 1988 review of her 1987 Bilingual Press book in *The Americas Review* 16:210-13.) They even get her name wrong, praising the book by "Beverly Arnheim." It does provide an interesting list of Chicano musicians who were in bands that became famous or who backed famous artists, such as Barry Rillera (Righteous Brothers), Bobby Rey (né Reyes) (Hollywood Argyles), Gil Bernal (the Robins, who later became the Coasters), and others consigned to the oblivion of East LA trivial pursuit, but this is small stuff.

What could the editors at the University of New Mexico Press, which produces excellent Southwestern cultural scholarship, especially New Mexico history and archeology, have been thinking? Surely not that any old book written on Chicanos would sell. Or that another rock and roll history would add to the burgeoning list of books in this field, such as those mentioned earlier. Additional questions arise: who edited this book? Why didn't it include any bibliographical references? And why not get a musicologist to write such a book?

What this book does show is that *the* great work on Chicano rock and roll has not yet been written. Beverly Mendheim's *Ritchie Valens: The First Latino Rocker* is not that book, and this work, most assuredly, is not the one. This great work will cover all the various Chicanos who have played or sung in studios and garages: Santana, Los Lobos, Ritchie Valens, Chris M^ontez, Sam the Sham (Domingo Samudio), ? (Rudy Mart^ínez), and then follow with the second tier, including Cannibal and the Headhunters and the many regional singers: Freddy Fender, Sunny and the Sunglows, Tierra, and dozens of others.

Material from the Reyes and Waldman book will serve some value by contributing references for this chapter. Then, this great synthesizer will have to deal with Chicaneste performers such as Linda Ronstadt and Vicki Carr. (As her recent PBS special, *Memories/Memorias* showed, she can still break hearts. I have always identified with Vince Gardenia, Cher's father in *Moonstruck*, who kept playing Vicki Carr music over and over.) A separate book will still have to be written on Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Pérez Prado, Desi Arnaz, and Latino band music.

The book is even oddly shaped, almost square. On my shelf, it sticks out, but only in this limited sense.

Note

¹Interestingly, members of Los Lobos branched out into solo projects and other configurations in spring 1999. David Hidalgo and ex-John Mayall Blues Project guitarist Michael Halby teamed up on *Hounddog* (Columbia/Legacy); César Rosas released *Soul Disguise* (Rykodisc); and Hidalgo and Louie Pérez collaborated on *Dose* (Atlantic).