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shirts. Even Jim Morrison and the Doors have become favorites among young people who were born years after Morrison’s death.

Values and beliefs rooted in working-class experiences set the standards of criticism and the parameters of debate about American life within popular music. Just as previous generations of middle-class listeners nurtured memories and values of working-class pasts, today’s “middle class” turns to images from working-class life to express its own discontents as in Billy Joel’s 1982 “Allentown” and John Cougar Mellencamp’s 1987 “Empty Hands.” The working class in the U.S. exists as an empirical fact in the lives of those trading their labor power for wages, but it also lives in the collective historical memory of the middle class. Oppositional thought denied expression by the monopolies who market culture survives in the subtle nuances of cultural moments too small for co-optation or censorship. The working class may not be the agency of emancipation envisioned by Karl Marx, but whatever form emancipation eventually takes, it will be that much easier because there is and has been an American working class. As a class, American workers are “older now, but still running against the wind,” nurtured and sustained by a dialogue within popular music that enables them to remember the past and to imagine the future.

Cruising Around the Historical Bloc: Postmodernism and Popular Music in East Los Angeles

During his first visit to Los Angeles, Octavio Paz searched in vain for visible evidence of Mexican influence on that city’s life and culture. The great Mexican writer found streets with Spanish names and subdivisions filled with Spanish Revival architecture, but to his surprise and dismay he perceived only a superficial Hispanic gloss on an essentially Anglo-American metropolis. Mexican culture seemed to have evaporated into little more than local color, even in a city that had belonged to Spain and Mexico long before it became part of the United States, a city where one-third of the population traced its lineage to Olmec, Maya, Toltec, Aztec, Spanish, and Mexican ancestors, and a city which had more Mexican residents than all but two of Mexico’s own cities. Paz detected a “vague atmosphere” of Mexicanism in Los Angeles, manifesting itself through “delight in decorations, carelessness and pomp, negligence, passion and reserve.” But he felt that this “ragged but beautiful” ghost of Mexican identity only rarely interacted with “the North American world based on precision and efficiency.” Instead, this Mexicanism floated above the city, “never quite existing, never quite vanishing.”

As both the oldest and the newest immigrants to Los Angeles, Mexican-Americans have faced unique problems of cultural identity and assimilation. But the anguish of invisibility that Paz identified among them is all too familiar to minority ethnic communities around the globe. Everywhere, cultural domination by metropolitan elites eviscerates and obliterates traditional cultures rooted in centuries of shared experience. For ethnic minorities, failure to assimilate into dominant cultures can bring exclusion from vital economic and
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political resources, but successful assimilation can annihilate prized traditions and customs essential to individual and collective identity. Cultural institutions and the mass media alike depict dominant cultures as “natural” and “normal,” while never representing the world from the vantage point of ethnic communities. Active discrimination and economic exploitation reinforce a sense of marginality among aggrieved peoples, but mass-media images rarely grant legitimacy to marginal perspectives. Traditional forms of cultural expression within ethnic communities lose their power to order and interpret experience, yet they persist as important icons of alienated identity. Surrounded by images that exclude them, included in images that seem to have no real social power, ethnic communities come to feel that they never quite exist and never quite vanish.

But the transformation of real historical traditions and cultures into superficial icons and images touches more than ethnic communities. A sharp division between life and culture provides an essential characteristic of life in all modern industrialized societies, affecting dominant as well as subordinated groups. As Walter Benjamin points out, the production and distribution of art under conditions of mechanical reproduction and commodity form lead to an alienated world in which cultural objects are received outside of the communities and traditions that initially gave them shape and meaning. Created artifacts from diverse cultures blend together into a seeming contextless homogenized mass, encountered independently from the communities that gave birth to them. Mass communications and culture rely on an ever-expanding supply of free-floating symbols only loosely connected to social life. Experience and traditions seem to have no binding claims on the present. Ours is a world in which “all that is solid melts into air” as Marshall Berman asserts in a phrase appropriated from the Communist Manifesto.

Members of dominant social groups might not feel quite the same anguish of invisibility that oppresses cultural minorities, but cultural identity for them has become no less an exercise in alienation. The seeming collapse of tradition and the tensions between cultural commodities and social life make mass cultural discourse a locus of confusion and conflict. A proliferation of composite cultural creations and marginal subcultures claim the same “authority” wielded by traditions rooted in centuries of common experience. The revered “master narratives” of the past—religion, liberal humanism, Marx-

ism, psychoanalysis—survive in truncated form, influencing but not dominating social discourse. Instead, a multivocal and contradictory culture that delights in difference and disunity seems to be at the core of contemporary cultural consciousness. This “postmodern” culture allows the residues of many historical cultures to float above us, “ragged but beautiful,” “never quite existing and never quite vanishing.”

Postmodern culture places ethnic minorities in an important role. Their exclusion from political power and cultural recognition has allowed aggrieved populations to cultivate sophisticated capacities for ambiguity, juxtaposition, and irony—all key qualities in the postmodern aesthetic. The imperatives of adapting to dominant cultures while not being allowed full entry into them leads to complex and creative cultural negotiations that foreground marginal and alienated states of consciousness. Unable to experience either simple assimilation or complete separation from dominant groups, ethnic cultures accustom themselves to a bifocality reflective of both the ways that they view themselves and the ways that they are viewed by others. In a world that constantly undermines the importance and influence of traditions, ethnic cultures remain tied to their pasts in order to explain and arbitrate the problems of the present. Because their marginality involves the pains of exclusion and exploitation, racial and ethnic cultures speak eloquently about the fissures and frictions of society. Because their experience demands bifocality, minority-group culture reflects the decentered and fragmented nature of contemporary human experience. Because their history identifies the sources of marginality, racial and ethnic cultures have an ongoing legitimate connection to the past that distinguishes them from more assimilated groups. Masters of irony in an ironic world, they often understand that their marginalized status makes them more appropriate spokespersons for society than mainstream groups unable to fathom or address the causes of their alienations.

Discussions about postmodern sensibilities in contemporary culture often revolve around trends and tendencies in painting, architecture, and literature, but they have even greater relevance to analyses of commercialized leisure. It is on the level of commodified mass culture that the most popular, and often the most profound, acts of cultural bricolage take place. The destruction of established canons and the juxtaposition of seemingly inappropriate items char-
characteristic of the self-conscious postmodernism in “high culture,” have long been staples of commodified popular culture. With their facility for cultural fusion and their resistance to univocal master narratives, expressions of popular culture contain important lessons about the problems and promises of culture in a world in which “all that is solid melts into air.”

The Mexican-American community of Los Angeles that so disappointed Octavio Paz provides an instructive example of how ethnic minority groups can fashion forms of cultural expression appropriate to postmodern realities. Paz’s static and one-dimensional view of Mexican identity prevented him from seeing the rich culture of opposition embedded within the Los Angeles Chicano community. What seemed to him an ephemeral cloud “hovering and floating” above the city in actuality represented a complicated cultural strategy designed to preserve the resources of the past by adapting them to the needs of the present. In many areas of cultural production, but especially in popular music, organic intellectuals within Mexican-American Los Angeles pursued a strategy of self-presentation that brought their unique and distinctive cultural traditions into the mainstream of mass popular culture. Neither assimilationist nor separatist, they drew upon “families of resemblance”—similarities to the experiences and cultures of other groups—to fashion a “unity of disunity.” In that way, they sought to make alliances with other groups by cultivating the ways in which their particular experiences spoke with special authority about the ideas and alienations felt by others. They used the techniques and sensibilities of postmodernism to build a “historical bloc” of oppositional groups united in ideas and intentions, if not experience.

Popular Music in Mexican-American Los Angeles

During the 1940s, defense spending and war mobilization changed the face of Los Angeles, stimulating a massive in-migration of whites, blacks, and Chicanos. Traditional residential segregation confined Afro-Americans to the south-central area, while limiting Chicanos largely to housing in downtown East Side neighborhoods. Private bankers and government planners encouraged housing segregation by class and race, viewing ethnic heterogeneity in Los Angeles (as in other cities) as a defect of urban life rather than as one of its advantages. In this way vicious prejudice became written into federal loan policies and private commercial practices. For example, the Home Owners Loan Corporation City Survey File on Los Angeles for 1939 contained a confidential memorandum that argued against the feasibility of loans to Mexican-Americans because

While many of the Mexican race are of high caliber and descended from the Spanish grandees who formerly owned all of the territory in Southern California, the large majority of Mexican peoples are a definite problem locally and their importation in the years gone by to work the agricultural crops has now been recognized as a mistake.

Translated into public policy, that perception of Mexican-Americans meant that Chicano neighborhoods would not be eligible for housing loans, thereby ensuring residential segregation in the region. Federal appraisers rated the eligibility of each Los Angeles neighborhood for home loans, giving the highest rating to areas reserved for the exclusive use of white Christians, while assigning the lowest rating to black, Chicano, and mixed neighborhoods. The Federal Housing Authority gave its lowest possible rating to Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles because its mixture of Chicano, Jewish, and Eastern European residents convinced the appraisers that

This is a “melting pot” area and is literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements. It is seriously doubted whether there is a single block in the area which does not contain detrimental racial elements and there are very few districts which are not hopelessly heterogeneous.

Yet the opening of new shipyards and aircraft assembly plants combined with Los Angeles’s severe housing shortage produced unprecedented inter-ethnic mixing in the city. Official segregation gave way bit by bit as Chicanos and European ethnics lived and worked together in Boyle Heights and Lincoln Park, while blacks and Chicanos lived in close proximity to each other in Watts and in the San Fernando Valley suburb of Pacoima. On the factory floor, on public transportation, and on the streets of thriving commercial districts, diverse groups mixed with each other as never before. Wherever one traveled in the city’s barrios, ghettos, and mixed neighborhoods, one could easily find the potential for inter-group conflicts and rivalries;
sometimes they took the form of actual racial and ethnic violence. But there also existed a vibrant streetscene built upon communication and cooperation in community organizations and in neighborhood life.

In this milieu, small entrepreneurs catering to the local market sensed a demand for cultural commodities that reflected the social life of the new urban environment. Before RCA's purchase of Elvis Presley's contract from Sun Records in 1955, the major studios ignored the music emanating from working-class neighborhoods, leaving the field to the more than four hundred independent labels that came into existence after the war. Existing outside corporate channels, the smaller firms in working-class areas produced records geared to local audiences, especially in minority communities. The invention of magnetic recording tape made it possible to enter the record business with relatively little capital, while concentrations of transplanted war workers provided a ready market for music based on country music and blues.12 (See Chapter 5)

Recruiting performers from the communities they knew best, small-scale local record producers responded to trends in the streets. In addition, the proliferation of local radio stations in the postwar years offered exposure to new audiences. Juke box operators, furniture-store owners, and musicians responded to the consumer demand for a popular music that reflected the folk roots and multiracial ethos of the new urban streets. For example, a 1948 hit record by Los Angeles's Don Tosti Band titled "Pachuco Boogie" went on to sell more than two million copies, an extraordinary total for any Spanish-language record in the U.S., but especially for one that glorified one of the barrio's more reviled subcultures—the Pachucos.13

In many ways, Pachucos embodied the defiance of conventional authority that came to symbolize the appeal of rock and roll. Pachucos were teen-aged gang members sporting zoot suits, ducktail haircuts, and distinctive tattoos; they had attracted public attention during the war years when newspaper stories blamed them for much of the youth crime in Los Angeles. Tensions peaked in June 1943 when hundreds of sailors invaded the East Los Angeles community to beat up Mexican-American youths who wore zoot suits. The police, prosecutors, and city council joined forces to praise this criminal attack, lauding the sailors for the efforts to "clean up" the city. But the racism manifest in the attacks caused many Mexican-Americans to start looking at the Pachucos as defenders of the community against outside encroachments and as symbols of Chicano victimization and marginality.14

The Don Tosti Band's "Pachuco Boogie" captured the spirit of that new-found admiration for street rebels. The song's lyrics employed calo, the street slang associated with Pachucos but considered vulgar by "respectable" Mexican-Americans. "Pachuco Boogie" blended Mexican speech and rhythms with Afro-American scat-singing and blues harmonies to form a provocative musical synthesis. Some Spanish-language radio stations refused to play the song, but Anglo disc jockeys programming black rhythm-and-blues shows aimed at white teen-agers put it on their playlists, to the delight of their listeners. Band member Raul Diaz remembers what it was like before that record became a hit, how Mexican-American musicians like himself often had to wear sombreros and tropical outfits to get work playing music during intermissions at motion-picture theaters. "We wanted to play Chicano music, not come on like some clowns," Diaz recalls, "but at the time the scene was dominated by people like Desi Arnaz and Xavier Cugat and the music was really bland."15 The Don Tosti Band changed that when "Pachuco Boogie" sold more than two million copies. Itself a blend of Chicano, Anglo, and Afro-American musical forms, "Pachuco Boogie" garnered commercial success by uniting a diverse audience into a new synthesis—a "unity of disunity."16

"Pachuco Boogie" signaled the start of creative new links among previously divided groups. Anglo youths especially imitated the distinctive dress of Mexican-American "cholos" with their khaki pants and long-sleeved Pendleton shirts over sleeveless white undershirts, and "cholo" became a hip slang word with larger meanings. The word "cholo" probably derives from an Aztec word meaning servant, and it connotes someone with low status, usually a recent immigrant from a rural area. Cholos spoke a bilingual slang, displayed elaborate tattoos, and staked their claims to urban neighborhoods by covering walls with stylized graffiti. The studied disinterest and cultivated detachment affected by cholos echoed the oppositional postures of other postwar subcultures including hiphop musicians and beat poets. But in Los Angeles the cholo relationship to rock and roll made that subculture the most accessible model of "otherness" for middle-class white youths. When Anglo, black, or even Chicano youths em-
braced the cholo image, they flaunted their alienation by openly identifying with one of society's most despised groups.17

The ability of musicians to learn from other cultures played a key role in their success as rock-and-roll artists. For example, in 1952, black saxophonist Chuck Higgins had a hit recording with "PachucO Hop"—a song he wrote as a tribute to the dancing, style, and slang of the Mexican-American youths he encountered while playing dances at East Los Angeles union halls.18 White songwriter Jerry Leiber's widowed mother operated a grocery store near a black neighborhood in Baltimore in the early 1940s where he was first exposed to black music. The family moved to Los Angeles in 1945, and as a teen-ager he resumed his infatuation with the blues while working in a record store with a largely black clientele. A high-school classmate introduced Leiber to another middle-class white fan of black music, Mike Stoller, who had grown up on Long Island but had taken piano lessons in Harlem as an eleven-year-old student of the great jazz and blues pianist James P. Johnson. As a teen-ager, Stoller joined a Harlem "social club" before moving to Los Angeles with his family in 1949. "I learned the pachuco dances and joined a pachuco social club," Stoller later explained when asked how he got his start as a musician.19 He played piano with the Blas Vasquez band which exposed him to Chicano appropriations of Afro-American and Euro-American forms and styles as well as to indigenous Mexican music. Within a year after joining the Vasquez band, Stoller began writing rhythm-and-blues songs for black vocal groups along with his writing partner Jerry Leiber. "We found ourselves writing for black artists," recalls Leiber, "because those were the voices and rhythms that we loved. By the Fall of 1950, when both Mike and I were in City College, we had black girlfriends and we were into a black lifestyle."20 Leiber and Stoller went on to write the original "Hound Dog" for Big Mama Thornton, and they fashioned dozens of best-selling songs for black artists that celebrated the speech, folklore, and subcultures of Afro-American city life.

Perhaps the artist who best exemplified the new cultural fusions engendered by Chicano rock-and-roll music was Johnny Otis. The son of a Greek immigrant grocer and shipyard worker from Northern California, Otis first came to Los Angeles in 1943 as the white drummer in a black band playing at the Club Alabam on Central Avenue in Watts. Otis had developed his interest in black music while growing up in a mixed but mostly black neighborhood in Berkeley. He accompanied his playmates to "sanctified" churches to listen to the gospel preachers, singers, and choirs, and they made a lasting impression on him. "This society says no white kid can stay in black culture," Otis observes, "but see, that culture had captured me. I loved it and it was richer and more fulfilling and more natural. I thought it was mine."21 When a high-school teacher suggested that he spend less time with blacks and associate more with whites, Otis capsized a long battle with his teachers and principals by dropping out of school in disgust. He became a drummer with Count Otis Mathews's West Oakland House Rockers and then went on the road to tour with a variety of Afro-American bands including Lloyd Hunter's Territory Jazz Band.

In Los Angeles, Otis worked with black musicians, married his high-school sweetheart, a black woman, and thought of himself as "black by persuasion." But part of the consciousness of the black community he joined there involved staking a claim for full participation in American life and culture, and that claim led to interactions with other groups and other cultures. "I got here in '43 and at that time the Avenue [Central] was just swinging. It was like a transplanted Harlem Renaissance," Otis remembers.22 One night at the Lincoln Theater he saw the blues singer and piano player Charles Brown win a talent contest by playing "Clair de Lune." Otis recalls,

"He kind of apologized for what he played, but they loved him, they made him do an encore—"Rhapsody in Blue"—he just broke it up. And it was a good lesson for me, because in later years people would tell me that 'You can't take Big Mama Thornton to New York because she's too rough and bluesy, and you can't take Sally Blair to the Apollo because she's not bluesy enough,' well, bullshit on both counts. The people just liked it. If it's really strong and it has artistry, they like it."

Otis began promoting rhythm-and-blues shows for mixed audiences, offering Chicano and white youths a chance to hear the music of the black community. He promoted and starred in weekly rhythm-and-blues shows at Angeles Hall on the East Side that demonstrated the powerful appeal of black music for Mexican-American audiences and which helped stimulate the growth of rock-and-roll music within the barrio.24 Otis had rock-and-roll television programs on three Los
Angeles television stations in the early 1950s and promoted dances all over the city, despite harassment from local authorities upset about a music that crossed racial and class lines. “The cops would come and hassle the kids standing in line to get into the television show,” Otis recalls. “They see black kids and Hispanic kids and Asian kids and they don’t like it. They just didn’t want to see that. If it were all Asian and Hispanic and black they wouldn’t care, but there were whites there and they’re mixing with the blacks and what not.”

Despite the official harassment, the teen-agers kept coming out to Otis’s shows, and despite rumors of gang violence and racial incidents about to happen Otis remembers “We never had any trouble, the people got along great.”

Exemplifying the fusion of small entrepreneur and musician that often brought rock and roll to the public, Otis started a small record label and recording studio in the mid-fifties featuring many of Los Angeles’s leading rhythm-and-blues singers including L’il Julian Herrera, the city’s first commercially successful Chicano rock and roller. Otis produced Herrera’s 1956 local hit “Lonely, Lonely Nights,” a classic do-wop ballad, and featured him in his stage shows as part of a special effort to attract Chicano audiences. As Otis tells it,

L’il Julian came to me as a kid, a young Mexican-American guy and sang. He wasn’t great, but he could sing and he was charming and it was nice and real. I put him on stage and the little Mexican girls loved him and our Chicano audience was a big part of our audience in those days. I put him in the band and then he lived in my house.

Herrera’s relationship with Johnny Otis illustrates the ways in which rock-and-roll music became a common ground for people from diverse backgrounds in Los Angeles in the early 1950s. After all, “Lonely, Lonely Nights” presented a Chicano’s rendition of a black vocal style on a record produced by a white man who thought of himself as black. But Otis found out that the story of Lil Julian Herrera was even more complicated than he knew. One day a juvenile officer walked into Otis’s record company in search of Ron Gregory, a run-away youth from the east. When the officer showed Otis a picture, he realized that Ron Gregory was L’il Julian Herrera. “He ran away from home, hitchhiked out here, and this Mexican lady in Boyle Heights takes him in and raises him as her son,” Otis relates. It turned out that Los Angeles’s first Chicano rock-and-roll star was born a Hungarian Jew and became “a Chicano by persuasion,” just as Johnny Otis had become “black by persuasion.”

The pinnacle of this brown-white-black mixing in rock-and-roll music in Los Angeles came with the enormous popularity of Ritchie Valens, East Los Angeles’s best-selling and most significant rock-and-roll artist. Independent record producer Bob Keane discovered Valens when he noticed that the car-club cholos of East Los Angeles and of the San Fernando Valley responded to a band called the Silhouettes and their lead singer, Richard Valenzuela. Shortening (and Anglicizing) the youth’s last name to Valens, Keane signed him to a contract and recorded the singer with the same back-up musicians that Keane used on sessions by the black gospel and rock singer Sam Cooke. These session musicians brought a wealth of musical experience to Valens’s recordings—bass player Red Callendar had played with jazz great Art Tatum, and drummer Earl Palmer had recorded with rhythm-and-blues artists in New Orleans, including Roy Brown, Fats Domino, and Little Richard. But Ritchie Valens did not have to learn his cultural pluralism in a studio; life in postwar Los Angeles prepared him well for the mixing of forms and styles that would come to characterize his recorded music.

More than any other artist, Valens brought the folk traditions of Mexican music to a mass audience via rock and roll, but his music also reflected an extraordinary blending of traditions and styles from other cultures. Valens’s father, Steve, and his mother, Concepcion, met while both were employed at a munitions factory in Saugus, California, north of the city of San Fernando. He was born in 1941 in the San Fernando Valley suburb of Pacoima, where he learned music by listening to his relatives sing Mexican songs as they gathered at each others’ homes in the evenings. At the age of five Valens made a toy guitar out of a cigar box and learned to fret it with the help of an uncle who taught him how to play his first song—the traditional Mexican huapango “La Bamba.” In Pacoima, Valens met William Jones, a black musician who lived across the street from the youth’s Aunt Ernestine. Jones taught Valens how to tune a guitar and play chords. After building a green and white electric guitar for himself in his junior-high-school wood-shop class, Valens began to experiment with the Afro-American rhythm and blues songs he heard on the radio. But he liked country music as well, idolizing Roy Rogers and
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Gene Autry, and delighting his classmates in school with a parody of the theme song to the Walt Disney television program “Davy Crockett.” The very plurality of the industrial city excited Valens, he drew his friends from diverse communities. As classmate Manny Sandoval recalls, “They used to put Ritchie down, especially the Mexican kids. They used to call him falso and call me that, too, because we liked to be with everybody—Blacks, Mexicans, whites, whatever. So they [Chicanos] wouldn’t come around that much to group into the music thing with us. It would be the Blacks, some of the whites, and a few Chicanos.” In 1957 he joined the Silhouettes, a mostly Chicano but multi-racial band put together by vibraphonist Gil Rocha that included Valens on guitar, William Jones’s Afro-American sons Conrad and Bill on drums and woodwinds, Italian-Americans Dave Torreta and Sal Barragan on trumpet and alto saxophone, and Japanese-American Walter Takaki on tenor saxophone. Although primarily a rock-and-roll band, the Silhouettes’ Chicano members were well schooled in traditional music; when the occasion called for it, they could break into Mexican corridos as easily as they played “Shake, Rattle, and Roll.” Valens became the featured vocalist with the band, and his tributes to the black rhythm-and-blues singer Little Richard motivated his admirers to start calling him “Little Ritchie.”

In the brief period between Valens’s emergence on the best-selling record charts and his death in a plane crash early in 1959, he brought an extraordinary range of music before pop audiences. He borrowed from white rockabilly, black blues, and Mexican folk musicians because they all made up parts of his cultural environment in postwar Los Angeles. “La Bamba” and “Come On, Let’s Go” featured variations on melodies and harmonies common to Mexican fiesta music, while “Ooh My Head” employed the boogie-woogie form and vocal mannerisms common to Afro-American music. One of Valens’s unfinished records included an attempt to lay the rhythm popularized by blues guitarist Bo Diddley underneath the melody of “Malgueña,” a song originally written by Cuban bandleader Ernesto Lecuona, but blended by Valens with the Mexican march “Espan Canti.” Radio programs and phonograph records made Eddie Cochran’s rockabilly and Bo Diddley’s rhythm-and-blues songs an organic part of Valens’s life, while the limited but nonetheless real cultural mixing in working-class neighborhoods enabled young people to explore the culture of their neighbors. Valens wrote his big hit song “Donna” about a failed romance with an Anglo classmate whose father ordered her to stop going out with “that Mexican,” and he recorded a version of his favorite rhythm-and-blues song “Framed,” which had originally been recorded by a Los Angeles rhythm-and-blues group, The Robins, but which had been written by Mike Stoller and Jerry Leiber.

Valens’s tragic death at age seventeen deprived the Los Angeles Chicano community of its biggest star, and it cut short the career of one of rock and roll’s most eclectic synthesizers. But other artists carried on his propensities for blending the folk music of the barrio with the styles and forms circulated within popular music. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, groups including the Safis Brothers, Carlos Brothers, Rene and Ray, and the Romancers had regional and national hit songs that reflected the barrio’s dialogue with mainstream rock-and-roll music. Just as Ritchie Valens established himself as a commercial performer by playing rhythm-and-blues-styled versions of Anglo and Mexican songs for a mixed audience, later Chicano musicians played a mix of different kinds of music for a combination of audiences. In concerts at East Los Angeles College and at El Monte Legion Stadium, at dances held in youth centers and union halls, and in popular nightclubs like the Rhythm Room and Rainbow Gardens, Chicano rock and rollers learned to blend Mexican and rock music into a synthesis that won them admirers both inside and outside the barrio.

In 1965 Frankie “Cannibal” Garcia and his group, the “Headhunters,” brought Los Angeles Chicano rock music to new audiences when their “Land of a Thousand Dances” entered the national best-seller charts. Garcia got his start as a rock singer when the lead vocalist for the Royal Jesters (another East Los Angeles rock group) got sick, and the band recruited Garcia to take his place “because I sang in school with a mariachi band, doing traditional Mexican music.” Garcia later joined with some friends from the Ramona Gardens Housing Project to form Cannibal and the Headhunters, taking their name from Garcia’s “street” (gang) name of “Cannibal” gained when he bit an opponent in a fight. One of their most effective songs in live performances had been Chris Kenner’s “Land of a Thousand Dances,” but at one show Garcia forgot the words at the beginning of the song and ad-libbed “na-na-na-nana” to the delight of the crowd. In the studio they retained Cannibal’s accidental improvisation to
give the record a captivating introduction. They also borrowed the
double drum sound prominent in Stevie Wonder records to forge a
synthesis that attracted the attention of audiences all over the coun-
try.

Yet however much they might influence popular culture, Chicano
rock musicians could not be completely assimilated. Frankie "Cann-
ibal" Garcia feels that his group's Chicano identity prevented them
from attaining greater success after they reached the Billboard Top
Forty with "Land of a Thousand Dances" in 1965. Garcia remembers,"They didn't know how to market us, for one. There were basically
only black or white groups in the early 1960s, not even many mixed
groups. The people didn't even know what we were half of the time;
a lot of people thought we were Hawaiian or something. And with
the name Cannibal and the Headhunters, most people just assumed
we'd be black."38

Whether the audience knew what they were or not, Cannibal and
the Headhunters found that they could not forget who they were. Re-
membering a tour through the southern states with the Rolling
Stones, Garcia relates, "It was a shock to us to go somewhere and see
restrooms that would say 'white only' or 'black only.' I'd say 'Where
do we go? We would get kicked out of restaurants, no Latinos allowed.
There was a big billboard in Jacksonville, Florida that said 'No nigg-
ers, no spics, no Mexicans allowed.' I wrote home and said 'You
know what Mom? There's this big marquee that says they don't like
us here.'"39

Other Chicano musicians in the 1960s combined a fusion of pop-
ular and Mexican music with lyrics that evoked the complex plural-
ities of the city streets. Thee Midnighers scored a national hit in 1965
with "Whittier Boulevard," a song honoring the main traffic artery of
the East Los Angeles barrio. Drawing inspiration from the energy and
imagination of the car customizers and cruisers who claimed the
boulevard as their own territory on weekend nights, Thee Midnigh-
ters presented the activities of the car-club cholas to the outside
world, while at the same time elevating the self-image of the cruisers
by inserting their subculture into the discourse of mainstream pop-
ular culture. As Thee Midnighers' lead singer Little Willie G (for Gar-
cia) once explained, "A lot of people say you guys made Whittier
Boulevard famous, but we just took the action off the boulevard and
made it into a song."40

The car culture's quest for fun and good times expressed a desire
for the good life of material success, but it also provided a means for
saturizing and subverting ruling icons of consumer society. Just as
Chicano car customizers "improved" upon the mass-produced vehi-
cles from Detroit, Chicano rock songs like "Whittier Boulevard" cel-
ibrated Mexican-American appropriations of automobiles as part of
a community ritual. By the late 1960s, that dialogue between the im-
ages of mass culture and the realities of barrio life increasingly took
on an expressly political cast. At that time, changes in urban econom-
ics and politics threatened to destroy the social basis for the cultural
pluralism of Los Angeles rock and roll by undermining the social and
economic infrastructure of the central city. The cumulative effects of
postwar highway and housing policies had subsidized suburban
growth at the expense of the inner city, had exacerbated racial and
class polarizations, and had encouraged residential segregation. For
Chicanos, increased migration from Mexico, inadequate access to de-
cent housing, and discrimination within a segmented labor market
all combined to help create a new consciousness.41

The failures of 1960s social programs including the War on Pov-
erty, the effects of the Vietnam War on poor and working-class
youths, and the repressive policies of the Los Angeles Police Depar-
tment all contributed to a growing political activism and cultural na-
tionalism. On August 29, 1970, the Chicano community mobilized for
a massive anti-war demonstration that expressed anger over many
pent-up grievances and complaints. Taking their opposition to the
war and their growing nationalism to the streets, demonstrators re-
lied on their cultural traditions to give form to their protest activity.
As one participant chronicled the start of that day's events,

The boulevard was filled with gente, doing Latino chants and playing
musica right in the streets. It started taking on the atmosphere of a
carnival. Some even danced.42

This demonstration involved an attempt to reclaim city streets as a
terrain for culture, politics, and celebration. But its aggressive festiv-
ity provoked a violent reaction from the authorities. Los Angeles po-
lice officers used force against the demonstrators; one officer shot
and killed Los Angeles Times columnist Ruben Salazar. The Salazar
killing outraged many people within the Mexican-American commu-
nity and helped mobilize subsequent activism and demonstrations.43
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The political ferment surrounding the 1970 demonstration found its way into Mexican-American rock-and-roll music in significant ways. Thee Midnighters (who had recorded “Whittier Boulevard”) recorded a song titled “Chicano Power” in 1970, and the V.L.P.’s changed their name that same year to El Chicano. In the early 1970s, East Los Angeles musicians began to feature Latin musical forms and Spanish-language lyrics more prominently in their songs, and they attached themselves to a variety of community icons and subcultures. A series of outdoor music festivals, known popularly as “Chicano Woodstocks,” showcased the community’s musicians and provided an arena for displaying and celebrating diverse images of Chicano identity. The band Tierra emerged as a favorite of the “low rider” car customizers in the early 1970s, while Los Lobos got their start with an album recorded under the aegis of Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers union. Mixing images from the past of pachucos and cholas with contemporary ones like low riders, these bands and their audiences placed current struggles in historical perspective, preserving a measure of continuity in a period of extraordinary change.45

Yet the music of East Los Angeles still had a significant influence on artists and audiences outside the barrio. In 1975, for example, a mostly Afro-American jazz/funk ensemble from Long Beach calling themselves War recorded “Low Rider,” a tribute to Chicano car customizers, cruisers, and musicians.45 One of the year’s best-selling records, “Low Rider,” expressed War’s own experiences playing dances and concerts for Mexican-American audiences throughout southern California, but the song also reflected demographic trends in Los Angeles that encouraged black-Chicano cultural interaction. In 1970 more than 50,000 Hispanics lived in the traditionally black south-central area of Los Angeles; by 1980 that figure had doubled, with Chicanos making up 21% of the total population of the south-central area.46 The clear Latin influence on the subject and style of “Low Rider” testifies to the importance of Chicano music to American popular music, even when Chicano artists themselves might not enjoy access to a mass audience.

Popular Music and Postmodernism

The rock-and-roll music created by Mexican-American musicians in Los Angeles since World War II bears particular relevance to the issues of ethnicity, identity, and culture raised in Octavio Paz’s lament. From the Don Tosti Band of the 1940s through Los Lobos in the 1980s, Los Angeles’s Chicano musicians have made commercially successful records by blending the folk music of Mexico with the cultural fusions of the modern day barrio.47 Their proclivities for mixing eclectic styles, for making references to their community and its history, and for acknowledging the diverse influences on their art display a conscious or intuitive postmodernism—delighting in difference, undermining univocal master narratives, and celebrating the decentralized and polyglot nature of popular culture. In its most successful commercial forms, Chicano rock-and-roll music from Los Angeles transformed a specific ethnic culture rooted in common experiences into more than just a novelty to be appropriated by incomprehending outsiders. Confronted with media monopolies and public sentiments blind to the unique circumstances of Mexican-Americans, Chicano musicians drew upon both residual and emergent elements in their community to win some measure of participation in the creation and dissemination of mass popular culture. Musical forms and social attitudes emanating from the isolation and marginality of barrio life took on new meaning when appropriated as “youth” music by consumers with little knowledge or concern about the ethnicity of the musicians.

In his superb work on ethnic autobiographies, anthropologist Michael M. J. Fischer identifies the core components of the postmodern sensibility as bifocality or reciprocity of perspectives, juxtaposition of multiple realities, intertextuality, inter-referentiality, and comparisons through families of resemblance.48 Fischer’s categories encompass the central practices of Los Angeles Mexican-American rock-and-roll musicians since World War II. Caught between the realities of life in their community and the hegemony of Anglo-capitalist culture, Chicano artists fashioned a bifocal music accessible from both inside and outside their community. They juxtaposed multiple realities, blending Mexican folk music with Afro-American rhythm and blues, playing English-language songs in a Mexican style for audiences filled with Spanish speakers, and answering requests for both Mexican and rock music with the same song—“La Bamba.” They practiced particularly intricate forms of intertextuality by connecting their music to community subcultures and institutions ori-
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entended around speech, dress, car customizing, art, theater, and politics. References to shared historical and cultural experiences permeated Mexican-American rock-and-roll songs, but these references extended beyond the immediate Chicano community as songs featured rockabilly and soul influences borrowed from white and black working-class music. That inter-referentiality complemented an equally adept facility for making comparisons through families of resemblance. Chicano musicians and artists could incorporate white rockabilly or black rhythm-and-blues music into their songs because they recognized similarities in form and content that transcended surface differences. Yet even while drawing upon families of resemblance, Mexican-American musicians in Los Angeles never lost sight of the singular historical realities shaping them and their community.

The emergence of Los Lobos as a significant commercial rock-and-roll band in the 1980s provides an illustration of the persistent bicultural, juxtaposition of multiple realities, intertextuality, inter-referentiality, and comparisons through families of resemblance in Los Angeles Chicano music. Mixing Mexican Norteño accordions and guitarróns with Afro-American and Anglo rockabilly drums and electric guitars, Los Lobos stand between Chicano culture and mass culture, playing to audiences in both camps. The five members of the group first learned to play their instruments in response to the popularity of the Beatles, but they secured their first employment as musicians playing Mexican folk music for neighborhood gatherings. In response to critics who charge that the band's forays into rock and roll betray their roots in folk music, drummer Lobo Perez replies, "We always aspired to play to everybody, but there was no place to expose it. We haven't gone back on the basic philosophy of this band, which was to play cultural music. It's a music that's as much Mexican culture as it is American, and that's what we are."^{50}

Rock-and-roll audiences first discovered Los Lobos when they served as the opening act for a U.S. tour by the punk/new wave band the Clash. A white band from England playing new-wave music with strong reggae and rhythm-and-blues influences, the Clash recognized the families of resemblance that tied their music to that of Los Lobos, and sought to give the Chicano band greater commercial exposure. Subsequently, the Blasters, a Los Angeles Anglo band steeped in rhythm and blues and rockabilly, arranged to have Los Lobos open live shows for them. Conrad Lozano of Los Lobos acknowledged his group's debt to the Blasters in a 1984 interview when he told a reporter, "Musically it gave us someone to look at and reinforced our commitment to our style. We met them and had a lot in common. We became friends and they liked our music so much that they had us open some gigs for them. That really allowed many more people to see and hear us."^{50}

Anglo saxophonist Steve Berlin left the Blasters to join Los Lobos, a transition that seemed logical to him because of his own commitment to juxtaposing multiple musical realities. Born in Philadelphia and nurtured on that city's rhythm-and-blues music, Berlin introduced Los Lobos to some old rhythm-and-blues songs, while they taught him to play their traditional polkas and corridos. Describing his connections with Los Lobos and other artists on Los Angeles's Slash Records label, Berlin observes, "A lot of us have similar record collections, and a shared appreciation for people like Hank Williams and George Jones. The Del Fuegos' heroes are the Blasters' heroes and they're our heroes too. If you went to everybody's house, there would be the same bunch of records they consider important."^{51}

When similar record collections enable Steve Berlin, a white musician influenced by black rhythm and blues, to join a Chicano rock band on the basis of a mutual affinity for country and western singers Hank Williams and George Jones, we have gone a long way toward a world in which "all that is solid melts into air." Cultures appear interchangeable and works of art seem divorced from real historical experience. But the fusions that characterize Chicano rock-and-roll music reflect more than the confusions and ambiguities of postmodern society. Their definitive contours come from the conscious choices made by organic intellectuals attempting to address the anguish of invisibility by bringing their own cultural traditions into the mainstream of mass culture. Mexican-American musicians could stay with traditional Chicano musical forms like ranchera or cumbia music and find recognition and reward within their own community. Or they could master Anglo styles and assimilate into the mainstream without anyone being aware of their Chicano identity. But Los Angeles Chicano rock-and-roll artists have generally selected another path. They have tried to straddle the line between the two cultures, creating a fusion music that resonates with the chaos and costs of cultural collision. Their choices arbitrate particularly complex tensions emanating from ethnicity and oppression for Chicanos, while hold-
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ing open to other groups a vision of cultural fusion based on families of resemblance and similarities of emotion and experience.

As members of an aggrieved community, and as artists involved in the generation and circulation of ideas reflecting the needs of that community, Mexican-American rock musicians from Los Angeles have functioned as what Antonio Gramsci referred to as “organic intellectuals.” Gramsci felt that dominant social groups wield power as much through ideological hegemony as through physical force, and he charged that traditional intellectuals reinforce social hierarchies by serving as “experts in legitimation.” But Gramsci pointed out that subordinated groups have their own intellectuals who attempt to pose a “counter-hegemony” by presenting images subversive of existing power relations. The elite try to “manage consent” by making domination appear natural, voluntary, and inevitable. Organic intellectuals, on the other hand, attempt to build a “historical bloc”—a coalition of oppositional groups united around counter-hegemonic ideas. The efforts by Chicano rock musicians in Los Angeles to enter the mainstream by linking up with other oppositional cultures reflect their struggle to assemble a “historical bloc” capable of challenging the ideological hegemony of Anglo cultural domination. In the struggle, they found that their primary weapons included biculturalism, juxtaposition of multiple realities, intertextuality, inter-referentiality, and comparison through families of resemblance.

Juxtaposition of multiple realities in Chicano life allowed for juxtaposition of multiple realities in Mexican-American music. In a culture that drew sharp lines among black, white, and brown music and audiences, Chicano rock-and-roll artists worked to break down barriers. To a commercial marketing structure that imposed rigid categories on rock, popular, folk, and ethnic music, they offered songs that fit no simple description. The dominant culture and its popular culture industry often treated ethnicity as a discrete and finite entity, but Chicano musicians treated it as plastic and open-ended. For them, ethnicity seemed as much a dynamic construct as an inherent fact, as much a strategic response to the present as an immutable series of practices and beliefs derived from the past. Consequently, they brought a sense of play and whimsy to the arts of bricolage. Just as Ritchie Valens experimented with a Bo Diddley-style rhythm-and-blues bass line beneath the Latin guitar standard “La Malaguena,” Los Lobos brought the accordion and guitarron into use as rock-and-roll instruments.

The same forces that encourage Los Angeles’s Chicano rock-and-roll musicians to roll back the boundaries of ethnic identity also compel them to incorporate ideas from nonmusical sources into their work. As organic intellectuals chronicling the cultural life of their community, they draw upon street slang, car customizing, clothing styles, and wall murals for inspiration and ideas, as well as upon more traditional cultural creations such as literature, plays, and poems. Their work is intertextual, constantly in dialogue with other forms of cultural expression, and most fully appreciated when located in context.

The commercially successful Chicano band Tierra got its start in the early 1970s as a favorite band of the low-rider subculture in Los Angeles. As anthropologist Brenda Bright demonstrates in her fine work on Mexican-American car customizers, low riders are themselves masters of postmodern cultural manipulation. They juxtapose seemingly inappropriate realities—fast cars designed to go slowly, “improvements” that flaunt their impracticality, like chandeliers instead of inside overhead lights. They encourage a bifocal perspective—they are made to be watched but only after adjustments have been made to provide ironic and playful commentary on prevailing standards of automobile design. They are intertextual—cars are named after songs or incidents in Mexican history, zoot-suitet pachucos appear in car paintings. Low-rider “happenings” incorporate elements of popular fashion, dance, and music in a community ritual celebrating the utility and beauty of automobiles that the dominant culture would deem impractical, tasteless, and garish. Tierra incorporated low-rider intertextuality in its music, using fragments of barrio memories in song lyrics that celebrate zoot suits and rhythms that approximate the jitterbug dancing of the 1940s and 1950s. In a similar fashion Thee Midnitighters wrote and recorded “Whittier Boulevard” in 1965 to celebrate the culture of car customizers and cruisers along East Los Angeles’s main thoroughfare in the 1960s. In 1982 Ruben Guevara’s “Los” explored Chicano history through the “writing on the walls”—the distinctive graffiti of the barrio.54

Chicano musicians had to assume a bifocal perspective as a matter of self-respect. The dominant culture imposed an identity on them. Regardless of their characteristics as individuals, Anglo stereotypes
about Mexicans and their culture influenced the ways in which Chicanos were perceived outside the barrio, and they had to be aware of the limits imposed on them by that cultural domination. But to accept the stereotypes would mean denying one's own vision. Prevented from defining themselves because of pervasive discrimination and prejudice, but unwilling to leave the work of definition to others, they adopted a bifocal perspective that acknowledged but did not accept the majority culture’s images of Chicanos.

A conscious inter-referentiality accompanies the pervasive inter-textuality of Los Angeles’s Chicano rock-and-roll music. Even though they seek success in commercial popular culture, these musicians employ repeated references to individual and collective histories in the manner of folk artists. Mexican-American rock-and-roll artists acknowledge their roots; Ritchie Valens hit the best-seller charts with “La Bamba,” a song that he learned from his family when he was five. Los Lobos won a Grammy Award for folk music with a faithful rendition of “Anselma,” a hundred-year-old Mexican song. But they also connect the musical past to social and political history. “I grew up listening to the folk groups and balladeers,” Ruben Guevara explains in tracing the origins of his music, but he plays little traditional music himself. Instead, Guevara adapts the music of today to collective popular memory. He founded Zyanra Records in 1982 (“zyanya” is a Mexican-Indian word meaning “always”) to provide an outlet for Chicano musicians and a forum for addressing the community’s youth. “The younger Chicanos who did not experience the Chicano movement of the 60s and 70s lost a cultural awareness, and through this music I would like to make them aware of social issues,” Guevara insists. Groups on the Zyanra label including Con Safos, Los Ferros, and Califas use overtly political lyrics and a self-conscious ethnic nationalism to address the problems of contemporary barrio life. But even those groups that shun direct political or historical references in their lyrics still evoke the past through references to pachucos, cholos, zoot suits, and community heroes like Ritchie Valens. Willie Herron, a Chicano punk/rock musician, mural painter, and poet, sees the fate of barrio musicians directly wrapped up in the fate of the community itself. Explaining why Chicano rock-and-roll music has failed to achieve greater commercial acceptance, Herron points out, “We had setbacks all along—the death of Ritchie Valens in ’59 being one of the biggest. In the 70s the reasons became

more political—the Chicano moratorium [an anti-war demonstration that ended in a police riot], the death of Ruben Salazar [a newspaper columnist killed by police officers during the Chicano moratorium], many of the people in the Hispanic community just dropped out.”

Decisions by Chicano rock-and-roll musicians to blend cultural and political history echo the stance taken by artists in other media in their community. John Valdez, an artist who grew up in the Estrada Courts Housing Project in East Los Angeles, gained critical recognition in the 1980s for paintings that featured pachucos and other barrio symbols. “I like to show the Pachuco image,” Valdez relates, “even if some Chicanos who are trying to assimilate think they left this in the past. It’s still something that is very much with us.” For Valdez, pachucos imagery retains meaning because it displays “the beauty of a people we have been told are not beautiful.” Similar tensions inform the writing of Mary Helen Ponce from East Los Angeles. In one of her short stories she recalls a childhood in which, “We really lived in two worlds. The secure barrio that comforted and accepted us, and the ‘other,’ the institutions such as the school that were out to acculturize us, sanitize us, Americanize us, and de-lus us at least once a year.” Ponce describes her feelings of solidarity with a classmate found to have lice in her hair, because Ponce resented the smug sense of superiority that enabled Anglo school officials to make Chicano children feel ashamed of their homes. The same bifo- cality that makes Ponce want to describe the world as divided in two, and that makes her side with the despised ethnic world, induces Willie Herron to claim that he formed his punk rock group Los Ille-gals “to talk about the experience of being a cholo, a low rider, of being in gangs, all of it.” The same stubborn inter-referentiality that leads John Valdez to celebrate the pachucos, compels Ruben Guevara to explain his song “cholo” with a motto— ‘The present day Pachuco refuses to die.’ Inter-referentiality, intertextuality, juxtaposition of multiple realities, and bifocality characterize the music of Los Angeles’s Chicano rock-and-roll musicians, and they explain much of its aesthetic. As part of mass popular culture that aesthetic appealed to people from other communities, building alliances on the basis of comparisons through families of resemblance. In Los Angeles, Anglo rock-and-roll musicians Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart (Don Van Vliet) included references to pachucos in their 1970s albums, and Zappa invented a mythical Chicano band, Ruben and the Jets, to
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embody the pure spirit of rock and roll. He persuaded Ruben Guevara to form an actual group called Ruben and the Jets during a backstage conversation after Zappa had attended Guevara’s cultural nationalist play, “Who Are the People?” Guevara’s recollection of that meeting testifies to the power of families of resemblance; he recalled that he and Zappa “rapped from Bo Diddley to Beethoven. We found that we had the same musical roots.” Of course, neither Zappa nor Guevara made music that actually sounded very much like Beethoven’s or Bo Diddley’s, but the commodity culture of the postmodern world made them feel they were on common ground because they shared appreciation of those two musicians.

Families of resemblance also brought together suburban Los Angeles punk and new-wave audiences and artists with rock bands from East Los Angeles in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Chicano bands including the Brat, Odd Squad, and the Plugz blended the urgency and emotionalism of 1950s rock and roll (the Plugz even recorded a version of Ritchie Valens’s “La Bamba”) with lyrics speaking to the alienation and frustration of contemporary youth. Relatively affluent suburban teen-agers could identify with the music of a band like Los Illegals, not because they really knew what it was like to be a cholo, but because the real historical experiences of the Chicano community gave its artists a well-developed vocabulary for talking about alienation and oppression. Neither the punk-rock musicians nor their audiences were actually cholos, but the subjective act of identification with cholismo created a family of resemblance—a mutual desire to draw upon real historical experiences to proclaim distance from the dominant culture and its values.

The commercial popularity of Los Lobos in the 1980s provides another example of the capacity for Los Angeles’s Chicano rock-and-roll musicians to form a historical bloc with other groups based on families of resemblance. Los Lobos proudly affirm their cultural heritage, but they reject separatism. They insist on acceptance as “legitimate contributors to contemporary music” without having to hide their ethnic identity. Aware of the ways in which they might be perceived as a novelty by a mass audience, they attempt to use their marginality to find families of resemblance connecting themselves to other groups. Drummer Louis Perez explains the group’s philosophy by talking about the title song from their 1984 album, “How Will the Wolf Survive?” Perez recalls that he read a National Geographic ar-

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ticle about wolves as an endangered species and that he compared their plight to those of people he knew. As he describes writing the song:

It started out being about the wolf and the next verse turned into a message of hope for the middle class. And the last verse is about how bands all over the country are trying to preserve something close to the heart of America. So yeah, it’s about whether or not Los Lobos will survive. Not only us . . .

Perez’s lyrics talk about a wolf “running scared now forced to hide, in a land where he once stood with pride”—a clear reference to the Chicano people and to Los Lobos (“the wolves” in Spanish) themselves. The narrator predicts that the hunted creature will somehow find its way and concludes with a tribute to the “young hearts and minds” in bands whose “songs of passion” keep alive the wolf’s hope for survival. For Perez, the world of rock-and-roll music does not obliterate local cultures by rendering them invisible; rather, it is an arena where diverse groups find common ground while still acknowledging important differences. The prefigurative counter-hegemony fashioned by Los Lobos has succeeded in winning the allegiance of musicians from other marginalized cultures. Their songs have been recorded by polka artist Frankie Yankovic as well as by country and western star Waylon Jennings. The southern “swamp rocker” Tony Joe White introduced Jennings to “Will the Wolf Survive.” At first, Jennings could not make out all the lyrics in the song, but he loved the record’s sound, so he decided to record it himself. He recalls,

The funny thing is, we couldn’t understand all the words on the record, and that often means the lyrics are bad and they are trying to cover them up. Still, I loved the feel of the record and we decided to record it—even without knowing what it said completely. When we got the words from the publisher, I was knocked out. The words were great. I think everyone can relate to that song.

The Cajun accordion player and singer Jo-El Sonnier views Los Lobos as artists whose cultural struggles parallel his own. As he explains:

I’ve sold myself as French, as R&B, as country, and as rock. But I want to do it all if I can. I think we could open doors for this music. Look at what Los Lobos has done for ethnic music, and they got
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signed without really changing. It can’t just be that all people want is Madonna and punk music! All I’ve ever wanted to do is bring my music and my culture to the people. I have a message about the preservation of it. I feel like if I let my culture die, I die with it.”

Sonni’s strategy of using the plasticity of popular music as a means of preserving his ethnic culture echoes the efforts by Chicano musicians like Los Lobos to build a historical bloc; his acknowledgment of their importance as a model reveals a self-conscious understanding of the families of resemblance that they nurture and cultivate. With their bifocality, juxtaposition of multiple realities, intertextuality, inter-referentiality, and families of resemblance, Chicano rock-and-roll musicians from Los Angeles explore all the main axes of postmodern art. Jean-François Lyotard has celebrated this postmodern condition as a logical and healthy response to the totalitarian imperatives of technology and capital. Lyotard and other postmodernists see the proliferation of marginal subcultures and the confusing display of remnants from past eras in contemporary culture as a break with oppressive master narratives. To postmodernists, improvised cultural forms and free-floating signs and symbols appropriated out of context can open up a world of play and desire previously constrained by the tyranny of master narratives.

Scholars uneasy about the open-ended implications of some postmodernist theory nonetheless concede its central point—that contemporary society entails a fragmentation and decentering that radically alters the nature and function of cultural creation and reception. Fredric Jameson attempts to steer Lyotard’s discussion toward a reemphasis on the importance of history and historical consciousness, arguing that a world view with no sense of the past or expectation for the future only degenerates into schizophrenia, trapping individuals within the bounds of their own immediate sense perceptions. Jameson maintains that the emancipatory possibilities in contemporary cultural forms come from a “political unconscious”—from “buried” master narratives that carry on the historical traditions of opposition sedimented within the collective experience and memory of aggrieved populations. In a similar vein, Jürgen Habermas argues that the plasticity of contemporary culture reveals a “legitimation crisis” brought on by the failure of capitalist society to fulfill the promises of Enlightenment and revolutionary traditions. Thus the decentralized and fragmented culture of the contemporary world is not an end in itself for Habermas, but, rather, an indication of popular desire for an eventual consensus, for a practice that closes the ruptures and disruptions of capitalism. Marshall Berman shares the sentiment voiced by Jameson and Habermas that modernity is “an incomplete project” rather than a totalitarian master narrative, and like them he champions the “unity of disunity” by which modern culture represents a collective struggle to feel at home in the world.

What Jameson, Habermas, and Berman champion on the plane of criticism, Mexican-American rock-and-roll musicians have created in art. The marginality of Chicano rock-and-roll musicians has provided them with a constant source of inspiration and a constant spur toward innovation that gained them the attention of mainstream audiences. But this marginal sensibility amounts to more than novelty or personal eccentricity; it holds legitimacy and power as the product of a real historical community’s struggle with oppression. The “buried” narratives in this music—narratives about group identity, oppositional subcultures, and a desire for unity—amount to more than a “political unconscious.” As Chicano musicians demonstrate in their comments about their work, their music reflects a quite conscious cultural politics that seeks inclusion in the American mainstream by transforming it.

Almost forty years after Octavio Paz’s visit to Los Angeles, Mexican-Americans in that city still suffer from the anguish of invisibility. Their numbers have increased, but discrimination and exploitation leave them under-represented and under-rewarded. The expanded reach and scope of the mass media over the past four decades has exacerbated the cultural crisis facing Mexican-Americans; rarely do they see their world presented sympathetically or even accurately in the communications media that reinforce and legitimate Anglo-cultural hegemony. But the “vague atmosphere” of Mexicanism perceived by Paz persists in the present. In community subcultures and styles, in the prefigurative counter-hegemony of organic intellectuals, it continues to inform the struggles of the present with the perceptions and values of the past. Conscious of the fragmentation of the modern world, this constantly changing “Mexicanism” cultivates its own marginality even as it reaches out to other groups. It is not a buried master narrative, but, rather, a conscious cultural politics that survives by “floating and hovering,” never quite existing and never quite vanishing. Invisibility has its psychic and political costs, but for
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Chicano musicians in Los Angeles, it provides the ultimate camouflage for the difficult but necessary work of building a historical bloc.
CHAPTER 5

5. See Richard Tertian, “Deconstructing Memory,” 20. Also see chapter 2.
11. Simon Frith, Sound Effects, 158.
17. Lawrence Grossberg, “Another Boring Day in Paradise.”

CHAPTER 6

33. The phrase “prestige from below” is from a talk by Stuart Hall at the Economy of Prestige Conference, University of Minnesota, April 9, 1988, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
38. Arnold Shaw, The Rockin’ 50s 79.
40. Steve Chapple and Beebee Garofalo, Rockin’ Roll Is Here to Play, 46–47.
41. Steve Chapple and Beebee Garofalo, Rockin’ Roll Is Here to Play, 60–64.
42. Simon Frith, Sound Effects, 83, 84.
43. Ted Dresowekiewicz, “Irma Thomas: Radio or Not, She’s Still Queen,” Musician n. 119 (September) 1988, 11.
44. Steve Chapple and Beebee Garofalo, Rockin’ Roll Is Here To Play, 69.

5. The term bicoque is from Claude Lévi-Strauss, who uses it to propose a universal description of innate human characteristics, but it is used here simply as a description of cultural amalgamation processes.
Notes to Chapter 6

22. Interview with Johnny Otis.
23. Interview with Johnny Otis.
25. Interview with Johnny Otis.
26. Interview with Johnny Otis.
27. Interview with Johnny Otis, Ruben Guevara, "The View from the Sixth Street Bridge," 118.
28. Interview with Johnny Otis.
39. Ibid. 53.
45. Melvin Oliver and James Johnson, Jr., "Inter-Ethnic Conflict in an Urban Ghetto," Research in Social Movements: Conflict and Change, v. 6, JAI Sage, 57–94.
46. Ruben Guevara, "The View From the Sixth Street Bridge."
52. Ibid. 9–10.
60. Los Angeles Times, October 12, 1980.