



MUSIC

What Store Stickers On Old Records Reveal About History Of Mexican American Music

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Agustin Gurza of UCLA's Frontera Collection has been studying stickers affixed to old 78 rpm records. It has allowed him to uncover a history of Mexican American music in the United States.

Transcript

AILSAL CHANG, HOST:

So if you switched on the radio in 1930s Los Angeles very early in the morning, you might have heard a song like this.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "ZENAIDA")

LOS MADRUGADORES: (Singing in Spanish).

CHANG: Los Madrugadores were the most popular Mexican American group during the Great Depression.

LEILA FADEL, HOST:

Their name translates to The Early Risers, and it was fitting. They serenaded Southern California listeners with live radio performances from 4:00 to 6:00 in(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "ZENAIDA")

LOS MADRUGADORES: (Singing in Spanish).

FADEL: Now, that group and a handful of others are at the center of something of a musical detective story.

AGUSTIN GURZA: The story really is about these retail stickers, not so much about the music.

CHANG: One of the sleuths is Agustin Gurza. He's a writer and editor for the Frontera Collection collection at UCLA. And he wrote about these retail stickers for its blog. He collects records and also owned his own record shop for several years in the 1980s.

FADEL: Now, he's not really talking about the little white price stickers you see on albums today. The ones we're talking about go way back to the old 78 rpm records.

GURZA: The stickers themselves were created by individual record stores as a way to advertise their retail location. In a way, you could think of them as business cards. But instead of being handed out at the counter, they would paste the sticker right on top of the label of the particular record.

FADEL: Gurza says the stickers can tell you a little about the shops where people bought and sold music.

CHANG: Take, for instance, the record "Sonador" by Quinteto De Los Desvelados.

(SOUNDBITE OF QUINTETO DE LOS DESVELADOS' "SONADOR")

CHANG: On it, a sticker from an old downtown LA shop - one of Gurza's personal favorites. The sticker depicts a man with a guitar. A record behind him proclaims the shop's name, Repertorio Musical Mexicano.

GURZA: This is a shop that was located on Main Street near Olvera Street. And it had to be like the center of the universe for Latin music in LA during the '20s and '30s.

FADEL: At the bottom of the sticker, the name Mauricio Calderon. He was the shop's owner.

GURZA: And his sticker actually indicates that he sells Mexican music for Mexicans.

FADEL: Calderon was a civic leader in the immigrant Latino community. And his shop was a crucial meeting ground for Mexican musicians, including those Depression-era stars we mentioned, Los Madrugadores, who formed after a chance meeting at the store.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

LOS MADRUGADORES: (Singing in Spanish).

CHANG: For Gurza, the magic of these store stickers comes from the ability to imagine the path the records might have taken from manufacturer to record shop to the hands it passed through and history that comes with it.

GURZA: Some of these stickers are from record stores in what we might think as out-of-the-way places, I mean, Fresno or San Bernardino, places where they obviously catered to the farmworker, maybe the migrant workers. So in the span of history, people forget that these stores ever existed until you find the label on a record.

FADEL: But sometimes the magic comes from something a lot more personal.

GURZA: This one sticker, it was a little white square sticker with just the name and the price and a code. And I said, oh, my God, I recognize that. That was my own store. It was a store that I used to own back in the '80s called DiscoCentro that was located on Whittier Boulevard in East LA. And when I saw the sticker, I said I, can't believe this. Like a boomerang, buying my own record back.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CHANG: And that feeling is something that is hard to put a price on.

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