

# Low and Slow: Chicano Low Rider Music

By Veronica Dahlberg

If there was a sub-genre of music that could be called Chicano music, it would be divided into multiple categories such as “Eastside Sound,” “Low Rider” “Tejano” “Cruisin’” and many others. Ruben Molina, a record collector from Los Angeles, set out to assemble in one reference book, the artists and songs that define Low Rider music. His book is entitled, “The Old Barrio Guide to Low Rider Music 1950 -1975.” First published in 2002, the third printing of the book is now available with new entries

**“Low Rider music is like the cars—it’s something that no one else has, it has the personal touch.”** *Ruben Molina, author and Chicano Music Historian*

and photos. “I saw a need for us to show that our culture is not as narrow as some people might think,” Molina said. “I’ve been collecting books on music about everything, such as the English Invasion, everything but the Chicano taste. And I thought, Why not us?”

Each page is a glossy, photo-filled encyclopedia of information that Molina collected over many years of research. The entries highlight artists that have been long

forgotten in the music industry, but remain alive in the hearts of Chicanos. The music has its roots in the *orquestras* that played in Los Angeles after World War II, with band leaders like Lalo Guerrero (See story on Lalo Guerrero on Page 27 of HOLA) and promoters like Billy Cardenas.

They took elements of Mexican culture and added influences of soul and R & B. Young Mexican teens went to dances featuring bands such as The Romancers, the Jaguars and the Salas Brothers. A new urban style developed in the barrios, known as *Pachuco/Zoot Suit* culture.

Low Rider music is about style: the music is silky, smooth—usually soulful ballads with harmonies. And it’s also about uniqueness. The music selected by the Low Rider culture was usually B-sides, rare underground and bootleg songs. In addition to the Chicano groups, many of the entries in Molina’s book feature black rhythm and blues, Doo Wop and soul groups. “The Chicanos really took a lot from black music,” Molina said.

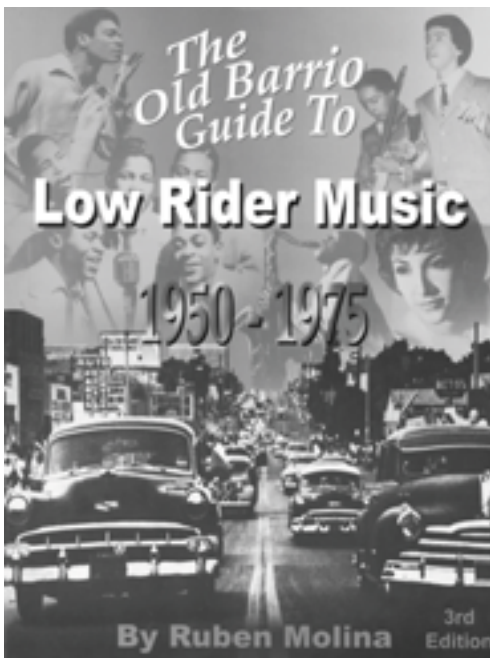
“Low Rider music is like the cars—it’s something that no one else has, it has the personal touch,” Molina said. “It’s the same thing with the music.” Molina has collected over 3000 record singles (45 rpms), many of them Chicano groups such as Thee



The Romancers (c.1963): Top Row, left to right: Ralph Ventura, Manuel “Magoo” Rodriguez, Bobby Hernandez. Bottom row: Cesar (?), Max Uballez, Manuel Mosqueda.  
Photo courtesy of Max Uballez

Midneters from East LA, Sunny and the Sunliners from San Antonio, Bobby Rosales and the El Paso Premiers. “It’s the music that I grew up with,” Molina said. “A lot of the Chicano group recordings that you can’t find anywhere. They were regional in their popularity. Some of these recordings now sell for as much as \$400 each.”

One of the first Chicano groups recorded, classified as the “Eastside Sound,” were The Romancers. Their song, “My Heart Cries” from 1965, is considered a Low Rider classic. In his book, Molina calls it “A tear-soaked ballad that is one of the greatest records to come out of East Los Angeles.” Max Uballez, vocalist and rhythm guitar player for The Romancers, and now a re



*Copies of “The Old Barrio Guide to Low Rider Music” can be purchased online at [www.mictlan.com](http://www.mictlan.com)*

## Chicano Low Rider Music

cord producer near San Francisco, explains the song's appeal as a Low Rider classic: "It has all the components—it's a ballad, the background harmonies are Doo Wop, the lyrics are similar to what you'd find in Mariachi music, it has a whimsical feeling," Uballez said. But he is quick to point out that the Eastside Sound is not the same as Low Rider music. "Low Rider is oldies. And at that time, a lot of the oldies used piano.

When we started the Eastside Sound, we didn't have piano. We used a rhythm guitar," Uballez explains. They also didn't have venues where they could play in the 1960s. So their fans formed the Romancerettes and created a nonprofit group that was able to rent halls for the band. "The key for the Eastside Sound to grow was we were able to rely on the Romancerettes," Uballez said. "At that time the city of Los Angeles did not let teen dances be held. They thought they would break out in gang warfare." Dozens of Chicano groups grew out of the Eastside

Sound, such as Cannibal and the Headhunters, and later, groups like Malo, the group led by Jorge Santana, Carlos's brother, and then Los Lobos.

Molina says the difference between the Eastside Sound and Low Rider music can be a "complete mystery" to many. "Low Rider music is music from the barrio that we adopted and handed down over the years; grinders, and tearjerkers and B-side ballads that have endured the test of time. We're keeping the music alive," Molina said. "This is our classic music."

# Lalo Guerrero: 1916 - 2005

## The Father of Chicano Music Passes Away

Lalo Guerrero is one of the most beloved and important figures in Mexican and Chicano music. Yet when he passed away on March 17, 2005, he received barely a mention in the mainstream media. He had recorded well over 450 songs, most of them he wrote, and many of his songs became Mexican standards. He has influenced scores of Mexican children with his children's albums featuring the endearing *Las arduillas* (Little Squirrels). There is no clear record of how many songs Guerrero wrote and recorded. He was born in Tucson, and lived and performed in the California, the southwest and Mexico.

His son, Mark, continues to

research and collect information about his prolific father. The most definitive and thorough resource of Lalo Guerrero and Chicano music history in general can be found on Mark's website, [www.markguerrero.net](http://www.markguerrero.net), an excellent must-read for any music buff and historian. It includes a discography of hundreds of Lalo's songs: Mexican standards, *corridos*, ballads, children's songs, *rancheras*, songs with tropical rhythms, political songs, parodies and rock and roll. Lalo Guerrero recorded in English, Spanish, Spanglish and even Caló, the Pachuco dialect. He was a world-class vocalist that never had any musical training.

"I can't think of one person that did the variety of music that my dad did. That's just a fact," said Mark Guerrero, in an interview by phone from his home in Cathedral City, California. "He did so many things, and he did them so well. You have either great singers or great songwriters like Ray Charles, Frank Sinatra, but they didn't do the variety my dad did."

Although Lalo Guerrero received very little attention when he passed away, he was awarded the National Medal of Arts and named a National Folk Treasure by the Smithsonian. The obscurity of Latinos and their accomplishments in American life was a common theme in Lalo's music, especially his parodies. For example, in 1982 he recorded, "No



Photos courtesy of Mark Guerrero

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Chicanos on TV." (*The TV families are all white, Not a Mexican in sight, he sang.*) His political songs depicted the life of migrant farm workers, such as "Corrido de Delano," written for Cesar Chavez and a standard at United Farm Worker rallies. He recorded hundreds of dance

songs, *rancheras*, fox trots or his classic Mexican rock and roll hit from 1955, "Tin Marin de do Pingue." His comedy songs are still hysterically funny today, such as "One Tamale," (Sung to Hello Dolly) or "There's No Tortillas" (sung to O Solo Mio).

"Songs like *Cancion Mexicana* and *Nunca Jamas*—every mariachi knows them," Mark Guerrero said. "Yet as great as he was, as many accolades as he got—so many awards and recognitions—he was in that limited Chicano field. He was very frustrated."

Mark continues to catalogue and search for all of his father's work, discovering more material since his father passed away. "He didn't like to save things. I mean, there were lots of records in his garage, tapes that he made," Guerrero said. "It was really funny with him. Nothing was planned or plotted. It was work. He usually had a record deal of some kind. He always stayed current with what was going on, the news. He just wrote about what was happening around him."



Lalo Guerrero with his early quartet, Las Carlitas (C. 1936) Top left: Joe "Yuca" Salas, Lalo Guerrero, Gregorio "Goyo" Escalante. Seated, Soledad "Chole" Salas.