



Peace Meal Supper Club #15(2): Border Radio

Versailles ~ February 10, 2024

For the benefit of Palestine Children's Relief Fund

The seminal wellspring of mass communication, the high-tech haven of quack cures, faith healers, and prosperity preachers, and the first frontier of the audio underground, Border Radio emanated from multiple points along the Mexican-US border. Subversive from birth, it blow-torched its cross-cultural message clear across the pole into Russia. Media is powerful, especially when it extends beyond boundaries. And of course, boundaries are imaginary.

Course 1: Universality and Norteño

Tortilla Soup

Course 2: Pedro and the Redemption of Tijuana

Caesar Salad ~ Rellenitos

Course 3: Home is Where the Sound is

Enchiladas ~ Red Sauce ~ Rajas con Crema ~ Pappas

Course 4: Closer to the Heart

Canadian Butter Tart ~ Various Accompaniments

Peace Meal Supper Club #15(2): Border Radio

There has never been a culinary border along the southwestern United States. The foods shared between US and Mexican states are part of a vast cultural landscape, one that resounds across the imaginary line that separates us. Border Radio demonstrated that the political border is porous, too: sound originating in Ciudad Acuña, Mexico, for example, could reach most people in the United States. Most critically, it could reach Mexican workers in American fields, orchards, and factories. It brought them the sounds of home, and it helped them navigate the sometimes turbulent current of American bias--and is still doing so.

Border Radio also brought a bonanza of weirdness to American culture. Late night psychics, autographed pictures of Jesus Christ, magical potions to resolve impotent motions, and preachers who shamelessly requested your last dollar: it all buzzed through the one-million-watt whiz-bang known as XER AM, broadcasting from the south side of the Rio Grande. The man behind the curtain, Dr. John R. Brinkley, was one of the greatest con-men of the 20th century. In order to silence his opposition, he simply turned up the volume. Following his dubious lead, others followed. Sound is power.

~ 1 ~

This Norteño variation on a Central Mexican soup reminds us that just as boundaries are porous, culture is very fluid. Just as cross-cultural as border food, Norteño music contains elements of Mexican balladry, Middle European military band music, Czech polkas, and German waltzes. Norteño songs tell stories, and have helped keep culture vibrant among far-flung citizens. Music with a message, and a message with music: the full-service nature of Spanish-language radio, emanating from the border or within a community, has helped people unite in support of their rights. Sound is power.

~ 2 ~

Caesar Salad was born in Tijuana, Mexico, during the days of US Prohibition. US citizens filled Mexican border towns to drink and dine and leave, reinforcing the idea that Mexico existed for the US to use. Pedro J. Gonzalez, a trail-blazing Spanish-language radio producer, ended his career at a Tijuana border-blaster. His life overshadowed the reputation of the border towns: he had been a telegraph operator for Mexican revolutionary Francisco "Pancho" Villa; had a successful musical career with the Norteño group *Los Madrugadores*; established the first US-based Spanish-language radio programs in 1929 at KMPC and KELW in Los Angeles; and interspersed the music with social commentary--which is still the common practice on Spanish-language radio. Though derailed by a prison term--based upon perjured testimony--he continued his advocacy for Spanish-speakers and fought for prison reform. Upon his return to the airwaves, this time at Tijuana's border-blaster XERU, he resumed his public campaigns for social justice. Sound is power.

~ 3 ~

Mexico no longer has its whole enchilada. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo divided it in half, giving the biggest half to the United States. This area includes our present-day states of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Texas, and portions of other states. It should be no surprise that this region contains the largest concentrations of Latinos in the US, many of whom are artificially separated from the land of their heritage. When I worked in kitchens in the US southwest, I sang along to Spanish-language radio with my co-workers. To them, it was more than entertainment. It was history, family, and more importantly, Home: a cohesive set of values and sensory experiences, fluid yet stabilizing, figurative but based in concrete identity. The region abounds with sonorous Spanish place-names, and in the air is the music of the borderlands, itself without a boundary. Sound is power.

~ 4 ~

Place-names, language, music, and other sounds help us establish identity. Our identity erodes as we lose characteristic accents, words, and music. Once our sound is gone, we are also gone. Toronto-based writer Mitchell Akiyama suggests that one culture's "soundmarks" can overwrite those of another. That is, our sound might cease to exist, not of its own accord, but because it has been completely drowned out by a louder sound. What happens when you cannot be heard?

This Canadian Butter Tart represents a goal line of sorts: Mexico had been seeking clear channel access across North America since the early days of radio. The uncontrolled success of Border Radio, along with community radio operations in California and Washington and tireless social advocacy, empowered Mexico to reach its citizens as they work in foreign places. Radio provides an accessible platform, an auditory "site" where all listeners can meet and learn. Spanish-language radio continues its tradition of building community, extending "Home," assisting with immigration compliance, and uniting a scattered citizenry. Sound is power.