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Under the Musical Spell of the Sonidero; Mexican D.J.'s Relay Messages, on Dance Floor and to the Homeland

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Correction Appended

In droves, the young Mexican men crowded around Fausto Salazar at the nightclub, whispering softly in his ear or handing him poetic notes, as cumbia melodies whirled in the air around them.

Mr. Salazar, a short, sharp-eyed 40-year-old who is known as Potencia Latina, or Latin Power, is one of New York's first and best-known sonideros -- Mexican D.J.'s who play Colombian-style cumbia music, a mix of Latin melodies and African rhythms, while talking ceaselessly over it to relay messages from audience members to loved ones both near and far.

"I was a cook -- very famous, everyone knew me -- when I first came here," Mr. Salazar said on a chilly October afternoon outside Fantasma Records on East 116th Street in Manhattan. "But I missed the sonidero environment from when I lived in Mexico."

As New York City's Mexican population has grown, organizers have been finding more of an audience for sonidero shows, in which a man (always a man) with a booming voice calls out messages -- greetings and poetic dedications -- to the audience while using light shows and sound effects to encourage couples to have fun and dance. And to those in the audience spending most of their days toiling unnoticed in the backs of restaurants and groceries, the flash, spectacle and greetings that go with the sonidero scene are especially meaningful.

And so, on weekend nights, Mexican youths line up to pay \$20 or more to get into clubs like the Club Karate Center in Harlem, or more established sites in Queens like the Club Melao in Astoria and Club Casino in Woodside. There they will watch and listen as their favorite sonideros (also called sonidos) -- Potencia Latina, Sonido Caluda, Kumbala, El Condor -- create a magical scene with the liberal use of fog machines and flashing colored lights.

Once the sonidero starts to blast the cumbias, his fans jostle around him. As couples spin around the dance floor holding each other close, the young men hold up their notes for the sonidero, or tell him directly what they want said. The next day, the sonidero will sell copies of the set, recorded greetings and all, and those cassettes and compact discs will eventually find their way to families in Mexico. Videotapes are fast coming into vogue as well.

"It's kind of like making a telephone call home," said Cathy Ragland, a musicologist who has followed sonideros in New York and New Jersey.

Home is even closer when famous sonideros visit from Mexico, as some did at a party at Club Casino last month, where locals like Potencia Latina and El Condor shared the stage with the Mexican sonidero, La Changa.

La Changa was represented not by the original -- Ramon Rojo -- but by his son, Oscar Ramon Rojo. According to Mr. Salazar, some sonideros have spawned dynasties, in which the son or grandson will carry on performing under the original sonidero's name.

"When you say La Changa, it's like you're saying Michael Jordan," said Rudy Vidals, another aspiring sonidero who was at Club Casino to listen to the visiting D.J.

At Club Casino, the notes that were left at the sonideros' feet were sometimes poignant, sometimes cryptic.

One read: "If I were God, I would take you to glory. But since I am only Pedro, I will keep you always in my memory."

Another declared: "Fly, fly, fly little dove fly. Never stop. Tell Potencia Latina, we've come. We are the proud girls."

The sonideros see themselves as helping their audience communicate their true sentiments, whether to a group of friends at the party, relatives in Chicago or a girlfriend in Ciudad Neza outside Mexico City.

"Some people may not like the fact that we talk the whole time, but those people are probably not from Mexico," Mr. Salazar said. "We are here to cheer people up. To have a good time, you just have to go to the sonidero station and ask for a shout-out, and you will feel nice."

But to make the audience feel as if he alone can convey their sentiments across space and time, each sonidero must establish an auditory style of his own.

"You want people to say, 'With the power of Sonido Dragon Sound's voice, this message will reach all the way to Mexico,' " explained Miguel Flores, an aspiring sonidero who has been doing events for two years.

Many sonideros say they try to follow the rhythm or words of the song as they speak. Some use the tremendous volume to convey their mastery of technology and establish their authority. Potencia Latina repeats the phrase "100 percent Potencia Latina" throughout his set. La Changa says his stage name over and over in a manner that approximates Woody Woodpecker's cackle. Other sonideros wrap commentary and jokes into their styles, teasing their audience. Being a good sonidero also involves knowing how to take the edge off an offensive message, such as those passed between rival gangs.

"A lot of sonidos are followed by young guys who are also new immigrants, and he becomes a big piece of their identity here," said Robert C. Smith, a professor at Barnard College whose book, "Mexican New York: Transnational Worlds of New Immigrants," will be published in 2004. "Some gangs follow a particular sonido. They'll send shout-outs and codes to other gang members."

David Huerta, 24, a sonidero who goes by the name Sonido Caluda, said that at one point he was nervous to go to Brooklyn and Queens to play, for fear of getting in the middle of a dispute between rival gangs. But his jocular style has made him popular enough that he is invited to play all over the city. "When we go to play, it's like a talk show," Mr. Huerta said. "Sometimes we make fun of the politicians in Mexico, sometimes we make fun of the politicians here, and the people like that. It's like they feel they're in Mexico."

Yesenia Lucero, 22, a waitress who enjoys going to parties at Club Casino, said that she sends messages to her friends under the pseudonym Las Chicas Consentidas, or the pampered girls. Ms. Lucero tries to make it to at least one party a week.

"It's a different feeling to be able to hang out with your own people," Ms. Lucero said as her hoop earrings jingled. "When one of my friends sends a message to the group, it makes me feel good. I feel recognized."

Photos: Couples dancing at Club Casino in Woodside, Queens, where words are heard over the music from D.J.'s, or sonideros. (Photo by Nancy Siesel/The New York Times)(pg. B1); The Mexican band Grupo Maravilla performed at Club Casino last month while the sonidero took a break. On weekends, there is often a line to get into the club.; Two sonideros are Arturo Escalante, above, known as El Condor, and Fausto Salazar, called Potencia Latina. (Photographs by Nancy Siesel/The New York Times); (Photo by Lisa Iaboni)(pg. B4)