

Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

The Musical Migration of Rodrigo y Gabriela

Interview by Claire Healy

Dos aventureros, amantes de la música, buscaron fortuna en el extranjero y encontraron elogios y aplausos (Rolling Stone México, November 2004) [1]



Rodrigo y Gabriela in concert
(Enda Casey, www.rodgab.com)

The stage is in complete darkness and the audience is hushed in anticipation, as two young guitar-players take their seats. A few seconds later, the entire venue reverberates with the frantic strumming of guitars and the synchronised tapping of the two performers' feet. The tunes are literally hammered out on the instruments, the exquisite music punctuated by the performers' humorous personal interjections between songs. After a succession of encores, Rodrigo and Gabriela take their final bows on the stage at Vicar Street, Dublin, and retire to the temporary sanctuary of the dressing rooms and an enormous bowl of fruit. The audience in the Irish capital is once again in awe of the talent, energy and mastery of the Mexican couple, who have returned to play a few gigs in the city where it all began.

Despite their growing popularity and tours in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and most recently back in Mexico, Gabriela and Rodrigo continue to find themselves returning to Ireland.

Gabriela Quintero and Rodrigo Sánchez first met at the Casa de Cultura in Mexico City. Mexico City, constructed on the ruins of the Aztec cities of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco, is the capital of Mexico, and with a metropolitan population of almost twenty million people, is one of the largest cities in the world. After each playing in various heavy metal bands based in the sprawling metropolis, Rodrigo and Gabriela began to perform together in a band called Tierra Ácida (Acid Earth). During the day, Gabriela worked as a music teacher, while Rodrigo performed music for television programmes. Yet gradually they began to think of leaving la Ciudad de México and traversing the Atlantic to Europe, in search of adventure.

The pair arrived in Dublin, Ireland in 1999, to a city and a country in the initial stages of an economic boom period. This was reflected in a thriving live music scene in the city's pubs and clubs. As Rodrigo explains, 'we didn't want to come to London or Paris or Spain. We come from a very big city, so we wanted something smaller.' (Rodrigo y Gabriela DVD). In 2003, the duo released their first album, *Re-Foc*, and a year later an album recorded live in Manchester and Dublin hit the shops. Their music is an innovative hybrid of the metal music that they carry in 'la médula de los huesos [the marrow of their bones]' (Sergio Burstein, Lavibra.com), jazz and classical acoustic guitar - but any verbal description could not do justice to their originality. As Gabriela points out: 'I hate to think what kind of music I play or I want to play. All that to me, is s**t. To be honest. You play what you can express.' (Rodrigo y Gabriela DVD).

In 2006, with their eponymous album, Rodrigo y Gabriela beat both the Arctic Monkeys and Johnny Cash to number one in the music charts of their adopted country. (Sue Steward, www.rodgab.com/history, 2006). I spoke with Gabriela Quintero in November 2006, and she candidly told her story:

[Claire Healy] Could you tell the story of your move from Mexico City to Dublin City? What had you heard about Ireland before you arrived here?

[Gabriela Quintero] I had heard very little about Ireland. The original idea was to come to Europe, but to live somewhere different - not in Spain. But we didn't know much about Ireland. We got advice from a Mexican friend who had lived all over Europe ten years before that, and who really loved Ireland and said that it was very friendly. I didn't know anything else, but I should have asked my mum, she is very knowledgeable, and she always loved Irish writers. When she came to visit Ireland, she said I should have asked her about it first!

Had you known of any connections between Ireland and Mexico?

Yes, I had heard of the San Patricio Battalion. In a place called San Ángel there is a plaque with the names of all the Irish soldiers, but nobody in Mexico knows this, they don't teach it in school. It was a cool thing to happen, though they all ended up having horrible deaths. The world is very small, you know, the more you travel, the more you know. I think we only have borders in our minds, but in reality they are not really there.

What influenced your decision to come here?

We just wanted to come to Europe, to travel the world, we were not looking for a job. We come from a middle-class background in Mexico, so when we quit the metal band, we just went to the beach. Then we found a really good way to make a living by playing music at hotels. We were sorted and we got paid properly, but we wanted something else. So we decided to travel to Europe, but the package trips they sell in Mexico are always to England, France, and other places. We didn't want to see the Eiffel Tower, we wanted to do something outrageous, like maybe live in Poland, but we ended up in Ireland! It was definitely the right decision in the end.



Gabriela Quintero
(Enda Casey, www.rodgab.com)

Did you know anyone living in Ireland before you arrived?

Not really, we didn't know anyone personally. The day before our trip we met a girl who knew a friend of a friend of a friend - a Mexican guy living in Dublin. She gave us his telephone number, he was a student studying in Dublin, we didn't really know him at all. We ran out of money in Ireland after the first week, so we had to go out and busk, but we rang that guy and he was really cool, he let us sleep in his house for three days. He didn't really have to do that, he was a good soldier!

What were your first impressions of the country, and did they change after you had remained here for a while? What differences do you see between Ireland in 1999 and today?

There are a lot of differences between Ireland in 1999 and today, even though when we came here in 1999, a lot of people were already telling us that Ireland used to be different, that everything was terrible now. Now I have kind of become one of those people who say 'it's terrible, Ireland has changed so much'!

It was our first time in Europe so there was a big culture shock and my English was terrible, I had none whatsoever. Rodrigo spoke a little bit of English, but the first day was a nightmare. Even just trying to say the most normal things was a problem, but people were very nice to us. We didn't understand anything. After just one week we had to go and play in the street. My first impression of Dublin was that it was really windy, and really cold, and I thought 'what on Earth are we going to do?' We busked on a Saturday morning at 11am on Grafton Street [the main shopping street in Dublin]. It was absolutely packed. That changed everything; many people approached us and were very friendly. We basically just said yes to any invitation.

Our first gig was a religious party in Bray [County Wicklow]. We had said that we would do anything, but on the journey there we wondered if it was some kind of sect, and we didn't know what they were going to do to us! It ended up being a little boy's First Communion, and we spent the evening drinking with the guests! The following day we played at a folk night in the Norseman pub in Templebar [Dublin's cultural quarter]. We were paid ten pounds each and were the headline act, though everybody thought we were Brazilian!

I don't think people are less friendly in Ireland if you come from a Latin American country. Latin Americans can be very proud, but it all depends on how you approach the encounter. Really, nobody cares in Europe or America if you are Latin American or not. Mexicans often complain about foreigners, and think that foreigners are being cold just because they don't tell Mexicans that they're great! People can have problems if they arrive here with a bad attitude. Wherever you are from and wherever you go, you find good people - and *eejits* [Hiberno-English word for 'idiots']!

And what do Mexicans think of Ireland?

It depends where in Mexico you are. A lot of people in Mexico don't have a clue where Ireland is. A lot of people say [US-] Americans are ignorant, but Mexicans can be ignorant too. An Irish friend of ours visited Mexico and he always had a great time because people saw him as someone different. They thought he was a *gringo*, but he told them he wasn't. Mexico is very friendly, but there are *eejits* there too!

Did you find it easy to settle in as a Mexican/Latin American?

I think in Ireland people don't really have an idea of Mexico, generally they only know what they have seen in American films or in shows like 'Speedy Gonzales' [Warner Brothers cartoon character of a Mexican mouse]! I don't get offended because I didn't know anything about Ireland before I came here. A lot of Mexicans do get offended, and complain about it when they come back from Europe. For me it's just a little annoying, but some Mexicans think that it's racism. I think people are just trying to be funny. The middle classes and upper classes in Mexico can be so pretentious. They study in American-style universities and dress like Americans, yet they say they are proud of Mexican culture. Then they come here and get called 'Speedy Gonzales'!!

Did moving abroad make you more aware of your identity as a Latin American?

People here don't really know, they think we're Spanish, they call us the Spanish couple, whatever, I don't really care. Throughout Latin American history people have been conquered, and now we are bombarded with American culture. I don't really focus on Hispanic roots.

In Mexico they don't teach you that the Aztecs were an amazing and advanced civilisation. In school they use racist words for indigenous people, it is really cruel. A few well-educated people know about the Aztecs, and some good teachers teach the truth. The Mexican President [Vicente Fox] didn't want people to mention the Aztecs, which was very bad. When Mexican people go abroad and live in other countries, they get confused, they think 'I'm not indigenous, I don't know what I am - but I know I'm not Speedy Gonzales!'

You start to think about your identity and where you're from when you are abroad. Some crazy people say 'we're Aztecs,' but they're not. In Europe, people have been fighting so long for their territories, so identity in every country is strong. Over there people are only proud to be Mexican when they're drunk! Some of the local people, the working classes, they know they're Mexican and they don't worry about it. Their skin is usually darker and, though they may not know anything about the Aztecs, they don't get confused. The upper classes are usually more European-looking. Mexico is really a very racist country. At the beginning when I went back to Mexico from Ireland I thought this was terrible, but now I accept things the way they are and that you're never going to change things. Mexico is a welcoming country to foreigners but Mexicans can be racist towards one another.

The image on television over there is just Barbies all over the place, and particularly in soap operas. Young actresses and newsreaders look European, that's the cool image for young people. People grow up with terrible complexes. A typical Mexican girl with dark skin who is really beautiful would still think she was really ugly.

You played with Irish folk musicians - to what extent did living in Ireland influence your music?

We played with Robbie Harris, and other Irish folk musicians. To be honest, harmonically they did not have much influence, but I was quite impressed with Irish music. I saw it live, and enjoyed seeing young talented people playing in contemporary ways. My right hand, my percussion hand, is influenced by Irish folk - my hand was impressed with the *bodbrán* [traditional Celtic frame drum]! It sounds so fantastic and I tried to play it. Robbie and I went together to buy a *bodbrán* and he tried to teach me how to play with the stick, but I gave up and just played with my hand. That's actually the original Irish way so I play it in the pure form!



(Tina Korhonen, www.rodgab.com)



Rodrigo Sánchez
(Enda Casey, www.rodgab.com)

You are repeatedly referred to in the Irish media as playing with ‘Latin flair’/ ‘Latin style’ - do you consider your music to be ‘typical Latin American music’?

No, I don’t think we play ‘Latin music.’ We are influenced by it, because some of the music is fantastic. Though we are much more influenced by heavy metal. Before I got into that, music was everything to me as a child. My mum always played salsa. I never really liked salsa, I thought it all sounded the same, and was really monotonous, but eventually I thought it was cool. We came here to compose a different type of music, but Latin elements started to come up. We never studied Latin music, so we don’t even really know what ‘Latin’ is. Really you can call our music whatever you want, except flamenco!

A few years ago we played a song called ‘Libertango’ based on the music of Astor

Piazzola [influential Argentine tango composer]. I love Piazzola, it’s not pure tango. I think in Argentina they hate him because he mixed tango with jazz, but I love his music! So we did a version of his song, but also with Irish influences. I have loved tango music since I was a little girl. My mum had a great collection of albums, loads of tango and instrumental music. I still love that, and the dance itself. I also like bossa nova and jazz, but not so much Mexican music. You hear that a lot at parties when you’re drunk! When I’m back in Mexico I watch Mariachi [traditional Mexican bands] on TV and some of the bands are really good, but it’s like in Ireland where a lot of people hate Irish music. When some Irish people hear Irish music, they don’t stop and say that’s cool, they just hate it. I have come across a lot of people like that.

Why exactly did you choose to record a song with the Hungarian Roma violinist, Roby Lakatos?

He is amazing, we saw him on TV and thought this guy is amazing. The record company for the album wanted us to jam with different people, but we wanted someone that we really admired. The only one that responded to us was Roby Lakatos, so he came to Bath and recorded the song in just two hours. We were playing like crazy - he wanted to play on the whole album and to be on the cover, but we said no. He is amazing but crazy!

You recently appeared on Mexican television - how did the Mexican public respond to your music and your story?

We got loads of messages saying ‘guys, you played really well,’ but the majority of people just said ‘wow - you are going to be on TV in America.’ They are more impressed by our story than by the music, like the fact that we were on Jay Leno [US-American chat show]! I didn’t really want to go to Mexico at all, we’ve been touring and recording constantly for the past two years, we have no life. So going to Mexico to work didn’t sound that inviting. But we tried it out, we did a whole day of publicity on the TV and on radio programmes, from 7am in the morning to 9pm at night! So we’re just gonna wait and see what the response is. Maybe we’ll go back there to work, maybe just on holiday. We know some people were impressed, but on the streets they were much more impressed with our travels.



Rodrigo y Gabriela
(Enda Casey, www.rodgab.com)

Do you want to eventually return to Mexico, or settle in Ireland or elsewhere?

I already have a house in a village in Mexico, in Ixtapa [beach resort in the state of Guerrero, 200km north of Acapulco], and that’s where I’ll definitely spend the European winter. I really like Europe and I’d miss Ireland if I was away too long. For the moment, because the album was released in America, it’s convenient, because we can easily go back from there to the village in Mexico. But who knows, our record label is Irish and our manager is Irish.

At least for a couple of months a year I'd like to live in West Cork. It's beautiful, I've been there twice, I love the West of Ireland. I would like to live there for a while. I don't know, I just know I can't stay in one place for a long time, I have to keep moving.

Claire Healy

More information, music and concert dates available on the excellent website, www.rodgab.com. I am very grateful to Gabriela Quintero, for so enthusiastically doing the interview, and to Carlo Polli, for organising it.

Notes

[1] 'Two adventurers and music-lovers went off to seek their fortune overseas, and encountered praise and applause.'