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LBE



at the epicenter of indie print culture in Los Angeles

by Jorge N. Leal

La Banda Elástica magazine became an essential source of Spanish-language rock and alternative music for Los Angeles Latinos –U.S.-born and recent immigrants—from the day it first published in early 1992.



And yet, the glossy, beautifully designed magazine didn't appear from out of a vacuum. The region's growing Latino population had been eager to join the multidirectional flow of cultural expressions moving throughout Latin America — be it music, film, television, or other art forms. This explosion of creativity created *en tu idioma* ("in your language"), which predated the dawn of the World Wide Web, resulted in a proliferation of magazines and 'zines written in Spanish, Spanglish, and English.

These innovative publishers served as organic intellectuals within the *rock angelino* scene (the Los Angeles Latino rock scene), while adding their ranks to a broader pan-Latin transnational circuit of independent magazines alternative to institutional or commercial publications.

The journalists, writers, photographers, designers, musicians, and readers adopted and amplified *rock en español* that had slowly surfaced in Spanish-speaking countries decades earlier.

Angelino *rockeros* were creating their own version of the genre in L.A., localizing the sound, lyrics, and fashion as an alternative to older traditional Latino culture prevalent in the region. After more than a decade of anti-immigrant sentiment driven by the Reagan-Bush administration, transnational, bicultural Latinos had become emboldened to express themselves, showing pride in their ethnic identity. This mirrored the intellectual movements taking place in much of Latin America, where brutal authoritarian regimes had choked artistic expression and alternative youth culture.

The indie publishers of these 1990s publications were inspired by counter-cultural magazines and 'zines printed in Mexico, and other Spanish-speaking metropolises. Magazines such as *La Regla Rota* and *La Pus Moderna* from Mexico City, *La Línea Quebrada*, and *El Sueño de la Gallina* in Tijuana, among others.

Publishers placed their bets on the emerging new *rock mexicano* as a cultural expression of dissent from the authoritarian politics of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had almost eliminated dissenting voices in mass media. In South America, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, several countries were under military dictatorships that violently persecuted people who could be perceived as dissenters of the state.

Many Spanish-speaking immigrants who arrived in Los Angeles — mostly from Mexico — in the 1980s and early 1990s, drew from the Latin American alternative underground culture. They were informed by the counter-cultural literary movements in Argentina, Chile and Mexico, leftist protest songs from the Nueva Canción, as well as music and films from Spain's *La Movida*.

The burgeoning *rock en español* genre became the backdrop for Latinos coming of age in the United States.

A print culture shared *de mano en mano*

Participants of the early *rock angelino* scene subscribed to magazines such as Mexico's *La Pus Moderna*, and *La Banda Rockera*, in addition to others published in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America via postal mail. Some of these publications sporadically appeared in bookstores or *rockero* stands located in the now-defunct swap meets along Broadway in Downtown Los Angeles. Other times, these magazines were delivered by friends and family who traveled to Latin American cities. The first owner would share these magazines *de mano en mano* — from hand to hand — with other *rockeros* and *rockeras*.

These publications became the models for *rock angelino* publishers of fanzines or 'zines — which were already styled after the counterculture zines that proliferated during the wake of American punk rock in the 1970s and 1980s.





Embodying punk rock's Do-It-Yourself ethos towards publishing, *El Acordeón* debuted in Los Angeles in the spring of 1990, becoming a sort of Angelino sibling of *La PusModerna* and *La Línea Quebrada*. The name of the publication, *El Acordeón* (The Accordion), was a nod to its austere but ingenious design and printing materials. To maximize printing space and reduce reproduction costs, the publication consisted of several photocopied sheets of heavy-stock paper folded into a pamphlet — as an accordion.

Founded by a crossborder group of L.A.-based creatives, *El Acordeón* was produced by Enrique Blanc, a music journalist from Guadalajara, who at the time was head of programming at a San Bernardino-based radio station and would later become a contributor to the *Los Angeles Times* and other publications in English and Spanish; Octavio Hernández, a writer, musician and concert promoter from Tijuana; graphic designer/musician Emilio Morales, a transplant from Mexico City who also was part of L.A. band *María Fatal*; and Omar Márquez, a Mexican-American foodie and wine connoisseur who kept the team well fed and running at full speed.

El Acordeón was distributed mainly at *rock en español* concerts and gigs — *de mano en mano*.

An elastic print culture emerges

By the spring of 1992, *El Acordeón* had gained so much in popularity thanks to an insatiable rockero audience, the founders abandoned the zine layout, transitioning to a glossy rock magazine format, in full color. Shortly afterward, photographer María Madrigal, a Chicana French and marketing student raised in Chicago, joined the indie publisher, adding her singular images to Morales' signature, eye-grabbing design.

The revamped publication came with a new name: *La Banda Elástica*, or "the elastic band," which alludes to the Spanish word for "band" or music group, *banda*. "*La banda*" is also slang for a "group of friends" defined as *rockeros*, or rock-and-roll devotees. However, it also subverted the rigidity of the *rockero* term with the addition of "elástica."

Morales and friends wanted to show the elasticity of the genre and the expansiveness of their interests to cover many different aspects of the "alternative culture" in Los Angeles and Latin America.

Stacks of the first issues of *La Banda Elástica* appeared at L.A. rock shows or *tocadas*, which the *LBE* team specifically organized to celebrate the launch of each new issue. *María Fatal*, *Los Olvidados*, *Juana La Loca*, and many other *rock angelino* bands performed at these events. Some of the venues were already legendary around Southern California, such as *The Hong Kong Low* in Chinatown, *Las Pampas* in South Gate, and *Guitarra Cuadrada* in East Hollywood.

As *La Banda Elástica* established itself as a regular publication, gaining readers over a short period of time, it formalized as an organization. By 1993, Madrigal (who years later married Morales), became co-publisher of *LBE*, with Blanc and Hernández joining as editorial directors working with a stable of well-known contributors.

Among them were L.A.-based Uruguayan journalist Enrique Lopetegui, who would become the *Los Angeles Times* Latin pop music critic (1993-1997) and

the author of *Ruta Alterna* (a *rock en español* column published by *Nuestro Tiempo*, the *Times*' Spanish-language weekly), and Argentinean radio hosts Natalie Stawsky and Carlos "Carli" Bracutto, who hosted the KPFK radio show *Caracol Puccini*, one of the first *rock en español* shows on L.A. radio.

Soon afterward, Ecuadorian-born journalist Enrique Lavin, a contributor at the *Los Angeles Times* and other regional newspapers, joined Madrigal on the business side, while editing, translating, and contributing content in English.

In addition, the magazine enlisted collaborators writing from different U.S. cities, such as San Francisco, New York, Miami, Chicago, and San Juan, Puerto Rico, among others with emerging music scenes.

Within a few years, *La Banda Elástica* expanded its coverage with a long list of contributions throughout Latin America who provided numerous articles about the latest in Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and other countries. The magazine also included the playlists of dozens of radio programs dedicated to *rock en español*, which were mostly hosted in college and public radio stations throughout the U.S.

By 1995, the U.S. rock music magazine *Spin* noted *La Banda Elástica* in its "Future of Rock" list in its fall issue.

Sure enough, *La Banda Elástica* stretched its focus from Los Angeles to include articles and reviews on bands and albums from different cities in the U.S., the Americas and Spain. In the second half of the 1990s, *La Banda Elástica* became the most renowned *rock en español/Latin alternative* magazine, not only in the U.S., but also in Latin America, where it was distributed in major cities. The publication went from a circulation of just a few hundred in its early days in 1992 to over 20,000 by 1999, as reported by trade publications.

LBE set itself apart from other local publications because of its regular new music showcases, and then covering Latin alternative national tours, such as the historic Watcha! Tour, which was modeled after the American punk/alternative Warped Tour.

By the early 2000s, *LBE* was hosting awards shows and frequent Battle of the Bands, elevating new and emerging artists for national and international audiences, which were by then tuning in via the internet.

It was enough for the *Los Angeles Times* to call the magazine and its events wing, the "Bible of alt-Latin music."

Over the next 20 years, *LBE* went through several iterations as it transformed itself from a print-only magazine to a global internet-based platform. For a while, it published the first English-language newsletter dedicated to the genre, the *Latin alternative Bulletin*, or *The Lab*, which went out to more than 10,000 subscribers a week. Eventually, its site coalesced into a hub for Spanish-language alternative music lovers, who could find not only new music reviews, playlists, and features, but an online radio station and frequent performances from established and emerging artists live streamed across the world, reaching more than 200,000 regular readers a month.

La Banda's influence on the local scene

In the mid 1990s, LBE's influence on the local scene could not be overstated. Its continuous publication and ubiquitous presence at concerts and specialized stores encouraged other creatives within the *rock angelino* community to launch their own 'zines.

La Neta, *Al Borde* and *Retila* (1994-1997) were among the most visible. These were also exclusively written in Spanish, focusing on well-known Latin American acts and Southern California bands.

Founded by a Venezuelan couple, writer Alicia Monsalve and music producer Edgar Ochoa, who was also frontman of the band Hijos del Sol, *Al Borde* was the region's first, regularly printed weekly newspaper, running from 1997 through 2009. In 2001, *Al Borde* merged with *El Clasificado*, a larger publishing company, specializing in a weekly Spanish-language publication geared toward an older demographic. By 2005, *Al Borde* claimed to have a readership of some 85,000 per issue. However, by decade's end, *Al Borde* ended its bi-weekly print edition, moving to a digital model, where it continues to be intermittently updated.

Around the same time, *La Neta Magazine* found its way into the hands of alt-Latin scenesters in 1994. Its design and editorial line followed the mold of Mexico's *La Banda Rockera*, purposely using a crude copy-and-paste design style to signify its Mexico City working-class origins. Written primarily by Sergio "Lavis" Peralta, *La Neta* (the term being street slang for "The Truth") provided biting commentary about both Los Angeles and Latin American bands.

The *La Neta* articles were tinged with class-based slights toward the more popular *rock en español* bands, which were making headway, especially in Mexico pop radio. In the *La Neta* articles, these established acts were derided as *fresas* (urban middle-class hipsters) as opposed to the *rock urbano* adherents, who qualified themselves as working-class from Mexico City's periphery. By the early 2000s, *La Neta* ceased publishing, but "El Lavis" continues updating and sharing his impressive *rock en español* "neto" archives on social media.

Similarly, the Spanish-language magazine *RokEra* debuted in 1994. Led by Rogelio Mejía and José Velásquez, two graphic designers based in San Pedro, California, *RokEra* concentrated on the Los Angeles rock scene, highlighting notable acts from Latin America. The comic strips written and drawn by the publishers, distinguished *RokEra* from the other *rock angelino* publications.

By the mid 1990s other 'zines began to circulate such as *Perdidos en la Línea*, *Revista N*, *Cereal*, and Iván Munguía's *La Jornada Rockera*, among others.

Paralleling the emergence of *La Banda Elástica*, the English-language *Frontera* magazine started publishing in 1995. The magazine began as a class project by two Chicano students at UC Berkeley, Yvette Doss, and Martin Albornoz, who eventually moved their operation to Los Angeles to reach a larger audience of English-dominant Latinos.

In time, *Frontera* found a niche among readers who sought to read about both pop culture produced by U.S. Latinos and music (primarily rock and alternative *en español*), films, and literature created in Latin America. *Frontera* was distributed nationally in the U.S. and at its height, it distributed over 30,000 copies per edition, until its final issue in 2000.

Conclusion: Bridging the past with a new genealogy of Latina/o print culture

The *rock angelino* publications should be understood as part of a long lineage of self-produced publications—albeit of remarkably different historical eras—created by ethnic Mexicans and Latinas/os in Los Angeles.

Among the few examples, we can think of the pueblo of Los Angeles in the aftermath of the Mexican American War and consider *El Clamor Público* (1855-1859), the first Spanish-language newspaper in California, circulated after the American occupation in the 19th century. Founded by 19-year-old Francisco Ramírez, *El Clamor Público* defied Anglo-Saxon rule and the supposed American intellectual superiority over the Californios and California indigenous peoples.

At the turn of the 20th century, the Flores Magón brothers published *Regeneración* in downtown Los Angeles and present-day Echo Park. The bilingual anarchist publication, produced by the Mexican Liberal Party, counted on an international cadre of collaborators, many of them also in their early adult years, and its influence on the Mexican Revolution cannot be understated.

For the second part of the twentieth century, the *La Raza Magazine*, produced by a dedicated group of first-generation Chicanas and Chicanos college students, emerged as the publication that chronicled the 1970s Chicano movement.

The organic Latinas/os intellectuals writing on the *rock angelino* publications inscribed themselves into Los Angeles through their writings *en español*, at a moment in which their presence was put into question by nativist

politicians with their anti-immigrant propositions and the banning of bilingual education in California Schools (Propositions 187 and 227 passed in 1994 and 1997, respectively).

Their writings in publications such as *La Banda Elástica* countered tropes in predominant White-American culture that defined immigrants as uneducated and merely fit for low-paying jobs. Instead, the *rock angelino* organic intellectuals asserted themselves and their readers as cultural and intellectual producers who drew on their extended Latin American intellectual roots. In the process, these publications have become the first drafts of a new historical genealogy beyond borders.

A genealogy in which late 20th-century Latina/o writers presented themselves as discerning, dignified, and resourceful cultural producers who were part of the Latin American circuit of ideas, as well as part of the American metropolis that is Latina/o Los Angeles.

This article is an excerpt from Jorge Leal's upcoming book: *More than Ruido: Young Latina/o Ingenuity, Sounds, and Solidarity in Late Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*. This manuscript-in-progress is a historical analysis of the near-present Southern California. It examines how, through the creation and circulation of cultural expressions around *rock angelino*, Latina/o youth claimed themselves as part of Los Angeles, pushed against the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the 1990s, asserted their dignity, and advocated for equality and social justice in the United States and Latin America.

