

Josh Kun*

↳ Listening to the Line: Notes on Music, Globalization, and the US-Mexico Border¹

The following is an experiment in theory and practice, and is therefore divided into two parts. The first introduces the concept of “the aural border”, my attempt to listen to the US-Mexico border as a geography of sound and music. The second explores this notion through an excerpt from a critical performance text of mine, “Border Sound Files: An Audio Essay”, which tells musical stories of the border as a key site of globalization.

1. The Aural Border

I want to pose a few starting points for understanding what it might mean to consider the US-Mexico border as a field of sound, a terrain of musicality and music-making, of static and noise, of melodic convergence and dissonant clashing. And by this I don’t necessarily mean assembling a laundry list of every song ever written about the border or of every band or musician ever from the border (though this project has its own merits). I mean opening the doors to a new archive of historicity and analysis, a new methodology of understanding the audio-formation of national and social identities within specific, delineated geopolitical territories.

I am understanding the aural border as both an archaeology and a genealogy of “subjugated knowledges” or “disqualified knowledges” that unveil the many multivalent ways the very idea of the border gets constructed and disseminated through sound and music. This entails both the “release” and “emancipation” of hidden and repressed “local discursivities” (its archaeological function) and the praxis or “tactics” required to bring them into play in service of “opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal, and scientific discourse” (its genealogical function) (Foucault 1980: 80).

In his critical response to the rise of border theory as a field rooted in but now often independent from US-Mexico border studies, Tijuana-San Diego visual artist David Avalos has argued that the border of US official culture has no narrative. As a fiction of national control and hegemonic sustenance, the US-Mexico border is necessarily gutted

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¹ Portions of this essay have appeared in different versions in *Theatre Journal* and *Cabinet Magazine*.

of its narrativity and formed as the collective state fantasy of surveillance policies, xenophobic legislation, media stagecraft, and accumulative capital. “There is no space for storytelling or personal experience”, Avalos writes, “and time for nothing except accreditation and interrogation” (Avalos 1996: 189).

What the state’s official border (of which Avalos admits there might be more than one) does produce, however, is the unofficial border, the border of narrativity, experience, and storytelling, the border articulated through the daily performances, rituals, and acts of the people who live within its physical and psychic bounds. Outside of the grasp of the official border(s), yet informed by them, there arises a multiplicity of unofficial borders where borderness is voiced and rescued from the willful aphasia of official culture. Surely the aural border – the border that is narrated through sound, music, and noise – is one worth taking seriously, as debates around the past and future of border theory and border discourse receive a proliferating amount of attention from scholars and activists of disparate national, cultural, and disciplinary backgrounds.²

Yet even among the many narratives of unofficial border knowledges, the specular narratives of the visual border have dominated scholarship in the humanities, a fact which I believe makes the naming and development of the aural border all the more urgent and difficult. There is little critical language readily available to theorize the relationship between the US-Mexico border and the sounds it makes. The vast majority of writing about border representations and border performance has occurred through the lens of visual culture. In both the public and scholarly imagination, the US-Mexico border is mostly synonymous with visual icons and objects central to a battlefield of images: fences, rivers, walls, checkpoints, the tall and threatening border patrol agent, the crouching *indocumentados* hiding behind a bush, the Taco bell chihuahua, the dusty, erotic cantina.

In a sense, the direction of discourse about the border has historically been based on who controls how it is seen and envisioned, a point made abundantly clear by Claire Fox in *The Fence and the River* (1999), which surveys over a century’s worth of visualizing border experience, from photography and cinema to postcards, visual art, and billboards. Inspired by a single border shot from the 1989 film *The Old Gringo* (“an aerial view of a horse-drawn cart crossing an antique bridge that spans a verdant river valley”, Fox 1999: 8), Fox’s study centers on what she positions as the two focal icons of border knowledge, the fence and the river, and explores the formation of border discourse through what she calls “establishing shots [...] typically a two to three second take of a building exterior or landscape that is inserted at the beginning of a scene [...] meant to be unobtrusive keys that help the viewer to locate action within a larger space” (46).

Attention to the ways in which visual imagery “establishes” perceptions of border space and foundations of border knowledge is, of course, crucial to further understandings of border culture and its multiple histories. But what I am interested in developing here is not a further catalog of “establishing shots”, but something more akin to an exploration of “establishing sounds” that build the critical ground necessary for understanding what songs and sounds perform both at the moment of their performance and at the moments of their consumption by listeners. How do sounds “establish” for the listener

² For a survey of some of these debates, see Welchman (1996); Fox (1999); Michaelson/Johnson (1997); and Saldivar (1997).

what the border is, how it gets crossed, how it gets desired, how it gets feared, and ultimately, how as a place and a state of being it produces its own subjectivities? How do “establishing sounds” locate the listener within the border’s larger geopolitical space?

I believe developing this genealogy of the aural border is important because of its potential to highlight the undertheorized relations between popular music, place/space, and the performance of expressive cultures. Popular music in the borderlands – whether conjunto, corridos, banda, tejano, techno, nor-tec, or hip hop – has always been a prime register of border culture-clashing, a prime documentary mode of border history, and a prime stage for witnessing the performance of interstitial hybridities and identities-influx that have been generated along the border since it was arbitrarily drawn in 1848.³

Focusing our critical listening on the aural border also holds the potential for opening up new ways of understanding the border as an audio-spatial territory of performance. In the space of songs themselves and in the exchange between producers and listeners, music enables, constructs, and imagines the mapping of new places and cartographies of possibility; it draws maps that otherwise might not be possible in the real time of political realities. In this sense, then, I see the aural border functioning within the discursive register of what I have elsewhere developed as the audiotopia – a working term for the heterotopic possibilities of musical production and reception (Kun 1997). Building on Foucault’s notion of the “heterotopia”⁴, I hear audiotopias as sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and mapping of geographical space that music makes possible as well.

Thus, reading and listening for audiotopias (through an analysis of both lyrics *and* music) have a dual function: to focus on the space of music itself and the different spaces and identities it juxtaposes within itself, and to focus on the social spaces, geographies, and identities that music can enable, reflect, and prophesy. In both cases, the audiotopia is a musical space of difference, where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other. Thus, in a sense, audiotopias can also be understood (and this is particularly fitting in the case of the aural border) as identificatory “contact zones”. They are both sonic and social spaces where disparate identity-formations, cultures *and* geographies, which historically have been charted separately, are allowed to interact with each other as well as enter into relationships whose consequences for cultural identification are never pre-determined.⁵

Listening to the audiotopia of the aural border is also one way of situating its cultural forms within what cultural theorist Jody Berland (1992) calls “capitalist spatiality”. Berland has convincingly argued for a re-conception of music from a spatial perspective. She focuses her attention on the spatial positionality of listening, on the spaces produced for and occupied by listeners. “Much of the time we are not simply listeners to sound”, she writes, “but occupants of spaces for listening who, by being there, help produce def-

³ See for example the following landmark studies: Paredes (1958); Limón (1992); Herrera-Sobek (1990); Peña (1985) and (1999); McKenna (1997); and Loza (1993).

⁴ For more on the audiotopia’s roots in the heterotopia, see Foucault (1970: xvii-xviii) and (1986). For more on the border as heterotopia, see Morales (1996).

⁵ Mary Louise Pratt has described “the contact zone” in the context of colonial encounters as a social and geopolitical space “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 1992: 6).

inite meaning and effects” (1992: 39). Yet, while Berland is correct to stress the contingency of textual production on spatial production, I am equally interested in the inverse of her own declaration: that the production of space is likewise contingent upon the production of cultural texts. By listening for the border’s audiotopias, we are able to hear these spaces that the music itself makes possible, the spaces that music maps, evokes, and imagines.

The audiotopias are there, waiting to be heard.

2. Border Sound Files

[Play Manu Chao, “Bienvenido a Tijuana”]

[Fade into Zoo Sonico, “Speed Trip”, play opening forty-five seconds, fade down and continue playing on low volume as sound bed]

Tijuana, Mexico. I am in my car, waiting, in a sea of at least a hundred other cars, in a cloud of early morning exhaust, *pan dulce* fumes, and wet concrete steam, to cross the border. I am waiting to leave a city where drug barons live by the sea and Indians live between refrigerator boxes and discarded doors on crowded muddy hillsides for San Ysidro, a city that is a gateway to all the other cities *del norte*, all the other cities that are becoming more and more like Tijuana everyday.

The more times I do this, the less I *see* what’s all around me – vendors selling leather back cushions, men in white suits holding white church collection buckets, fading reward posters for the murderous Arellano-Felix narco brothers who only two years ago woke twenty-one Pai-Pai Indians from their beds in Ensenada and opened fire on them and who only eight years ago recruited members of San Diego’s Thirteenth Street gang to gun down Cardinal Ocampo – and the more I *hear* what’s all around me, the barked pitches, the alms pleas, the rattling mufflers, the radio crossing reports that bounce out of rolled down windows: “Fifty cars in lane one. Sixty cars in lane two. Forty cars in lane three.” It’s a soundscape like no other, a sonic symphony of banda and Sum 41, Los Panchos and Avril Lavigne, conducted by globalization’s invisible 9-to-5 crunch and played with determination by urban rancheros in shining Ford Rangers, import/export assistants on their way to San Diego offices, gringos in college sweatshirts heading home after mountain biking in Ensenada, and Tijuana mothers on their way to JC Penny in Chula Vista.

Local Tijuanaenses have a name for all this. Before getting in their cars to cross, they turn on the radio *para escuchar la línea*. To listen to the line.

When I finally pull up to the border patrol agents, they search the car, probing between the seams of the seats and emptying my trunk. I know if I look at them I will look guilty of something that I have not done. So instead I just keep my eyes on the bend of road ahead and keep listening to a future that’s already happening.

[Fade Zoo Sonico back up for thirty seconds, then fade out]

Buenos Aires, Argentina. In 1941, the Argentinean poet Carlos Argentino called Jorge Luis Borges on the telephone. Argentino was panicking; he was in the midst of finishing a poem and his family home where he was now living was about to be destroyed

to make room for a confectionery. He told Borges, who was blind in one eye and partially blind in the other, that the demolition must stop. In the dining-room cellar of the house was something he needed desperately in order to finish writing – an aleph.

An aleph, Borges is told in the 1945 parable in which he describes it, “is one of the points in space containing all points [...] the place where, without any possible confusion, all the places in the world are found, seen from every angle” (Borges 1967: 147). When Borges goes over to the house to see the aleph first hand, he lacks language to describe what he sees within its two to three centimeters of diameter – the vocabularies do not exist, there is no discipline of knowledge to which the aleph belongs that could effectively express the enormity of the convergence, the boundless cosmic space of overlapping realities, that Borges witnessed in Argentino’s cellar. “I saw millions of delightful and atrocious acts” he wrote, “none astonished me more than the fact that all of them together occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency” (150).

In 1974, the French writer Georges Perec wrote a book called *Species of Spaces* and in the middle of it, rather suddenly, he asked: “Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible, anything other than an alphabet?” (1997: 13). What if Borges were still alive, what if Carlos Argentino was living in Tijuana or Nogales or Juárez or Mexicali and what if his house was about to be torn down to make room for a maquiladora or if his cellar was being gradually destroyed by moist earth contaminated with toxic runoff from a nearby smelting plant, and what if Borges went over to see the aleph but instead of finding it in the cellar and instead of finding it in the alphabet, he finds it by looking out of Argentino’s window, out at the world created by a line drawn in the sand and then re-drawn with wire fences and then re-drawn with steel walls and then re-drawn with steel walls wired with electronic sensors and digital cameras? And since ocular vision was not the usual way that Borges saw the world, what if instead of seeing the convergences of all points in space, he hears them?

Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is audible, anything other than the border? As Borges reminds us, the aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and in the Jewish mystical text of the kabbalah, the aleph is En-Sof, “limitless and pure divinity” (153). Near the San Ysidro-Tijuana crossing point, on the Mexican side, there is a large piece of quarry stone meant to mark the border line. It reads: “Limite de la República de México”. The border, the limit without limits, *el límite sin límite*.

[Play Track: Control Machete, “Te Aprovechas de Limite?”, and fade at :22]

Los Robles, Mexico. The first time Janet Leigh and Charlton Heston (in brownface as Mexican narco-cop Mike Vargas) walked from “the Paris of the border” into the unnamed US city on the other side back in the 1958 B-movie *Touch of Evil* – no fences, no walls, no car searches – all you heard was Henry Mancini.

[Play Track: Henry Mancini, “Touch of Evil: Main Title”, up at :36, out at 1:19]

When they did it again in 1998, you heard a lot more. Now Los Robles didn’t just have a soundtrack, it produced sound, and not a single sweep of sound but a piecemeal montage of sound that moved from style to style as Heston and Leigh moved from border space to border space. Now the car bomb ticked between mambo mutated conga hiccups

and braying goats, and now each bar that Vargas and his new white bride walked past had its own music: swinging jazz out of one doorway, dragging dirty blues out of another.

The difference was crucial, not just for how much better it got the reality of border sound – a polyphonic crossroads of channel-zapped north and south, folklorico and pop, city and country – but for how much closer it stuck to the original vision of the film’s director Orson Welles. Back in 1957, the studio took control of the picture away from Welles and edited the final cut themselves without his supervision. When he saw the studio cut – the same cut which debuted in theatres the following year and that has been the *Touch of Evil* that generations of film audiences have known – he was so outraged that he wrote a fifty-eight page memo detailing the changes he wanted to be made. Chief among them was the removal of Henry Mancini’s symphonic “Main Title” score. Nobody listened.

Forty years later the film was re-cut to answer Welles’ lengthy edit memo by expert sound engineer Walter Murch. Murch found not only Welles’ original source but “a hidden layer of sound effects [...] allowing the audience to hear the town, the footsteps of the pedestrians, their voices, the laughter of the crowds, the sirens – even the bleating of a pack of goats stuck in the middle of the road” (2004). Welles continued: “the plan was to feature a succession of different and contrasting musical numbers. In honky-tonk districts on the border, loudspeakers are over the entrance of every joint, large or small, each blasting out its own tune by way of a ‘come on’ or a ‘pitch’ for the tourists. The fact that the streets of these border towns are invariably loud with this music was planned as a basic device throughout the picture” (ibid).

[Play Track: Walter Murch (Ed.), “Touch of Evil: Main Title”, and fade at :38]

Welles wanted “mambo-type rhythm numbers with rock and roll” because he had listened to the border long enough to know that the border is where sound is restless, not where it rests. By 1958, mambo had already hit the United States after being cultivated by Pérez Prado in Mexico City and rock and roll had already hit Tijuana with bands like Los Locos del Ritmo and Los Rockin Devils. Welles understood that the border between Los Robles and the United States – a border inspired by the one that separates Tijuana from San Ysidro – was a space of sonic multiplicity where rock bumps up against mambo, blues interrupts Latin jazz, and Murch never stops cutting the sounds against and into each other as long as Vargas and his bride keep moving.

There is one sound that remains constant – the sound of the radio in the car, the car that will, by the end of the three minutes and twenty seconds, explode, its sound turning the heads of Heston and Leigh, its sound the one that keeps bringing both sides of the border together for the rest of the film.

But a cut-up of *Touch of Evil*’s original sound source actually surfaced before Murch’s 1998 re-edit, at the hands of perhaps a less likely suspect, the Chicano rapper and producer Frost. A year before Murch re-cut the opening score, Frost was busy sampling dialogue from the film’s story of a corrupt US cop working in conjunction with a local drug cartel. The song the sample appears on is “Mexican Border” and it details the exploits of a young East LA drug dealer who sells drugs smuggled from Mexico in his Southern California neighborhood. In the song, he is on his way down to the Mexican border to pick up his latest shipment from Sinaloa when he is stopped by a cop for speeding. The cop ends up

dead, and the dealer keeps heading south down I-5 in a Chevrolet. As he passes through Oceanside and gets close to San Ysidro, he channels the voice of Joe Grande, the jefe of the Los Robles narco trade, as he threatens the life of Mike Vargas, the saintly Mexican cop with a white fiancée who will eventually bring Grande to his knees.

[Play Track: Frost, “Mexican Border”, fade up at 2:40, fade out at 3:05]

The border of *Touch of Evil* is the border of Hollywood archetype, a place of sin and corruption, of fortune tellers and prostitutes, where the Puritanical values of the North have no authority once they cross the line. “Tijuana is nothing”, Raymond Chandler made Phillip Marlowe say in *The Long Goodbye*, “all they want there is the buck. The kid who sidles over to your car and looks at you with big wistful eyes and says, One Dime Please Mister, will try to sell you his sister in the next sentence” (1998: 37).

It is the border that every Hollywood outlaw and criminal wants to make a run for, its lawlessness – the last frontier that US lawmen could not cross – a sanctuary for those living outside the law. One of Hollywood’s earliest productions, Charlie Chaplin’s 1923 *The Pilgrim*, ends with Chaplin – a thief on the run from the law – straddling the Texas-Mexico borderline, with one foot in the land of the law and the other in the land where law no longer applies. In 1971, Sweet Sweetback headed for Tijuana at the finale of his “*Baad Asssss Song*” with police dogs barking at his feet, and in 2003, “Charlie’s Angel” Drew Barrymore fled her assassin ex-boyfriend by hiding out in a Tijuana dive, even though it was really a hipster margarita bar in West Hollywood.

The dealer in Frost’s song is just another of these on the run outlaws headed south for safety, “headin’ down to the Mexican border”, but Frost’s dealer is not a white outcast on the lam, a white preppy looking for cheap sex, or a neo-Beat bohemian searching for illicit anti-authoritarian kicks. The dealer is Chicano and he’s looking across the border not just for refuge but for a role model. He’s looking to be the next Joe Grande.

On the cover of the album Frost’s song appears on, *When Hell. A. Freezes Over*, he’s standing in white camouflage in front of a silver military hum-v. Behind him, only ten minutes from the Venice Beach backlot that doubled as *Touch of Evil*’s Los Robles, is downtown Los Angeles, the original center of what was once Mexican Los Angeles, before there was a border, before there was any line between Los Robles and the other side, before there was any line that you had to walk across.

[Play Track: Fussible, “Rom u Rosa”, and fade at :40]

Tijuana, Mexico. The Nortec Collective have no manifesto, but just about everyone involved agrees that what they are after is giving voice to the modern Tijuana they all grew up in – a relentlessly misunderstood metropolis that now houses close to two million people, is crossed legally over fifty million times a year, and is both a capital of bling-bling narco traffic and one of the global economy’s most bustling maquiladora manufacturing hubs. For their publicity photo, members of the collective posed atop Tijuana’s famous donkeys painted to look like zebras and donned sombreros that read “still drunk” and “just married”. At their live shows, they accompany their music with digital video collages of maquiladora assembly lines, slain presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, and shots of local norteños slow-dancing at La Estrella on calle sexta.

Musically, Nortec artists like Terrestre, Fussible, and Bostich – all of whom grew up on German and British techno bought in San Diego record stores, dug the Depeche Mode they heard on San Diego’s 91XFM, opened bars with names like “Techno Club” and “Cafe Electrico”, and did their own mixing on samplers, keyboards, and sequencers purchased used at San Diego swap meets or on employee discount at Guitar Center – work with a common base of sound material and a common sound strategy. They all base their tech-Mex hybrids in norteño, tambora, and banda sinaloense, three of Mexico’s most traditional, most important, and most commercially popular musical styles (all Mexicanized hybrids of polka and waltz music brought to Mexico by German immigrants) best known for their button accordions, acoustic bass, brassy trumpets and trombones, big honking tubas, big bass drum booms, and firecracker snare rolls that were doing BPM speed rushes before drum n’ bass knew how to lace its running shoes. Nortec musicians sample these old records – as well as their own recordings culled from norteño and banda street musicians who play in downtown Tijuana – and then tweak them on synthesizers and samplers. “If you go to Revolución Ave”, says Nortec originator Pepe Mogt of Tijuana’s notorious main tourist drag, “there’s a club playing hip hop, a club playing techno, mariachis playing in the streets, and then a big pickup with tinted windows playing banda. All of that is Nortec for me. Take all of that as if you’re standing in the middle of Revolución Ave and turn it into songs” (personal communication).

[Play Track: Plankton Man, “Don Valiente”, fade at :50]

The Peruvian novelist José María Arguedas: “There is no reason why the course taken should be the one demanded imperiously by the conquerors and expropriators [...] that the vanquished nation renounce its soul and assume that of the victor. [...] I am not acculturated, I am a Peruvian who, like a happy demon, proudly speaks in Christian and in Indian, in Spanish and in Quechua” (2000: 269). Nortec musicians are happy demons of globalization, citizens of a border zone kept closed to human traffic and open to the flow of goods and money. Their music speaks norteño and Kraftwerk, first world and third, Spanish and German, naco and rave, two-story six-bedroom castles with security gates and matching Jettas in the garage built on jagged, rubble streets that have not been fully paved yet, maquiladora assembly lines that run like rivers of low-wage life through the NAFTA metropolis of “Tivijuana” (the world’s capital of TV set production). In other words, theirs is a music that could only have been born in the Tijuana of right now.

The Nor-Tec response to this Tijuana is music that lives at the border between inside and outside, music that is both local and global at once, art that bears the low-tech influence of the makeshift vernacular culture that extreme poverty brings (hillside colonias built of scrap metal and cardboard boxes, water contaminated with battery acid and smelting toxins from abandoned maquila plants, massive waste dumps that become debris residences, scrapped tires that become elaborate front porch staircases) as well as its trickle-down transformation by the wired winds of economic change (streetside internet links, samplers, cheaper computers, 100/month luxury gyms, massive seaside real estate developments, an underground of cyber-blogger-cronistas, painters and photographers who show their work in Berlin and New York, vaqueros wearing Versace).

This is Tijuana, they say, come inside. Listen for yourself.

[Play Bostich, “Polaris”, fade out until end]

Discography

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