

“Intergalactic Chicano:” Hip Hop Cumbia Futures in a *Sombrero Galaxy*

Marco Antonio Cervantes

A warm Gulf Coast breeze on a summer night drifted onto People’s Street in downtown Corpus Christi during DJ/producer El Dusty’s latest release event for his sci-fi hip hop album and collaborative comic book, *Sombrero Galaxy*. In the middle of the block, an elevated catwalk stage hosted musicians, DJs, and clothing models dressed as robots, aliens, astronauts, and other cosplay characters. Along the strip, vendors sold selections of T-shirts, skirts, jackets, and jerseys. One of the shops featured a room with framed, enlarged page cutouts from the new comic book on the walls. The title page glowed in the front and read, “Sombrero Galaxy, a Cholo’s Journey through Space.” The panel featured an illustration of a lowrider spacecraft blasting off through the galaxy with a smoky haze leaking from a cracked window. Also in the room, artist Maclovio Cantú IV designed a 3D lowrider UFO made from serapes, shown crashing through the wall.

In the middle of the street, the stage lights bounced from crowd to sky, illuminating the event as artists stood at the center of the show. El Dusty appeared on stage, behind turntables, with a helmet, gauntlet, and cape along with percussionists Camilo Quiñones and Andrew Ita dressed in spacesuits. He kicked his set off with electronic cumbia rhythms and the crowd swayed, jumped, raised arms, yelled, and danced. He then began the transition to playing music from *Sombrero Galaxy*, a futuristic exploration of hip hop, gritty beats, and lyricism.

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Featured artists on the project took turns getting up and rocking the crowd. Corpus artists Meta, Quentin Arispe, Chris56 and Ambrose Brown opened by playing the exceptional "Dark Skies," then El Dusty displayed virtuoso turntable skills over his instrumental "Un Estrella Del Deseo." Later in the evening, Magnu5 and Fatboyshaun played "Warning," Vino La Mano played "Space Tang," and Chris56 played "Shy Girl." While El Dusty's new project carried out hip hop in various forms, the genre of cumbia remained ever present, providing a landscape of bass-heavy sounds when mixed with reggae, house, and trap music among the sand and palm trees. El Dusty finished the set mixing an array of hip hop, house, and cumbia classics.

During the set, I jumped on stage and performed my original song, "Intergalactic Chicano," from the project. The track tells the story of a Chicano smuggler traveling the galaxy, struggling to survive with limited resources in a universe where racism and discrimination persist. I delivered the following lyrics to the crowd outside:

he kept the helmet locked on, when blazing
When the fire ignited, it filtered out contamination

body armor, jet pack, in-ear, microchip
flamethrower, lazer gun, got aboard the spaceship

lift off from the surface, by the window, in the back
soldiers and civilians sharing a passenger aircraft

leaning back, chillin, intergalactic Chicano
part time, hustle, smuggled goods through the cosmos

turbulence shook the weight, freight moved higher
through an economic decline for buyers and suppliers

the war never ended, inside he felt tension
heard the alarm, he put his hand on the weapon

The guards got the message, but the other side shot first
doorway got peripheral vision blurred, he heard

voices yelling, bodies scraping, busting caps, blasting
droids in the back, they carried gats attacking

He ran across and saw the aircraft cabin demolished
in between two opposing sides of the conflict

He made it towards cover, when saw all guns out
across the room from every angle shots rang out

in the middle of the attack, caught between sides
He hid behind the control booth to stay alive

computerized tracking enemy identified
In the front the pilot put the ship into hyperdrive

He analyzed the situation for cause and effect
Took a deep breath, let off shots next

electrocuted, pop locking, he tried to save the hostages
shots ran through the smoke, all bodies dropped then

rom-coms advertised over the intercom
pilot gone, he took the steering wheel, and turned the map on

cut off hyperspeed and found the nearest planet
He jetpacked out the back, before the crash landing

touched down by the coast, hit the ground, made it
took a look around, on the ground, brain faded

In a region that he's outlawed and incriminated
A stranger in this land, not welcome, most hated

All across this planet he's seen as a foreigner
repaired an out-of-order Impala across the border

spinners on the wheels, with the frame dropped low
when it was time to go, he cut off ground control

Epic, saga, novella, breaking down dilemmas
interstellar , cruising, spitting bars acapella

unraveling space-traveling, warrior, artist
Exploring the galaxy, high, flying through the stardust

When writing the lyrics for "Intergalactic Chicano," I set out to bridge the present with an imagined future that centers Chicana/x/o experiences. I chose a third-person perspective to frame the song as a narrated journey, guiding the listener through the hero's adventures. Like the figure on the album cover, the protagonist appears smoking with his helmet still on. I imagined him as a smuggler, drawing inspiration from characters like Esmar Tuek from *Dune* and Han Solo from *Star Wars*, whose roles as resourceful outsiders navigating complex worlds helped shape their identities and stories. At the same time, I drew from the tradition of smugglers memorialized in Texas and Mexican corridos, a genre that has chronicled life along the U.S./Mexico border since 1848. In songs like "El Corrido de Mariano Resendéz" and "El Corrido de Juan Garcia," smugglers are complex protagonists who confront hardship and injustice. Building on this lineage, I shaped my main character as a futuristic corrido hero navigating intergalactic terrain, whose story echoes the resilience and moral complexity of those earlier figures while reimagining them in a new, speculative world.

Throughout the song, I comment on current economic struggles in the U.S. and predict problems will be even more challenging for Chicana/x/os and people of color in the future. I refer to warfare in the song, predicting that violence will continue as more humans travel intergalactically. I also infer ways violence and discrimination grow from corporate greed and distorted media that distracts from greater violence at hand. Within this climate, the hero finds himself caught in the middle of opposing sides of conflict where he must hide and fight to stay alive. When the hero crashes after the battle, he finds himself a stranger in a xenophobic country—like many Mexicans and Latinos who often find themselves unwelcome in parts of the United States (although the nation sits on land that was once Mexican, Spanish, and earlier Indigenous). When the hero returns to earth, he is unwelcome and must figure out how to survive in this hostile territory.

Throughout his travels, he must maintain his sense of self and remain dignified as a human being. One way he does this is by expressing and maintaining style. Luis Alvarez calls this form of resistance "stylization" and argues that style can "challenge normative behavior and social mores" in ways that empower communities of color (80). In the song, the hero rolls and flies in a 1964 Chevy Impala styled spaceship, one he builds after landing on earth. I added spinners, decorative wheel rims that keep spinning even when the vehicle stops, to the ship's wheels to show that regional Texas style still lives in the future. I end by sending him into the galaxy for future travels across the universe. At the conclusion of the song, El Dusty finishes with scratches, using the stylization of the turntable to communicate urgency, energy, and motivation. The hook from the verse repeats twice: "body armor, jet pack, in-ear, microchip/flamethrower, lazer gun got aboard the spaceship." He scratches the snare drum every second and fourth beat and adds a "Let's Go!" sample to the mix. He ends the song echoing my final lines to create the feeling of an ongoing future.

The theme of the future fits the city of Corpus Christi with its emerging cultural movement. As new sounds develop, there is a solid foundation of the musical genres orquesta, Tejano, cumbia, electronica, hip hop, and more recently, NuCumbia, a genre that was founded by El Dusty. On the night of the event, the energy of the mostly Latina/x/o Corpus Christi crowd complemented the electrified sounds and sights of the night and pronounced the cultural power of the city. Corpus is home to historic record labels such as Hacienda and Freddie Records and renowned Tejano music legends such as Ray Barrera and Balde Gonzalez. My mother's side of the family is from Corpus and my uncles were musicians in the early Tejano orquesta and conjunto music scenes who played with the legendary Isidro Lopez. Corpus's own La Reina de la Onda Tejana, Selena, whose cumbia's have enchanted the world, remain a large part of the city's identity. The Kumbia Kings and later El Dusty would continue Corpus's legacy as a cumbia city and these two would incorporate more hip hop to the sound of the genre. *Sombrero Galaxy* then, represents the amalgamation of sounds that continue to develop from the city with cumbia as a large component.

Cumbia, Hip Hop, and Collaborative Work

The meetings of cumbia and hip hop informed the recording of the project, and it is important to note that these are Black diasporic music forms that have greatly impacted Chicana/x/o culture, history, and identity. Of the album El Dusty

remarks, "We wanted to create a concept hip hop album and I wanted to do it our style, so it naturally became a Chicano-based, sci-fi-themed, sample-based hip hop album... It still has a cumbia flavor if u listen close enuff!" (Rabinowitz). The way he describes the album signals the importance of these two genres to the project and reflects the impact that cumbia and hip hop have on Chicana/x/o ways of being.

Cumbia originated in coastal Colombia where Black and Indigenous communities created expressions in the face of colonial enslavement and violence. Peter Wade writes how cumbia was associated "specifically with black origins" and strong "Indigenous influence," especially through the *gaita* (47). The genre later spread across Latin America and the world. For Texas Mexicans, the beat and sound of cumbia is omnipresent. The popularization of the genre in the state would be affected by cultural mixture, that José Juan Olvera Gudiño writes, "entail intense practices of negotiation for meaning amid complex actions and messages, since, at certain historic moments, border hybridization and international migration take place concurrently and with great intensity" (99). One of the products of this cultural hybridization has been a style of cumbia that is tied to Texas Mexican culture and identity. The percussive-laden, rhythmic, bass-heavy music can now be heard across Texas weddings, quinceañeras, back yards, cantinas, and nightclubs. The radio, the importation of records, tapes, and CDs, the Internet, and the open sea that eventually leads to the Caribbean Islands, Mexico, and Central and South America pushes a cultural movement back and forth around the Rio Grande Valley and the U.S., manifesting in a mixture of sounds that is distinctly Corpus. Here, the drums, keyboard, saxophones, and the swing of the beat create a regional and distinct sound.

Hip hop is also a genre that has greatly impacted Chicana/x/o culture, and Chicana/x/os in turn have contributed to the vastness of hip hop's national and global spread. Hip Hop grew out of Black and Brown struggle in the South Bronx and continues to impact the world (Rivera 237-38). While hip hop culture is firmly rooted in African American music and style, Caribbean Latinos comprised some of the earliest youth engaging in hip hop culture. When hip hop's popularity reached the West Coast and the South; Chicana/x/os, Mexicans, Central Americans and South American Latina/x/os helped to shape new sounds and developments in the genre.

As a hip hop artist and Chicano raised in Houston, TX, the genre has been a way to describe the world that I live in. Early in my life, rapping was the first literary form that I felt I could strongly express myself to my Black and Brown

peers. Being able to cypher, battle, and later record music, and play live shows would lead to gaining confidence to write essays, poems, and short stories. Hip hop also gave me history lessons as a young person. The lyrics from artists such as KRS One, Rakim, and Chuck D would give me a view into Black history and motivated me to find out my place and history in the US. While hip hop has been a way to talk about the past, the music has been predicated on the present and future. The instrumentation and production of hip hop has revolutionized music creation. Producers like Pete Rock, DJ Premier, J Dilla, Dr. Dre, Timbaland, and Pharrell have innovated music production and set the tone for the sound of modern music today. Lyrically, hip hop has helped push the boundaries of structured rhyme, cadence, and metaphor. As a whole, hip hop has been an art form that has helped give creatives a platform to imagine and play out futures.

Like so many of my good friendships, hip hop set the foundation for my collaboration with Horacio Oliveira also known as El Dusty. I met him in the late 2010s when we both were gigging in San Antonio with the band Bombasta. During this time, El Dusty laid down futuristic mixes and electrified San Antonio crowds by blending familiar cumbia songs with the latest hip hop dancefloor anthems. I saw him rock the houses off of Corpus venues with his technical wizardry, capability to read the room, and pure love of music. Similar to Selena, whose sound reflected inspirations from Disco, R&B, soul, and *cumbia*, El Dusty fused his musical palette with these genres along with hip hop and house. His interest in music production started with hip hop. He started making beats early in his life, after getting an MPC 2000 drum machine. At the age of 17, he began DJing for the hip hop and Latino pop radio station Corpus Hot Z95. He later joined the band iH5 and recorded an album in Houston at rapper Tow Down's studio. These sessions led to legendary artist Baby Bash inviting El Dusty to DJ for him on an 88 -city tour with Frankie J and Gemini. While continuing to make beats and DJ, El Dusty toured in the group Master Blaster and played several festivals and released more music (El Dusty. Personal interview).

As he experimented creating songs from his DJ sets, he also took notes from his collaborators the Kumbia Kings and sought to create beats that reflected his love for hip hop, house, and cumbia. In 2011, he put out the song "K Le Pasa," which then led to El Dusty being signed to Universal Records. From this deal, he recorded the album *Cumbia City*, a masterpiece of cumbia club bangers. From here, El Dusty became a global sensation and solidified his place in the Latino and electronic music worlds. He remains active in the local Corpus hip hop scenes and has kept in touch with hip hop artists throughout his career.

My own experiences working with El Dusty involved traveling back and forth from San Antonio and Corpus playing hip hop sets. Our connection would continue as I maneuvered through hip hop and cumbia scenes across Texas. We collaborated on a performance for a hip hop symposium at the University of Texas at San Antonio. I also booked him for my Sonido Colectivo Series, and he later booked my group Third Root to play his celebrated Tropicoso showcase. He has since produced tracks for my group Third Root with Austin's Adrian Quesada of Black Pumas. We connected on the *Sombrero Galaxy* project where he explored new ideas, new approaches, and new directions, yet remained rooted in his drum machine and hip hop and cumbia records.

Sombrero Galaxy and Chicano Futurism

During a phone conversation with El Dusty, he gave me a rough description of a project that would be centered on a "cholo and his chihuahua in space," and that I could run with that idea. In writing the character, I worked to imagine ways a "cholo" would navigate throughout the galaxy in the future. According to James Diego Vigil, "cholo is a label that Americans and Mexican Americans have used to refer to the poorest of the poor, marginalized Mexican immigrants" (57). Vigil goes on to describe how "Chicano street populations who have undergone intense culture change embrace and use this label with pride to denote their speech, dress, and other customs and habits as well as themselves" (57). Historically, the cholo has been a marginalized figure in the United States, often compelled to reclaim a sense of pride and identity. Chicana/o/x literature frequently grapples with the exploration and affirmation of identity. From Corky Gonzalez's *I Am Joaquín* to Lorna Dee Cervantes's *Emplumada*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, and José Vadi's *Inter State*, Chicana/o/x writers have long examined the complexities of Mexican American life in the United States. From this vantage point, I sought to create a character who represents Chicanos who have often been overlooked, marginalized, and misunderstood in U.S. society, yet continue to survive and persevere.

Whether directly or indirectly, these themes were addressed throughout the project. In the album, emcees relay concepts of alienation, the future, and intergalactic travel through hip hop tracks, laced with cumbia sensibilities. Complementing the dense lyricism, El Dusty's scratching of samples gives the listener a throwback into 1990s golden age hip hop. Through his manipulation of records and samples, he connects the past, present, and future together. One of

the marvels of turntablism is the ability to bring back sounds from the past and manipulate them in the present. Even the idea of using a turntable and transforming it into an instrument to scratch futuristic samples such as lasers, represents a move forward and has impacted recorded music as a whole. Artists like Ultramagnetic MC's, Kool Keith, Deltron 3030, MF Doom, Outkast, and many others have used sci-fi elements and references in their work. This is part of a long tradition of Black artists engaged in sci-fi and futuristic art, film, movies, and music that scholars describe as "Afrofuturism."

Ytasha L. Womack writes, "Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques" (9). Drawing from Afrofuturism, Taryne Jade Taylor writes how Latinofuturism, "recalls the past, explores the diversity of Latinx experiences in the present, and imagines a decolonial future" (31). More specific to Chicana/x/o artistic expression, Catherine Sue Ramírez explains how works of Chicanofuturism "excavate and retell histories of contact, colonialism, displacement, labor, migration, resistance, and social and cultural transformation in the Americas" (Chicanafuturism). Cathryn Merla-Watson describes how Chicanafuturism comprises "literature, visual art, sound/music, and performance that explore the nexus of race, gender, science, technology, the environment, and the future from a Chicanx and decolonial perspective" (Latinofuturism). In the *Sombrero Galaxy* project, the diverse stories and sounds reflect key elements of Chicana/x/o futurism. As a participant in the project, I was eager to explore how science fiction could be used to imagine and engage with the social issues affecting Chicana/x/os today.

Working on this project has pushed me to think about the future for all of us, whether Mexican, American, Mexican American, Chicano, or anyone struggling to survive in the world. What will existence be like in the future? How will music continue to reflect the conditions people are living through? How will musical mixture reflect the realities of people living within various communities? Who will continue to be criminalized? What national lines will continue to be set up? Who will be kept out? Who will thrive? Who will suffer? Is there a way we can work now for a better way of living? Art can give us a glimpse into these futures and help us see how the present and past are connected. In many cases, we can hope for the best but also expect and prepare for further conflict and struggle. As someone who works within education and music, these are questions that I consider daily.

Institutions in place continue to exploit and neglect communities that need help the most. Through gentrification projects, Black and Brown people continue to live in underfunded school districts with limited community resources. The criminal justice system continues to disproportionately penalize Black and Brown subjects. Healthcare remains unequal in the U.S., which has resulted in dire consequences among our most vulnerable communities. Political conflict in Latin America remains complex and corporate exploitation of Latin America and the consequences of these actions continue to grow. Anti-immigrant sentiment from both political parties displays how there will be continued xenophobia as more Latina/x/os move to the United States. Also, US and Latin American relations indicate growing economic tension due to histories of corporate greed, exploitation, and land theft. In this climate, it is helpful to prepare, create art, and work to enact change.

I am hopeful that with technological advances, more voices can be heard that challenge stereotypes and limited views of Black and Brown people and provide inspiration for social change. Of today's technological advances, Ytasha L. Womack writes, "This blossoming culture is unique. Unlike previous eras, today's artists can wield the power of digital media, social platforms, digital video, graphic arts, gaming technology, and more to tell their stories, share their stories, and connect with audiences inexpensively—a gift from the sci-fi gods, so to speak, that was unthinkable at the turn of the century" (10). With the greater accessibility to recording and releasing music online, we can share our experiences and create pathways to a greater existence.

Releases like *Sombrero Galaxy* will continue to provide insight into ways musical performance can help build awareness on social issues and incite inspiration and change. Music continues to transcend national borders, genres, and limitations and the possibilities for social commentary and change are grand. In a larger context, the artforms surrounding the *Sombrero Galaxy* release event in Corpus Christi demonstrate how varied yet connected art can be in a public setting. The event helped give voices to artists in the Corpus community by including local filmmakers, musicians, writers, artists, and designers. This creative energy will undoubtedly grow in Corpus and spread from the Gulf Coast to the world and the galaxy.

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