Making Ends Meet: Agency of Thee Midniters During the Chicano Movement

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"Thee Midnite Feeling"

There was a cold breeze in the autumn air that night in Montebello, but we were hot with anticipation. At least thirty of our friends were waiting for us to begin as they stood on the balcony and directly in front of us on the deck. My good friend Kevin allowed us to use his spacious backyard to play a show, as opportunities to play at established venues in Downtown Los Angeles were scarce. We spent over an hour looking for extension cables long enough to reach our makeshift stage and power strips capable of supporting four amplifiers and two pedalboards. With the help of the other bands, we set up the drums and adjusted the volume levels for our speakers and amplifiers accordingly. Strings of Christmas lights hung above us as our only source of light that night, and small stage lights colored our sneakers red and purple. A half-hour later than advertised, we finally finished tuning our guitars and were ready to start our set. With the Los Angeles skyline looming on the horizon, Max and Ben played the opening chords to The Cure's 1979 hit "Boys Don't Cry" as Daniel and I waited to join them. The three beats on Justin's snare drum were my cue to begin playing that song's iconic riff. The crowd bounced to our rhythm, and we knew the show had truly begun.

This scene takes place every weekend at houses all over the Los Angeles area. Small indie bands with rough sounds find ways to set up their own shows and become the soundtracks to their communities. This is not just a new phenomenon either. The East Los Angeles music scene has a rich history of local acts who defined the sound of their respective generations and reached incredible heights. Los Lobos, a Chicano band that formed in 1973, is arguably the most famous of the East LA bands, reaching the top of the Billboard Hot 100 with their performance of "La Bamba" for the 1987 film of the same name.[1] In the 1960s, Cannibal and the Headhunters had their own Billboard hit with their cover of "Land of 1000 Dances" charting at number thirty, and even made it all the way to opening for The Beatles' 1965 North American tour.[2] However, it was one of their

1 David Reyes and Tom Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California*, rev. ed. (University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 151.

2 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 74.

Figure 1: Photograph of Thee Midniters, circa 1966. Pictured from left to right: Jimmy Espinosa, Willie G., Romeo Prado, Danny Lamonte, George Dominguez, Roy Marquez, and Larry Rendon.[3]

contemporaries who left one of the largest impacts on the East Los Angeles community: Thee Midniters (Figure 1).

Known for their electrifying performances and a musical style blending Mexican traditional music, surf rock, African American R&B, and soul, Thee Midniters were more than just a band; they were a cultural phenomenon. Described by many as "The Beatles of East LA," Thee Midniters were local heroes, with songs such as "Whittier Boulevard" defining the low-rider culture synonymous with the Chicano experience.[4] Yet the decade of Thee Midniters' peak, the 1960s, was a time marked by civil unrest and political upheaval. While Thee Midniters rose to prominence at the beginning of the 1960s, the Chicano Movement, also referred to as "El Movimiento," became prevalent amongst Chicano communities by the end of the decade. El Movimiento was described by scholar Roger

3 Photo sourced by Mark Guerrero, "Thee Midniters (c. 1966)," 1966, photograph, MarkGuerrero.com, https://markguerrero.com/60s_photos.php. Published with permission. The inspiration for this paper came from my partner Hailey and her grandfather Robert's deep appreciation for Thee Midniters. As a musician myself, I feel it is important to preserve stories about artists with lasting impacts on local communities.

4 Mandalit Del Barco, "The Story of 'Whittier Blvd.,' a Song and Place Where Latino Youth Found Each Other," *NPR*, November 29, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/11/29/671688096/the-story-of-whittier-blvd-a-song-and-place-where-latino-youth-found-each-other

Bruns as "a time that witnessed a drive to secure social and political justice on behalf of Mexican Americans."[5] The band, not usually one to take political stances with their art, faced the reality that this new political movement had become the main identity of their community. As local Chicano rock stars with considerable influence in the East LA community, they had to grapple with this dilemma.

Thee Midniters had become notable in the early 1960s for forging a distinct cultural identity through their music rather than overt political messaging. The personal experiences of the band members did not often align with the claims of injustice made by El Movimiento, and as such the band did not truly adopt the ideals of the movement. In spite of this, the band decided to release songs with overtly Chicano themes, such as "Chicano Power" and "The Ballad of César Chávez," largely due to the influence of their manager, Eddie Torres.[6] Building upon the available historiography and oral histories provided by band members and other significant individuals, this paper argues that despite their roles as "reluctant activists" in the late 1960s, Thee Midniters' blend of diverse musical influences and their commitment to musicianship above all else, positioned them as authentic Chicano cultural icons, reflecting and shaping the culture of East Los Angeles.

"The Town I Live In": Cultural Origins of Thee Midniters

Thee Midniters formed in 1960 and consisted of several young, talented, classically-trained Mexican American musicians from high schools around the Los Angeles area. The caliber of skill possessed by each of the band members created an "all-star band" of sorts.[7] Willie Garcia, otherwise known as "Little Willie G.," is most famously remembered as the original singer of the band and is a prominent member of the Chicano rock community. Garcia attended Salesian High School, an all-boys school located in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, an experience he described as "actually the best thing that ever happened to [him]."[8] While a freshman at Salesian in 1960, Garcia met several of the musicians that would make

5 Roger Bruns, *Documents of the Chicano Movement*, 1st ed. (ABC-CLIO, 2023), xi.

6 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 95.

7 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 85, 89.

8 Guillermo Garcia, "Mark Guerrero's East L.A. Music Stories: Little Willie G—Episode 3," interview by Mark Guerrero, April 27, 2022, video, 21:19, https://youtu.be/hpvbtZeRAjw?si=QCHAO6dryj1fKuot&t=1279.

up Thee Midniters' lineup, including trombonist Romeo Prado, saxophonist Larry Rendon, and bassist Jimmy Espinosa. Eventually joined by the likes of guitarist George Dominguez and drummer George Salazar, Thee Midniters became an eight-piece band complete with the traditional rock and roll setup (guitar, bass, drums), alongside a horn section. This fusion of sounds was not common among rock bands at this time, though it is this style that "reflects the eclecticism of Chicano rock 'n' roll in general and this group in particular."[9]

This eclecticism is due, in large part, to the band members residing in East Los Angeles, a dynamic cultural hub where the influences of several cultures combined to create a diverse music scene. In areas such as Los Angeles that suffered from de facto segregation, "multicultural spaces" played a key role in transcending the boundaries of "ethnic enclaves."[10] These spaces often served as placemakers, cornerstones of a community that fostered cultural interaction and exchange. These places typically include restaurants and other businesses, but music also contributed significantly to the cultural syncretism of Los Angeles and the formation of a unique Chicano identity.

When reflecting on the development of the "Chicano rock sound," Willie G. characterized it as "an interpretation of everything [they had] ever been exposed to, every music genre [they had] been exposed to."[11] Thee Midniters, along with their contemporaries, "reveled in musical variety."[12] Jimmy Espinosa, Thee Midniters' bassist, discussed the band's influences in 2015, stating that "the band was a melting pot, a buffet of Black soul, R&B, British R&R, Gospel, Jazz and Latin à la New York and Puerto Rico."[13] The Chicanos of their day fell in love with the doo-wop, R&B, and rock and roll sounds of Black artists from Los Angeles like Johnny Otis, Chuck Higgins, and Big Jay McNeely.[14] This appreciation for Black music is

9 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 86-88.
10 Natalia Molina, "The Importance of Place and Place-Makers in the Life of a Los Angeles Community: What Gentrification Erases from Echo Park," *Southern California Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (Historical Society of Southern California, 2015), 76–77, https://doi.org/10.1525/scq.2015.97.1.69.
11 *Chicano Rock!: The Sounds of East Los Angeles*, directed by Jon Wilkman (PBS Home Video, 2008), DVD.
12 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 89.
13 Jimmy Espinosa, interview by Dr. Al Carlos Hernandez, "Chicano group from yesteryear: The Midniters [sic]," *Hispanic News Online*, February 13, 2025.
14 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 11–12.

central to the Chicano identity, as virtually every Chicano band took influence from Black artists during the 1950s and 1960s. On top of this, the previous generation of Chicanos, which had included local figures such as disc jockey Chico Sesma, had similarly become enamored with the big band and jazz music pioneered by Black artists in the 1940s.[15] Thee Midniters' popular covers of soul tracks by Black artists such as "The Town I Live In" and "Land of 1000 Dances," written by McKinley Mitchell and Chris Kenner respectively, demonstrate the band's appreciation for Black culture and how they incorporated it into the formation of their own musical identities.

The Beatles' arrival in New York on February 7, 1964, caused reverberations that changed the musical landscape of East Los Angeles for good. Thee Midniters began adopting the iconic look of the Fab Four and began being treated as such by Chicano teenagers in their community.[16] The Rolling Stones, an equally prominent British band at the time, were also an influence on the artistry of Thee Midniters. The story of Thee Midniters' most famous song, "Whittier Boulevard," is tied to the Stones, essentially a cover of their song "2120 South Michigan Avenue." According to Garcia, who saw the song as similar to a "surf rock instrumental," it was the idea of bandmate Romeo Prado to add horns to the song, emulating the sound of James Brown, a prominent Black singer.[17]

"Whittier Boulevard" demonstrates the cultural blending of Chicano music through a combination of Black and White influences. What makes this track unmistakably synonymous with East LA culture is how it channels the experience of its youth. The song starts with the band, led by Garcia, shouting, "Let's take a trip down Whittier Boulevard!" followed by someone yelling "Arriba! Arriba!" and a *grito*, a shout or cry commonly heard in Mexican mariachi music.[18] The pulsating rhythm and energy of "Whittier Boulevard" embodied the cruising culture of its namesake, a street synonymous with Chicano culture. Gaye Theresa Johnson has examined the impact of the song in her studies, claiming that the song "reflects collective and social traditions among excluded communities" and announces

15 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 10.
16 Reyes and Waldman, 88.
17 Guillermo Garcia, "Born to Sing and Perform," interview by Harvey Kubernik, "Go East Young Man," in *Turn Up the Radio!: Rock, Pop, and Roll in Los Angeles 1956-1972,* (Santa Monica Press, 2014), 84.
18 James Espinosa and Willie Garcia, "Whittier Boulevard," Chattahoochee Records, Track A on "Whittier Blvd./Evil Love," 1965, vinyl LP.

"the relevance of Mexican traditions, history, and persons on the literal boulevard and the figurative landscape of postwar L.A."[19] By celebrating their local environment, the band transformed a simple pastime into an anthem of cultural affirmation, capturing the essence of a community with strong cultural roots.

"Chicano Power": Thee Midniters and El Movimiento

When "Whittier Boulevard" was released in 1965, it was the only Midniters track to "evoke Mexican-American life."[20] However, the second half of the 1960s would mark the growing ubiquity of the Chicano Movement, a struggle that had arguably been taking place since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. This treaty caused the cession of Mexican land to the United States, setting the precedent for discrimination and prejudice against Mexican Americans.[21] According to Roger Bruns' chronology of El Movimiento, the movement's prevalence in the 1960s increased after the National Farm Workers Association began their strike against the Delano grape-growers on September 16, 1965, Mexican Independence Day. Many key events associated with El Movimiento occurred after this date, such as César Chávez's 1966 Sacramento march, the 1968 Los Angeles school walkouts, and the 1970 Laguna Park Moratorium Protest that resulted in the death of prominent Chicano writer Ruben Salazar.[22]

The 1960s in general was a turbulent period in American history, marked by the rise of both the civil rights movement and the Chicano Movement. The civil rights movement, primarily led by Black activists, aimed at dismantling segregation and securing legal equality for African Americans. Likewise, the Chicano Movement targeted systemic discrimination against Mexican Americans, particularly in labor, education, and political representation. Leaders of both movements stood in solidarity through their shared struggle and shared strategies in their battles against racial injustice.[23] Civil Rights Movement leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. sought change

19 Gaye Theresa Johnson, "Spatial Entitlement Race, Displacement, and Sonic Reclamation in Postwar Los Angeles" in *Spaces of Conflict, Soundsof Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles*, 1st ed.(University of California Press, 2013), 74–75.
20 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 93.
21 Bruns, *Documents of the Chicano Movement*, 1.
22 Bruns, *Documents of the Chicano Movement*, xxx-xxxiv.
23 Bruns, *Documents of the Chicano Movement*, 66.

through the "existing political framework," and as a result, they helped enact change with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Similarly, Chicano activists such as César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, who led the farmworkers' movement in Delano, California, sought reform through the formation of unions and the passing of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975, a law that "recognized farm workers' collective bargaining rights."[24] African Americans and Chicanos were bonded together not only through their culture and music but also through their collective struggles.

As Chávez and Huerta led the charge for social justice for Mexican Americans, Chicano art and literature became increasingly reflective of the ideals of the movement. An example of this is seen in Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales's 1967 poem "I Am Joaquin," a "touchstone for the emerging Chicano movement" that was "filled with a defiant, revolutionary fervor."[25] Gonzales, who had become popular with the youth, emphasized his belief in "ethnic nationalism" becoming central to the movement's identity. Many artists of the coming generation identified with Corky's ideals and the movement as a whole. These artists demonstrated this shift by choosing Spanish names for their bands and singing about overtly political themes that were relevant to the Chicano plight, in an attempt to reclaim and acknowledge their Mexican heritage.[26]

While many artists aligned explicitly with the movement, Thee Midniters occupied a more nuanced space. Beginning in 1967, their music adopted a more political stance, compared to their original works that mused on topics such as love and youth. This new alignment with Chicano activism was not accidental. Eddie Torres played a significant role in steering their public image and musical repertoire. Torres recognized the changing times and urged Thee Midniters to embrace the themes of the movement within their work. "Chicano Power," for instance, was originally a "Latin jazz instrumental" written by Romeo Prado, and the track's name was tacked on by Torres to appeal to the trends of the music scene.[27] Due to Torres's influence, the song was released on a new record label called La Raza Records, and the band began booking shows at college campuses and rotest rallies.

Chicano students welcomed Thee Midniters as "allies in the

24 Bruns, *Documents of the Chicano Movement*,145.
25 Bruns, *Documents of the Chicano Movement*, 77.
26 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 104–5.
27 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dance*, 96.

struggle," but this direction conflicted with the band's core identity as musicians first and foremost. Bassist Jimmy Espinosa, who recorded bass on the Midniters song "The Ballad of Cesar Chavez," once stated that Thee Midniters had no "altruistic" reason for writing that song, and in fact noted that he felt "forced to make a statement about something [he] did not completely understand," a sentiment shared by the rest of the band.[28]

Besides the name and the band's chanting of the phrase "Chicano Power" throughout the song, there is hardly a connection to El Movimiento. When compared to other undeniably political songs of the movement, the Chicano themes in Thee Midniters' work are relatively surface-level. Brenda Ramos asserts that the music that was truly influenced by the movement typically contained themes of "cultural pride," sympathy for the Mexican American struggle, and "address[es] the ethos of a Chicano consciousness firmly rooted in Indigenous and mestizo realities."[29] Examples of such songs include "Yo Soy Chicano" by Los Alvarados, released in 1973; "Corrido de Bracero" by Los Mascarones y Los Alacranes Mojados, released in 1975; and "America de los indios" by Daniel Valdez, released in 1974.

"Dreaming Casually": Agency in the Face of Pressure

Despite their reluctance to present themselves as activists, they were as equally representative of Chicano culture as the political acts who followed, and should be considered place-makers in their own right within the East Los Angeles community. Throughout their history in the music industry, Chicanos have always faced pressure to conform to Anglo expectations and have found ways of demonstrating resilience through compromise. Most famously, Richard Valenzuela used the name "Ritchie Valens" under the direction of his manager Bob Keane, as it was Keane's belief that if he used his real name, "record executives and disc jockeys" would never give his music a chance.[30] Yet, Valenzuela overcame the obfuscation of his heritage by adapting a Rock and Roll version of a "traditional Mexican wedding song" that became his biggest hit, "La Bamba."[31] In another case dating back to the 1940s, Lalo Guerrero changed his stage name

28 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dance*, 96.
29 Brenda M. Romero, "Rolas de Aztlán: Songs of the Chicano Movement." *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 27, no. 1 (2006): 117–118, https://doi.org/10.1353/lat.2006.0027.
30 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 39.
31 Jon Wilkman, *Chicano Rock!*

to "Don Edwards" at the request of Imperial Records in order to appeal to a white audience; his insistence on continuing to utilize his trademark Spanish lyric style caused Edwards to fail. In the 1950s, however, Guerrero earned the adoration of white audiences "on his own terms" by releasing humorous songs in English that were authentic to his style, such as "The Ballad of Pancho Lopez" and "Elvis Perez," all under his real name.[32]

Both Ritchie Valens and Lalo Guerrero are undeniably Chicano, and Thee Midniters are no different. Though it was Eddie Torres's vision to create a song titled "Chicano Power" to appeal to the growing movement, the band wrote tracks like "Never Knew I Had It So Bad" that showcased their true feelings of ambivalence during the movement. While the lyrics themselves do not suggest any explicit reference to El Movimiento, the song's themes reflected that the truth about undesirable living conditions had been "stretched" and that in reality, life was not as bad as others might have suggested. Willie G. sings, "The job that I'm holding don't pay me much but it's enough to get me by, I can't buy everything I want but at least I'm satisfied."[33]

Garcia, who described the song as "tongue-in-cheek," claimed that when the band was told that they were "being exploited by the white man and whatnot," the band as a whole did not feel they were experiencing "their whole concept and portrayal of what was going on in the world. [The band] would hear them out and then have discussions about it."[34] In the same interview, Garcia did acknowledge the racism they experienced outside of East Los Angeles, though he has more recently stated, "[In] our youth, we were oblivious to a lot of that stuff [because] we were just having fun. We were making music and having fun, you know?"[35] While they too were victims of discrimination, "Never Knew I Had It So Bad" ultimately demonstrates that the band was focused on writing songs that were true to their own experiences, an intrinsic quality of Chicano art.

Additionally, several of Thee Midniters' contemporaries and successors faced similar pressures to conform, illustrating the ongoing struggles that Chicano artists face when seeking authentic accept-

32 Reyes and Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances*, 7–9.
33 William Garcia, "Never Knew I Had It So Bad, Whittier Records, Track 6 on *Unlimited*, 1967, vinyl LP.
34 Garcia, "Born to Sing and Perform" in *Turn up the Radio!*, 85.
35 Garcia, "East L.A. Music Stories: Little Willie G," 5:52, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpvbtZeRAjw&t=140s.

ance. The band El Chicano (originally called The VIPs) was given its name by their White manager Eddie Davis (who also managed Cannibal and the Headhunters) due to rising awareness of the Chicano Movement. In the case of El Chicano, however, they grew to genuinely embrace their new name and began releasing music that was politically charged, such as their 1971 album Revolución, whose cover depicted the band standing with Mexican revolutionary figures Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata.[36] Regardless, the co-opting of the movement by Anglo figures in the music industry, and even fellow influencers like Eddie Torres, prompted Chicano artists to find ways to assert their own independence in the face of pressure. Thee Midniters, while not necessarily advocates of El Movimiento, still found ways to make their voices heard about experiences that were true to them.

"That's All"

Mark Guerrero, son of Lalo Guerrero and a key figure in the Chicano rock scene for his extensive documentation of its many artists, stated recently that "Chicano music is music made by Chicanos."[37] Guerrero said this during a panel at the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles regarding the movement's music, which he attended with other important figures such as Art Brambila (manager and producer), Geree Gonzales (singer), and Little Willie G. of Thee Midniters. Willie G., or Willie Garcia as he has been referred to throughout this paper, had his own comments to share on his view of Chicano music, stating, "Culturally, we grew up diverse and it was beautiful because there was this fabric of everything… All that just seems to mix itself into our thought processes. Everything that we write about becomes important because it's not about me, it's about us. And that's what Chicano music does, it's about us."[38] To be a Chicano artist is to be an artist who draws influence from the rich, diverse cultures of their surroundings while maintaining a consciousness of

36 John Wilkman, *Chicano Rock!*
37 Mark Guerrero, "Grammy Museum Panel & Performance (2022)- Mark Guerrero, Little Willie G, Geree, and Art Brambila," interview by Melissa Hidalgo, April 13, 2022, video, 44:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZJcpWmJKYs.
38 Guillermo Garcia, "Grammy Museum Panel & Performance (2022)- Mark Guerrero, Little Willie G, Geree, and Art Brambila," interview by Melissa Hidalgo, April 13, 2022, video, 48:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZJcpWmJKYs.

their ancestral roots. Just as young Chicano bands from East Los Angeles today play songs by musicians from different cultures and time periods, Thee Midniters wove together their own diverse influences to craft their unique identity. Just as they once played backyard shows that brought local communities together, today's underground Chicano artists continue to carry that torch and proudly create their own unique cultural identities not beholden to any expectations. Thee Midniters may not have fully embraced the label of a "Chicano band" during their prime, but their contributions to the cultural fabric of East Los Angeles are undeniable. Willie G.'s recent acceptance of the band's role in the movement seems to indicate their growing awareness of their own importance.

The Chicano Movement is arguably an ongoing process, responsible for creating a "new cultural awareness among its community, one that brought greater appreciation and pride of their culture and history and place in society."[39] The pioneers of El Movimiento banded together under a unified cultural identity to resist systemic racism, educational inequality, and labor exploitation. The legacy of their activism is still seen on Whittier Boulevard today, as Chicanos organize protests around contemporary issues such as immigration reform, racial profiling, and the pursuit of equitable education. Chicano art, both of the 1960s and of today, is deeply infused with the roots of resilience, a long-standing tradition established by those early fighters. Thee Midniters, who did not aim to become activists, were a reflection of both their community and the Chicano Movement in their own right. Their dual identity—as reluctant activists and cultural icons—demonstrates the complexity of cultural representation and the power of music to forge connections and inspire change. While they may not have explicitly sought to be the voice of a movement, their impact continues to echo across generations.

39 Bruns, *Documents of the Chicano Movement*, xxvi.