



Cambalache is a son jarocho band based in East Los Angeles. The group, whose name means *exchange*, was founded in 2007 and is led by César Castro, a performer, teacher and instrument maker from Veracruz, Mexico, home of Son Jarocho traditional folk music. They are inspired by the *fandango*, a traditional community-based celebration of folk music and dance in the Veracruz region. Fandangos are known for their musical collaboration, improvisation, and spontaneity, where beginners and can freely play and dance alongside life-long performers. It captures the spirit of community and collectivity that drives Cambalache. “Son jarocho is about interacting,” Castro says. “When you go to a fandango, you have that capacity, that social skill, more fundamental than the musical. The music is going to follow.”

While their music is deeply rooted in the traditions of Veracruz, Cambalache brings their own, distinctly East Los Angeles sound with Cesar’s hand-made instruments, and some modern electric strings, including a custom electric upright bass. For Cambalache, and many Los Angeles artists, their work is also influenced by the American rock’n’roll style. This combination is what made Ritchie Valens’s updated Son Jarocho classic *La Bamba* so popular in the 1950’s—faster and louder than the folk original, but still familiar. For generations, this uniquely Californian style has been part of the musical landscape of Los Angeles.

This performance was recorded live at UCLA’s Royce Hall. It also features some wonderful conversation with the artists. These materials expand on some of that discussion, and offers ways to connect, reflect and explore.

[The full performance and discussion can be found here.](#)



To learn more about Cesar Castro, Cambalache, and how they build community through music, [check out this 4 minute mini-documentary.](#)

It was created as part of Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage’s *Sounds of California* initiative, documenting stories of music and migration in California

MEET THE ARTISTS

César Castro is a sonero, maestro and luthier (string instrument maker) from Veracruz, México, now living in Los Angeles. Castro began studying Son Jarocho at age 13 in Veracruz. By 15, he was invited to join Grupo Mono Blanco, a hugely important group working to reclaim and re-popularize Son Jarocho traditions in Mexico. With Mono Blanco, he learned how to make the traditional instruments, how to teach the music to others, and the value of sharing a tradition and creating an active community—the driving ideas behind Cambalache.

Xochi Flores Born into a family of community organizers and community activists, Xochi learned to use her voice, her words and her community work to lift the voices of others. She began studying son jarocho in 2001 in Los Angeles. She is co-founder of Fandango sin Fronteras, an organization connecting musicians in Mexico and LA. She has played with other important groups in Los Angeles, like the all-female bands Candela and Las No Que No. She is also a very proud mother to three beautiful, super smart and determined young women.

Juan Perez, bass player, has played with every well-loved band in LA, including Los Lobos, Ozomatli, and Quetzal. Juan has studied bass for over 25 years and is considered the most knowledgeable bass player in the Son Jarocho and Chicano music genres.

Chuy Sandoval started out playing punk music as a teenager, and studied classical guitar in college before he learned jarana and son jarocho with Cesar, and eventually joined Cambalache. Chuy also teaches jarana at local community centers in Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley.

DIG DEEPER: Further Reading, Listening & Discussion Ideas

- [Listen to National Public Radio](#) report on the importance of Son Jarocho in Los Angeles.
- Learn more about making the instruments of Son Jarocho in this [LA Times article](#).
- [Check out this video](#) of a very traditional version of La Bamba, played by musicians from Veracruz. How is it different from the versions you may already know, or the one Cambalache plays?
- Read more about Cesar Castro and how the fandango spirit has shaped his personal and professional life in this [Folklife Magazine article](#) from October 2020.

What are some important music and dance traditions in your community? How do you participate in them? How are they shared between generations?

What artists or styles give voice to the issues that matter to you? What kinds of music, dance, or other art-forms make you feel connected to a larger community?

The *fandango* tradition is built on people working together, welcoming participants of all skill levels to contribute, and coming together to create something beautiful for everyone. Are there any examples of this kind of collaboration in your families, schools or communities?

Son Jarocho is a musical style that came to Los Angeles through immigrant communities, and grew into an important part of our city's musical heritage. It's just one of many "transplanted" art forms from around the world that have found a home in Los Angeles. What others are you familiar with?

Are you familiar with the Son Jarocho instruments, like the jarana or requinto? Have you seen similar instruments in other art forms? Were you surprised to learn that Cesar Castro makes Cambalache's instruments himself? Why?

THE BIGGER PICTURE: Son Jarocho

The Son Jarocho of southern Veracruz is one of the most dynamic styles of music and dance traditions known as *Son Mexicano*, the folk music of Mexico. Son Mexicano developed over 300 years ago, when the Spanish controlled what is now Mexico. Son Mexicano grew from a unique blending of Spanish, Indigenous, and African instruments, rhythms, music and movement.

Over the next few centuries, each region developed their own specific styles of playing, dancing, and singing, along with variations on the classical string instruments brought from Europe to the Americas. The *Son Huasteco* developed in Central Mexico; on the west coast it became *Son de Mariachi* (probably the most recognized style, especially outside of Mexico).

Son Jarocho is from Veracruz on the east coast, and features the local *jarana jarocho*, a small guitar-type instrument and sometimes the *arpa jarocho*, a large harp with over 30 strings. Son jarocho is also well-known for the accompanying dance style, in which the dancers' rhythmic footwork adds an unusual layer of percussion to the music. It's called *zapateado*. Dancers perform on a hollow platform or flat box called a *tarima*, which works like a drum, making a loud sound when struck with heels or toes.

Son jarocho was always an expression of the underclass, shaped by descendants of enslaved Africans and indigenous people in Veracruz. "It comes from oppression. It comes from slavery. It comes from migration. Son jarocho comes from poverty, from not having privilege, from having the need of expression," Cesar Castro explains. A sense of interdependence and shared responsibility to each other is what makes life possible in difficult times—and it is the bedrock of the *fandango* spirit unique to son jarocho. Fandangos, or community music and dance parties, provided an opportunity to bring people together in the face of adversity, to create together.

A more marketable, professional version of the music became popular in the 1930s, leaving behind some of the most important aspects of son jarocho: traditional instruments, poetry and improvisational skills, and *fandango* gatherings. Decades later, musicians from Veracruz began to re-establish the traditional fandango, and reclaim son jarocho as the voice of the people.

In the United States, son jarocho has become one important representation of immigration from Mexico and of Latino community struggles. In Los Angeles and beyond, the importance of "people's music" such as son jarocho has helped to amplify and support community voices in the anti-racist movement and other fights for justice.



Veracruz, on Mexico's Gulf coast, is the birthplace of son jarocho. Here, you can see a community fandango happening there in 2014. Notice how many people are holding instruments.

