



NOR-TEC RIFA!

**Electronic Dance Music
FROM TIJUANA TO THE WORLD**

Alejandro L. Madrid

Nor-tec Rifa!

*Currents in
Latin American
& Iberian Music*



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Aquí yacen tus pasos:
En el anonimato de las huellas
—José Emilio Pacheco, “Tradición”

Rifa ('ri·fa)

—v. tr.

1. *Spanish slang*: to control or direct; to exercise dominating power, authority, or control

—v. intr.

1. *Spanish slang*: to be excellent or superior
2. *Spanish slang*: to be in total control or command

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Introduction

Nor-tec and the Borders

As much as this is a book about a music culture and about the growth and transnational dissemination of a music scene, it is primarily a book about borders. It is an exploration of geographic and epistemological limits, their discursive stability, and their practical impermanence. In this book, I examine different understandings of the notions of border and boundary and the ways in which people deal with the contradictory circumstances of living in these geographic but also ideological and even mental spaces. My intention is to show how individuals in liminal circumstances continuously negotiate their identities, their pasts, their presents, and their imaginary futures, in the production, regulation, and consumption of cultural goods. Furthermore, I am interested in showing these types of negotiations as strategies that allow border communities to chart and navigate their everyday lives under the challenging pressures of globalization.

In this book, I am concerned with a variety of borders and boundaries. I deal with the geographic border between two nation-states, the United States of America and Mexico, and also look at individuals living in multicultural contexts as epistemological borders where different cultures and visions of the world meet. I investigate the boundaries between tradition and innovation as well as the borders between different musical genres, and I explore the thin line that separates the hip from the unsophisticated. In an attempt to move beyond simplistic dichotomies, I understand these borders as both limits and connecting tissue, as discontinuities and continuities, as margins and as centers. In short, I see borders as fluid give-

and-take areas where complexity, negotiation, and hybridity are everyday constants.

The Nor-tec scene is a prime example of the types of strategies necessary to chart and navigate these border zones. My analysis focuses on the relationship between this scene (including music, multimedia performances, distribution strategies, embodied culture, and networks of consumption and reception) and its social and cultural surroundings, including the desires and aspirations that make the music appealing to certain people. Thus, I take Nor-tec musicians, promoters, and fans as individuals whose actions are the results of their interactions with specifically liminal social, economic, cultural, and often psychological circumstances, but also, and most important, as individuals whose actions have an impact in that sociocultural world. Moreover, I do not attempt to arrive at the “true meaning” of this artistic manifestation or scene but rather to advance an informed interpretation and a viewpoint based on my experience of the music, the dance, the performances, and especially border and diasporic life. My analysis throughout the book should be read accordingly as a critical inquiry into border social life through music and performance.

What Is Nor-tec?

Like most hybrid manifestations, Nor-tec is a border site, a contact zone where distinctly different elements meet to produce a new form of expression. Thus, Nor-tec works as a perfect metaphor for the exploration of a large variety of issues of liminality and border life, from the stylistic and aesthetic to social, personal, and political boundaries. Nor-tec began in Tijuana in 1999 as a musical manifestation that sampled the sounds of traditional music from the north of Mexico (*norteña* music and *banda sinaloense* or *tambora*), transforming and reorganizing them with the help of the computer technology used in European and American electronic dance music (EDM). Hence, in the composite word Nor-tec, “Nor” stands for “north” and “tec” stands for “technology.” The idea of Nor-tec as an articulation of local tradition from the north of Mexico through modern technology was quickly embraced by local video and installation artists and by graphic and fashion designers; this transformed it from a musical experiment into an aesthetic of hybridity. Such a crossbreed aesthetic has allowed these musicians and artists to express the complex fluidity between the “American” and the “Mexican,” the “First” and the “Third” Worlds, the modern and the old, the cosmopolitan and the local, the center and the periphery, and the hip and the kitschy, as they experience it in their everyday lives at the Tijuana–San Diego border. Accordingly, Nor-tec is not only the manifestation of a border culture but also a border zone in itself, a

place where these contradictions collide and are resolved in its production, consumption, distribution, and performance.

Although the terms “Nor-tec” and “Nortec” were used interchangeably when the music was first made public, they quickly came to identify different aspects of the same experience. While “Nortec” became a synonym for the activities, music, and art produced by the members of the Nortec Collective (a formal group of musicians and visual artists working as a team in exploring the possibilities of the hybrid aesthetic), “Nor-tec” became a label for the aesthetic itself. Throughout this book, I favor the use of the hyphenated version and use the nonhyphenated word only when referring to the collective or when quoting a printed source that spells it that way.

The founding members of the Nortec Collective were musicians and producers Ramón Amezcua (Bostich), Pedro Gabriel Beas (Hiperboreal), Ignacio Chávez Uranga (Plankton Man), Fernando Corona (Terrestre), Roberto Mendoza (Panóptica), Jorge Ruiz (Melo), and José Trinidad Morales (Pepe Mogt; Melo and Mogt were Fusable) and Jorge Verdín and Fritz Torres (members of Clorofila). The visual side of the collective was formed by Verdín and Torres (who also make up a team of graphic designers called Cha3), Sergio Brown (VJ CBrown), Octavio Castellanos (VJ TCR), Iván Díaz Robledo (VJ Wero Palma), José Luis Martín (VJ Mashaka), and Salvador Vázquez Ricalde (VJ Sal).¹ Since the early twenty-first century, Plankton Man, Terrestre, VJ CBrown, VJ Wero Palma, and VJ Sal have each left the collective after serious differences regarding management, distribution strategies, and even aesthetics. However, many of them, especially Plankton Man and Terrestre, have continued to cultivate a Nor-tec sound in their individual productions and collaborations. The work of many musicians, producers, disc jockeys (DJs), artists, and graphic designers who are not formal members of the collective but who have collaborated with it or embraced the aesthetic from time to time was also fundamental in the development of the scene. DJs and producers Daniel Rivera (DJ Tolo), Aníbal Silva (DJ Aníbal), Enrique Jiménez (Mr. Ejival), Álvaro Ruiz (Balboa), and graphic designers, visual artists, and performance artists Claudia Algara, Raúl Cárdenas (Torolab), Ángeles Moreno, and Gerardo Yépez (Aca-monchi) have produced music and visual art that has become essential to the Nor-tec experience.

Most Nor-tec artists and musicians are middle-class individuals in their thirties. With few exceptions, all of them are from Tijuana or have spent several years in the city. Melo was born in Chula Vista, California, but has lived all his life in Tijuana; Verdín was born in Los Angeles and lives in Pasadena, California, but was raised in Tijuana; Plankton Man is from Ensenada and currently lives in Los Angeles but resided in Tijuana for

many years; Ángeles Moreno is from Mexico City and currently lives in Barcelona but also spent several years in Tijuana. They are all individuals whose life experiences make them carry the border within. Being from Mexico City, Balboa is the only musician affiliated with Nor-tec who has not lived in Tijuana.² Before the success of Nor-tec, many of these artists were part-time musicians. Although most of them had been involved in music for over 15 years (with the exception of Jorge Verdín, Fritz Torres, and Hiperboreal, whose concern with music had only been tangential as enthusiastic aficionados), in order to make a living they worked in a variety of nonmusic fields. Pepe Mogt was an engineer and used to work full time at a local *maquiladora*, a job he quit after Nor-tec. Panóptica spent some years proofreading articles and manuscripts at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. Bostich was and still remains a full-time orthodontist. Fritz Torres and Jorge Verdín make their living as graphic designers. Hiperboreal was a student of Spanish literature. Plankton Man and Terrestre were already full-time musicians and had played in several progressive rock and electro-rock bands before joining the collective. The visual artists of the group are all professionals who have graduated with degrees in communication or filmmaking from local universities. Most of them hold on-and-off positions as adjunct professors at private and public colleges in order to supplement their income. They are all very active in the local artistic and intellectual scene as documentary makers, community workers, and organizers of cultural events. Although they had all collaborated on documentary and visual anthropology projects, they did not have much experience as video jockeys (VJs) before Nor-tec.

Who Listens to Nor-tec?

The first followers of Nor-tec were a group of music enthusiasts who belong to the same generation as the members of the collective. They are an extended group of friends and music lovers who have followed the careers of Pepe Mogt and Bostich for almost 15 years. The group is made of young middle-class professionals (architects, writers, poets, etc.) who call themselves *la familia* (the family) or *los culturosos* (the cultured ones) (due to their proclivity for cultural events). Still a loyal fan base, they were at the core of the first local crowd that embraced Nor-tec in the late 1990s. As the Nor-tec experiment gained international notoriety and forced national and international electronica (electronic dance music) fans and critics to look at Tijuana, younger and younger fans joined the scene.

An interesting process of distribution that moves along the boundary between the mainstream and the underground, often crossing back and forth, has been an important factor in shaping the Nor-tec international

following. As the excitement about Nor-tec grew among international electronica fans, the Nor-tec scene diversified and acquired singular characteristics. The Internet was a fundamental aspect of the early, alternative distribution of Nor-tec, and it also played an essential role in the development of a transnational virtual community. From being a tool for the circulation and even the production of music, the Internet became an actual site where fans from Germany, Japan, Italy, and the United States could meet fans from Mexico and the rest of Latin America. These methods allowed for the widening and diversification of the Nor-tec fan base; the broad range of ethnic and class experiences among Nor-tec's transnational audiences often resulted in complex processes of reception and re-signification of the music. Thus, in the United States, the music began to be consumed by Anglos and Latinos alike, although it came to mean different things for the different communities that embraced it. In Mexico, after a few years of resistance, Mexico City fans finally gave in and succumbed to the sounds that had rocked the Tijuana scene since the late 1990s, a situation that puts in evidence the conflicting and complex relations between the center and the margins of the country.

Nor-tec and the International Underground Dance Music Scene

With some notable exceptions, the transnational audiences that have embraced Nor-tec are the middle-class youngsters that support electronica. Indeed, to fully appreciate Nor-tec within the phenomenon of globalization, we need to understand it as part of a larger musical tendency, electronic dance music (EDM). Furthermore, we should also understand Nor-tec as part of a distinct type of alternative EDM, underground dance music (UDM). Ethnomusicologist Kai Fikentscher defines UDM as a continuation of the 1970s disco phenomenon that, in response to dominant moral and aesthetic codes in contemporary American and European societies, "is cultivated outside the view of the general public eye."³ The social spaces and institutions that allow the dissemination of UDM are DJs and producers, home studios, independent record labels, raves, discotheques, and clubs. In most cases, these spaces and institutions are run privately or semi-privately and, as sociologist Sarah Thornton observes, are defined in open rejection or even denigration of the mass media and the mainstream music industry.⁴ As this book shows, Nor-tec is a type of "in-between" musical manifestation; it is a music style that continuously crosses back and forth over the borders between different UDM genres and a scene that, although self-defined as underground, finds ways to subtly cross the boundaries between the mainstream and the alternative via savvy distribution and consumption strategies.

Thus, against a large body of scholarship that approaches alternative music as resistance, I propose that alternative music often engages cultural and social constructs in complex ways that equally resist and reinforce aspects of hegemonic culture.

Just as the disco music scene was crucial in the development of UDM, another major influence in the late 1970s was the growing recognition of European electronic music by American underground musicians. The pioneering work with synthesizers, drum machines, and sequencers of bands like Kraftwerk and Depeche Mode was pivotal in the growth of an underground dance scene that also articulated the youngsters' futuristic imagination of modernity. As music critic Simon Reynolds suggests, "[E]lectronica's aura of non-humanity is part of a cultural obsession with a future conceived as either a utopia of aerodynamic technological pleasure or as a nightmare of control and automation."⁵ This passion with technology is very important in the production process of UDM, which is based on sampling and the technological manipulation of sound as basic compositional techniques. As in hip-hop, UDM tracks generally use breaks sampled from older recordings as basic units to "make beats" or to build the track's rhythmic foundation (usually in 4/4 meter) or groove. Most often, harmonic motion in UDM tends to be rather simple; however, harmonies work as a base for the introduction of innovative timbres and textures, the elements in which electronic musicians and producers are really interested and where the complexity of the music lies.

EDM and UDM do not refer to single heterogeneous music styles or genres. There is a wide variety of EDM genres and styles, each of them defined by a combination of specific stylistic features, discourses of origin and authenticity, practices of distribution, and networks of consumption and reception that conform to distinct scenes. Among the most important are house, techno, ambient, intelligent dance music (IDM), drum'n'bass, breakbeat, and trance, each including a large variety of substyles. House is a genre developed in Chicago in the early 1980s. It is characterized by a 4/4 meter at 118–135 beats per minute (bpm) produced by a sampler or drum machine. It features musical acoustic elements from disco music, funk, and European synth pop. Acid house, hip house, jazz house, and garage are different house substyles associated with specific clubs or DJs; they are all dance-floor-oriented styles that favor the dancing body over the listening experience. Techno music was launched in Detroit, also in the early 1980s, and was quickly embraced by European (especially German) fans. Musically, techno features a quick 4/4 meter at 130–140 bpm, slightly faster than house; it stresses synthesized sounds and lessens the acoustic musical elements found in house. Substyles of techno include minimal techno, gabba, acid techno, and hardcore. Ambient is a style of down-tempo music devel-

oped in the late 1980s that deemphasizes the dancing body. It is based on experimentation with sound for the creation of music characterized by background sonic textures. IDM is also an experimental down-tempo style that rejects the dance floor but, contrary to ambient, aspires to be listened to instead of becoming part of the room's "decoration." Substyles of ambient and IDM include bleep'n'bass, braindance, chill out, lounge music, and trip hop. Drum'n'bass was developed in London and Bristol by DJs who mixed reggae bass lines with quick breaks sampled from hip-hop and funk. It is a vigorous dance style also referred to as jungle. Among the subgenres of drum'n'bass are drumfunk, 2step, clownstep, neurofunk, etc. They are all characterized by the presence of an intricate bass line, exploration of timbres in the lower registers, and fast tempi that range between 165 and 180 bpm. Breakbeat originated in the mid-1990s in London, Brighton, and Bristol. It is characterized by an irregular 4/4 meter with prominent use of syncopation and polyrhythm. Breakbeat tracks usually range from 115 to 150 bpm and emphasize breaks that relate it to African American musics, such as funk and soul. Among the subgenres of breakbeat we may include big beat, nu skool breaks, drill'n'bass, and brokenbeat. Trance is a genre of electronic dance music developed in Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands in the early 1990s. It is characterized by its emphasis on melody and a 4/4 steady meter at 135–150 bpm. Stylistically, trance favors minor chord sequences and the use of synthesized sounds. Arguably, trance is the most popular genre of electronic dance music, having been embraced by the mainstream music industry. Such mainstream access has meant a dramatic stylistic shift that frequently includes the addition of vocals, a very rare element in other types of EDM. Subgenres of trance include acid trance, anthem trance, euro trance, progressive trance, and others.

Nor-tec shares many of the particularities of UDM genres: it is a type of home-produced, sample-based EDM, and it is also an underground manifestation that rejects the mainstream and makes use of alternative methods of distribution (although, as I show in chapter 3, Nor-tec musicians often find clever ways to use the mainstream for their own benefit). However, a mere taxonomical understanding of the notion of genre shows Nor-tec not necessarily as a genre itself. Nor-tec lacks the stylistic homogeneity of a genre; it is instead a heterogeneous music whose styles are as diverse as the number of musicians, producers, and DJs that compose it, mix it, and remix it. If anything, Nor-tec stands at the border of a number of different genres which are articulated differently by each member of the collective. Bostich seems to have developed the most personal and heterogeneous style among the Nor-tec producers. His is a unique, crude, and experimental down-tempo type of techno that often finds its groove with the use of cumbia-driven percussion rhythmic patterns ("Polaris," "Tijuana

Bass,” “Unicornio,” “Synthakon”).⁶ Fusbille’s Nor-tec goes from ambient and IDM (“Ventilador,” “Trip to Ensenada,” “Zona N”) to house (“El sonar de mis tambores,” “Casino Soul,” “Odyssea”) and even electro pop (“Tijuana Makes Me Happy”). The music of Hiperboreal is a curious mix of down-tempo jazz house and progressive trance (“Loop eterno,” “Kin-klé futurista,” “Dandy del Sur”). Panóptica prefers a type of minimal techno (“And L,” “Revu Cruising,” “She’s in Fiestas”) but also composes drum’n’bass tracks (“El chivero de tepatoche”) and IDM (“Aguasnegras en dub,” “Camposanto”). Clorofila’s music ranges from ambient and lounge (“Huatabampo 3 AM,” “Cantamar ’72”) to electro funk (“Funky Tamazula”) and IDM (“Paseo moral”). The down-tempo sound of Terrestre stretches from a type of lounge or chill out (“California 70”) and ambient (“Secondary Theme Inspection”) to jazz house (“Gran chaparral”) and even new age (“Maraka Man”). Finally, Plankton Man’s music is an interesting mixture of breakbeat (“Rancho tron,” “Recinto portuario”) and neurofunk (“No hay volver,” “No liazi jaz”). Even in the collective’s latest production, *Tijuana Sessions, Vol. 3* (2005), one is able to hear the music crossing over a variety of genres and subgenres beyond the seemingly superficial stylistic homogeneity of the tracks.

As observed in the variety of genres adopted by these musicians, it is clear that there is no such thing as a distinct Nor-tec style. Nevertheless, as in the case of house, techno, drum’n’bass, or any other prominent UDM genre, the fact that the boundaries of Nor-tec are clearly and meticulously defined by fans, critics, and marketing strategists in a continuous social performance makes it clear that it is the articulation of ideas and experiences beyond the music’s mere stylistic features that makes the music and the scene meaningful. Thus, Nor-tec should be understood as a strategy based on the social signification of an aesthetic idea rather than on an independently developed music style.

Defining the Field

The particularities of the Nor-tec scene, my intention to explore epistemological borders beside geographic boundaries, and the fact that I am an individual raised at the border (and have carried the border within myself as I have moved to the north of the United States)—all have made it difficult to define where the field began and where it ended. For practical reasons, I could assume that I entered the field almost without realizing it, after attending a concert in Mexico City that featured Bostich and Fusbille among a variety of German acts in early 2000. Nor-tec was relatively new, and it was the first time the project had been presented in Mexico City. Retrospectively, I realize that I immediately began to observe the event and ask

questions about it from an ethnographic perspective (What made people dance? What made them stop dancing? What was there in Nor-tec they did not like? What kind of cultural issues were at stake in their dancing or lack of dancing?). I began to gather printed materials about Nor-tec, but it was not until a year later that I started a more systematic research approach when I contacted the members of the collective for interviews. During the years 2003, 2004, and 2005, I was more actively conducting in situ fieldwork in Tijuana. I visited the city two times in 2003, spent the summer of 2004 there, and visited it once more, for the last time, in 2005. There, I befriended the members and former members of the collective as well as collaborators, fans, and detractors. I attended parties, witnessed recording and composition sessions, and enjoyed academic conversations about my project with local scholars. In the meantime, I realized that if I wanted to get a good picture of the Nor-tec phenomenon, I also needed to pay attention to its reception by fans and critics in the United States and Mexico City. I also recognized that the Nor-tec scene was different from other music scenes in that it did not have an actual meeting place. Even in Tijuana, Nor-tec was a nomadic scene that lacked fixed clubs and concert venues. I quickly understood that Nor-tec fans were not bounded by geographic location but were rather a transnational crowd whose meeting place was the Internet. Blogs, listservs, chat rooms, and cyber-lounges were the actual sites where Nor-tec fans got together to talk about the music, express their opinions about the musicians, discuss their favorite tracks, and state their fascination with the images produced by the Nor-tec video artists. It was also through these spaces that they shared pictures, videos, newly composed music, and DJ sets. The complex transnational and globalized web of distribution and consumption of Nor-tec forced me to develop an innovative type of virtual fieldwork I have called "cyber-fieldwork." Cyber-fieldwork recognizes the Internet as much more than a tool for communication or a space for the storage and retrieval of information; it acknowledges its importance as a virtual space where relationships are established, knowledge is produced, and cultural meaning is negotiated. For this, I became a member of several Internet-based listservs, groups, and chat rooms where I participated in and followed lively discussions about Nor-tec and electronic music. I also developed a systematic routine to check and keep track of a wide variety of fan blogs and kept an eye on several Internet-based channels of music distribution where fans circulate Nor-tec music free of charge.

After four years of traveling to Tijuana to interview fans, musicians, and event organizers; attending Nor-tec concerts in Mexico City, Los Angeles, and Chicago (in an attempt to account for the local, national, and transnational reception of Nor-tec); and mapping the Internet in search of