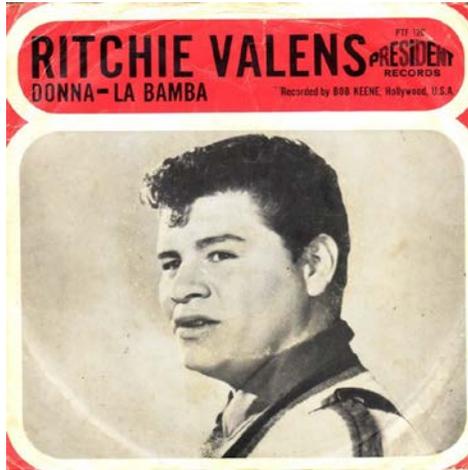


“La Bamba”—Ritchie Valens (1958)

Added to the National Registry: 2018

Essay by Larry Lehmer (guest post)*



Original 45 sleeve

As the speaker known as Angry Santa started his rant at a Tennessee rally of neo-Nazis and white supremacists, counter-protestors struck back. They cranked up “La Bamba” by Ritchie Valens at full volume from their impressive portable sound system. The tactic was effective. Video of the protest even showed one of the neo-Nazis’ bobbing his head in time with the music.

Television personality Trevor Noah aired the video on “The Daily Show.”

“It’s impossible to be intimidating when you have ‘La Bamba,’ playing underneath your words,” Noah said with glee. “‘La Bamba’ is such a happy song.”

And a popular one, too. Ever since Valens’ up-tempo rock version of the song hit the charts in 1958, “La Bamba” has established itself as a quintessential American tune, despite its Afro-Mexican roots. “Rolling Stone” magazine ranked it among rock and roll’s top 500 songs (at No. 345) of all time and it was the only one with non-English lyrics. Valens’ recording also earned the song a spot in the Latin Grammy Hall of Fame.

That’s pretty good for a song that Valens was reluctant to record at all.

It’s unknown where Valens first heard the song, but his manager, Bob Keane, remembered well his introduction to “La Bamba.” It happened in the summer of 1958, as Keane was driving Valens to a performance in San Francisco, some 365 miles north of Valens’ home in Pacoima, California, shortly after the release of Valens’ first record, “Come On Let’s Go.”

“I was driving my brand new Ford Thunderbird,” Keane recalled in a 1992 interview. “Ritchie sat in back with his guitar and my first son. That’s when I heard ‘La Bamba’ for the first time. I told him, ‘Let’s do something with that.’ He says, ‘I can’t do that.’ He really believed Mexico was his home. He was very loyal to his Mexican heritage.”

While Valens doubtless saw the song as Mexican in origin, its roots actually go back even further.

“La Bamba” is believed by musical scholars to have arisen from the slave trade between Spain and the Mexican port city of Veracruz. Many of the slaves came from the African regions of Angola and Congo, homes to the Bamba tribe. Over the centuries, the African music was influenced by Mexican and Spanish rhythms, creating a music that came to be known as *son jarocho* (“sound of Veracruz”).

“La Bamba” is believed to come specifically from a slave uprising in 1683, often referred to as the “Bambarria.” The song was traditionally performed at weddings, where attendees were encouraged to make up verses of their own. At rowdy weddings, where lyrics got a bit out of hand, fistfights were known to break out and, in some cases, machetes were drawn. As many as 1,000 verses to “La Bamba” have been documented.

Along with the song came a dance, a complicated affair where newlywed husbands and wives attempted to tie a long ribbon into a bow using only their dancing feet.

According to “Life” magazine, the song (and dance) were “brought out of the jungle” by U.S. bandleader Everett Hoagland, who ignited a “La Bamba” dance craze in Mexico City in late 1944. A year later, Arthur Murray was teaching the dance (described as a slow rhumba) in New York. In 1947, Ricardo Montalban and Cyd Charisse introduced the tune to film buffs in “Fiesta.”

Just as *son jarocho* has its roots in slavery and colonization, the rock and roll of 1950s America has a similar etymology; Bob Keane finally persuaded Valens to record “La Bamba” as the flip side to his next single, “Donna.”

But Valens, who was raised as Richard Steven Valenzuela in a thoroughly Mexican family, had never learned Spanish in his 17 years as a native-born Californian.

“We finally had to ask his Aunt Ernestine for the words, because he didn’t know them,” Keane said.

After rehearsing the song at Keane’s home studio, it was time for an earnest recording session at famed Gold Star studio in Los Angeles. Studio co-founder Stan Ross engineered the “La Bamba” session, which took place in Studio A, whose echo chamber produced magic for decades, including the Beach Boys and Phil Spector’s fabled “Wall of Sound.”

Keane estimated he paid only about \$250 for the “La Bamba” session, which included many of LA’s top session people. Besides rhythm guitarist Carol Kaye, there was Little Richard’s drummer, Earl Palmer; Buddy Clark on standup bass; Grammy-winning arranger Ernie Freeman on piano and Rene Hall on Danelectro six-string bass.

Although Valens arrived at the session with a cold, he took up his guitar position in the center of the studio with the other musicians around him. With Keane and Ross at the controls, the session had a rough beginning. Finally, eight takes in, everyone got through the song, including a now-legendary crisp mid-song guitar break by Valens.

Before the record’s release, Valens hit the road with tours of the Pacific Northwest and the East Coast, plus a promotional trip to Hawaii. “Donna” broke on the charts first, in late November 1958, but by the end of the year, deejays had flipped to “La Bamba” as well. By the time Valens went out on a tour of the Midwest with Dion and the Belmonts, Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper in late January, Valens had a two-sided hit.

On January 31, 1959, Ron Sapik was celebrating his last few days of freedom before joining the U.S. Army by catching Valens and his touring partners at the National Guard Armory in Duluth, Minnesota. Sapik said Valens was the star of that evening's show: "When he sang 'La Bamba,' he got down on his knees and he leaned all the way back with his head almost touching the floor and he was looking up in the air. He had his guitar strapped across his chest. He put on a good performance."

Just over 48 hours later, Valens was killed in an airplane crash with Holly, the Big Bopper and pilot Roger Peterson after a show in Clear Lake, Iowa.

That day of February 3, 1959, has come to be known as "the day the music died," but "La Bamba" has only grown more popular in the years since. Over the next three decades, there were dozens of cover versions of the song, from pop groups like the Tokens to singers Trini Lopez and Glen Campbell, even the Mormon Tabernacle Choir! The song's instrumental structure was closely copied for another much-recorded song of the early 1960s, "Twist and Shout."

But "La Bamba" really re-emerged into the national consciousness when a version by Los Lobos was used in the 1987 movie "La Bamba" that told Valens' life story. Los Lobos' version reached the top of the "Billboard" charts, even bettering Valens' version, which topped out at No. 22 nearly 20 years earlier.

In the years since, Valens' version of "La Bamba" has been inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame (2000) and Latin Grammy Hall of Fame (2013). Valens was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a performer in 2001.

Bob Keane, the producer and record label owner who discovered Valens and managed his brief career, died in 2009 but recognized Valens' great contribution to his Latin culture and American music in a 1992 interview: "Ritchie Valens and 'La Bamba' will live forever. They're just part of America now."

Larry Lehmer is the author of "The Day the Music Died: The Last Tour of Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens" and "Bandstandland: How Dancing Teenagers Took over America and Dick Clark Took Over Rock & Roll." He was also a featured subject on the ID-Discovery Channel's "The Will: Family Secrets Revealed" program on Ritchie Valens.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.