



“Fandango on 18th Street” (*Fandango en la Calle 18*)

A New CD by Chicago’s
Sones de México Ensemble

LINER NOTES

In Mexico, *son* is a term used to define a large family of regional music and dance styles. Each region has its own brand of *son*—*gusto*, *son jarocho*, *son huasteco*, etc.—each with its own repertoire, instruments, and dancing and singing style. A *fandango* is a dance fiesta where *son* is played and danced, often from sundown until sunrise or longer. It is also a playful time where tradition becomes fluid: rules are made and broken as old forms are applied to new experience. After the fiesta, tradition is passed on quietly, as the events of the *fandango* crystallize in the memories of the participants, becoming new lore for future resurgence. We call this a *living tradition*.

Sones de México is a unique ensemble of seasoned Mexican folk musicians and educators that hails from Chicago, a city that boasts a Mexican community that is quickly nearing one million people. The group formed in 1994 to keep the tradition of Mexican *son* alive in its many regional forms, true to its roots and old masters, and current and fresh at the same time. Music Director **Víctor Pichardo** is an award-winning musician, arranger, composer, and educator who came from a 15-year career with the folk group *Zazhil* and the late singer Amparo Ochoa in Mexico. The rest of the team is formed by world-music drummer and percussionist **Raúl Fernández**, multi-instrumentalist **Renato Cerón**, master dancer and musician **René Cardoza**, and *guitarrón* player and producer **Juan Díes. Gonzalo Córdova**, who played with the group for its first six years and participated in the first phase of this recording project, appears throughout the album as a guest singer, guitarist, and *requinto* player.

Fandango on 18th Street is a recording project that began in June of 1999 at Alien Soundscapes, Inc., a state-of-the-art multimedia studio, under the able hands of owner **Chris Greene** and chief engineer **Collin Jordan**. The studio is located on Chicago’s 18th Street, the main artery of Pilsen, a Mexican neighborhood that is home to a strong community of artists and new immigrants, including, at one point or another, a few members of the band. The intent of the project was to recreate a *fandango* atmosphere in all its living glory: true to the tradition and at the same time incorporating the group’s experience in the U.S. and the good friends made along the way. The result is a lively collection of all-acoustic, all-danceable songs and medleys that feature regional dance styles of *son* and a parade of talented guests who enhance the group’s sound in new, unexplored ways.

The project was completed in October of 2001. The *fiesta* was long and fruitful and the group’s perspective on *son* has grown and been enriched by it. The album is illustrated with depictions of a *fandango* on 18th Street by artists **Miguel Cortez** (cover) and **Rosa María C. Díes** (center), and band portraits by photographer **Todd Winters**, who also shot the popular cover of the group’s first CD.

Fandango on 18th Street opens with **El Butaquito**, a *son jarocho* from Veracruz that sets the mood for the fiesta. The musicians of *Sones de México* arrive and join the music one by one, starting with a foot-tapping solo by **René Cardoza**. In the middle of the song, **Grupo**

Mono Blanco from Veracruz makes a special guest appearance. They have been one of the leading proponents of a revival of *son jarocho* for the past twenty years. This session was recorded during their visit to Chicago in the summer of 1999.

This is followed by **A Mi Nación Mexicana**, a *ranchera* once performed by *Los Cantores del Pánuco* many years ago. Its polka rhythm makes it easy to dance to. This song cleverly mentions all thirty-one states of the Republic of Mexico—a geography lesson in its own right! The horns, recorded by veteran Chicago bandleader and trumpet player **Everardo Rey** and woodwind player, globetrotter, and ethnomusicologist **Bob Fried**, make for an explosive accompaniment that should leave few people sitting down.

The first medley, **Huapangos**, explores the *son huasteco* style of folk dance from the Huasteca region of Mexico. This is probably the most complex arrangement in the album because it explores some universal qualities of *son huasteco* in uncommon ways. It begins with *El Querreque*, a picaresque classic, featuring the old custom of breaking for a recited verse. The recitation is done by guest *huapango* poet and troubadour **Guillermo Velázquez**, the living champion of this old art form in Mexico, and was recorded during his 1999 visit to Chicago. The medley continues with *La Rosita*, another classic that is usually played with guitars and fiddles. However, on this occasion it features the additional accompaniment of a classical **brass quintet** (arranged by **Víctor Pichardo**), an unusual and almost baroque-sounding addition that works surprisingly well. The guest brass quintet is chaired by **John Hagstrom**, second trumpet of the *Chicago Symphony Orchestra*, and conducted by Venezuelan composer **Ricardo Lorenz**. Sones de México has collaborated with these musicians for more than four years in a community project called *Armonía*, a partnership between the CSO and the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum that uses classical music to build bridges between different cultures, communities and generations. Finally, the climax of this medley leads to a surprise ending with *La Lavandera* (*The Irish Washer Woman*), an Irish jig. It features a trio led by fiddler **Sean Cleland**, who once had invited Sones de México to a series of experimental sessions in a pub with his band at the time, *The Drovers*, at the prompting of music enthusiast Jim Sloan and other friends from the Irish Music Foundation. Their idea was to explore the parallels between Mexican and Irish music in memory of the *San Patricios*, an army of

anti-expansionist Irish American soldiers who voluntarily joined the Mexicans in fighting the U.S. Army during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. Besides finding a common fondness for beer and song, the musicians found that both the jig and the *son huasteco* were in 6/8 time and that Irish melodies could be played to Mexican rhythms, and the rest is history.

The next medley, **Gustos**, features the *gusto* style of dance from Guerrero with its characteristic 6/8 waltzy feel. The compositions by Isaías Salmerón and Agustín Ramírez are old classics from the early 1900s, but the idea for the arrangement came from an undocumented tape that **Víctor Pichardo** picked up at a truck stop somewhere in Guerrero. The band on the tape, believed to be *La Furia*, plays this song—like so many other modern groups from the region today—not with the traditional brass *bandas*, but with synthesizers and electric bass and guitars instead. From this model, **Ricardo Lorenz** arranged the music for the traditional brass accompaniment and once again conducted the fabulous guest **brass quintet** for the recording. Guest percussionists and friends **Gabriela Luna** and **Rubén Alvarez** join Sones de México to add a more danceable beat.

The **Polkas** and **Boleros** that follow were recorded by **Jack Le Tourneau** at *Paragon*, a legendary Chicago studio where locals such as Styx and Buddy Guy once made world-famous recordings in the 1970s. The recording approach for these two songs was slightly different from the rest of this album. All the musicians recorded simultaneously, separated by sound barricades. Later, some instruments and the vocals were overdubbed at Alien Soundscapes. For example, the bass line in the polkas is quite elaborate, especially for a *guitarrón* to play, but the tone was so low that it didn't come through as a distinctive melody. A twelve-string guitar was overdubbed duplicating every note that the bass line played, but in a higher register. The result brought the bass line to the forefront, weaving it in as a counter-melody to the accordion and vocals. The lyric content in the polkas is your run-of-the-mill unrequited love songs. **Caminos de Michoacán**, however, takes an interesting spin by mentioning almost every major city and town in Michoacán, as the author searches for a lost love in every corner of the state. The *bolero* **Que Nos Entierren Juntos** also offers a unique spin on love by asking that "if we die, let us be buried

together, in the same coffin, so that we may relish our love for eternity,” a dreary though quite romantic thought.

Next is **Tributo a Buck Owens** (*Tribute to Buck Owens*), dedicated to a Country & Western singer/songwriter from Bakersfield, California, who belongs to a wave of so-called “surfin’ cowboys” who presumably never rode horses. Owens took an alternative approach to C&W in the 1960s, when he first achieved widespread popularity. In recent years, he has experienced a resurgence in popularity, if not a cult following, among “alternative country” fans. In 1999, Chicago guitarist **John T. Rice** invited Sones de México and other local musicians, who were not all known as Country music artists, to play a song at an annual concert that was celebrated on Owens’ birthday at *Schuba’s Tavern*. Sones de México chose two: **Before You Go** and **Act Naturally**. The latter was also popularized by The Beatles and sung by Ringo Starr in their album *Help*. Both were arranged and translated to Spanish by **Juan Díes**; the first was set to a *son huasteco* rhythm and the second to a *cumbia* rhythm. **John T. Rice** was invited to record a *dobro* (slide guitar) part to add a Country “twang” to the tribute. The songs are upbeat and catchy, with a “novelty song” feel to them, and they should prove especially entertaining to those who are familiar with Buck Owens’ original versions.

Tres Veces Heroica is a *son montuno* praising the Black people of the state of Veracruz, who despite being an often shunned racial minority have been the first to fight the three major invasions of Mexico by the Spaniards, the French, and the Americans. The song features some piano work by **Ricardo Lorenz**, who calls-and-responds in counterpoint to the traditional harp and *requinto*; a muted trumpet solo by **Everardo Rey**; and a sung *décima* by **David Haro**, excerpted from his composition **Mozambique**. David Haro, one of the most celebrated songwriters of the Mexican underground, is a champion of the so-called “third root,” the African cultural legacy in Mexico. Haro was not able to record in Chicago, so in the summer of 2001, through the magic of digital studio technology, he added his singing voice to the song at *Estudio Agua Escondida* in Mexico City, owned and engineered by Ramón Sánchez.

Chun-Chaca is not a formal name for a music genre; folk musicians in Veracruz use this onomatopoeic term lightheartedly, and sometimes

pejoratively, to refer to “tropical” rhythms, particularly those derived from *cumbia*, which are not part of the region’s tradition but have become an important part of popular dance fiestas. This medley shows that even in an old *son jarocho* in 4/4 time, like **El Ahualulco** or **El Tilingo Lingo**, one can find *chun-chaca* characteristics that can work quite well in a *fandango*. For example, **El Tilingo Lingo**, arranged by **Renato Cerón**, shows that a *chun-chaca* rhythm can be easily danced in the traditional *zapateado* style. Furthermore, to prove that *cumbia* can work seamlessly in the company of this kind of *son jarocho*, **Juan Díes** proposed including **La Sirenita**, a song popularized by **Rigo Tovar**, one of the best-known Mexican *cumbia* artists from the Gulf Coast and also one hardly associated with folk traditions. To bridge the gap, **Victor Pichardo** gave the introduction a flavor of Colombia, where *cumbia* is folk, and **Raúl Fernández** gave the chorus a Caribbean *tumba’o* feel, which guest percussionists **Rubén Alvarez** and **Gabriela Luna** ran home with, helping to make it danceable as a *salsa*. As a result, the medley flows with seamless continuity despite the variety of styles presented.

The grand finale is **Mariachi**, a medley of quintessential Mexican classics: **Jarabe Tapatío** (with a clever inclusion of **La Cucaracha**); **Son de la Negra** (with a slightly different arrangement that references the *son planeco* folk version that preceded the Silvestre Vargas standard); and **Cielito Lindo** (in a merry, sing-along version). All the trumpets were recorded by guest player **Jack Cassidy**, who added a little Tijuana flavor to the mix.

This brings *Fandango on 18th Street* to a close. The musicians begin to take their leave after a long and intense fiesta that will be long remembered, for it was shared with such good company. At the end of the night, everyone leaves the studio and the master tapes are left resting on the machine waiting to see the light of day. Who knows how these sounds will crystallize in the minds of those who listened, and in what form a new *fandango* may emerge at some future time?

Juan Díes
Chicago, November 2001