



MALA NOCHE: THE USE OF MUSIC THROUGHOUT THE SONAMBULO COMIC BOOK SERIES

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Animation storyboard¹ and comic book artist Rafael Navarro was born in Nogales (Estado de Sonora, Mexico) and raised in Los Angeles, where he has been based since. Aside from working as a freelance artist and participating in numerous projects in the comics industry through the years, in 1996 he created *Sonambulo*, his own independent comic book series; the initial issues won the renowned self-publishing grant Xeric Foundation Award, paving a path to delve further into its eponymous protagonist's adventures. *Sonambulo* started off with the 3-issue *Sleep of the Just* narrative arc (republished as collected edition in 2001), to which several storylines followed through the years up to the present day. Salomon Lopez aka Sonambulo used to be a successful luchador during the apogee of Mexican lucha libre (the flashbacks set in his past date up to 1959); when he refused to abide by the local mob's will, he was beaten up and left for dead. Nonetheless, he was simply thrown into a deep, supernatural sleep that lasted for decades up to the present day, when he woke up and built a new life for himself as a private detective of the hard-boiled kind. The sleep he had fell into has left him with the peculiar power to read people's dreams, as well as the inability to fall asleep again. The visual and diegetic elements exploited by Navarro are diverse, from pin up ladies to lucha iconography, from supernatural horror encounters to crime entanglements, blended together by a culturally hybridized noir mood marked by Sonambulo's own distinctive ethos. The artist manages to bring into his comic a variety of elements peculiar to his own personal background and Mexican American cultural

¹ Navarro has been a storyboard artist for TV animated shows, such as Daytime Emmy award-winning *Tutenstein* (PorchLight Entertainment, 2003–2008), *Rugrats* (Nickelodeon, 1991–2004), lucha libre-themed *¡Mucha Lucha!* (Warner Bros., 2002–2005), and many more.



heritage, reconstructing a unique ambiance by structuring it by means of classic American noir film paradigms.

One of the most distinctive elements in *Sonambulo* is the presence of music throughout the series, adding a complex and cohesive common thread, strictly related to the artist's personal musical culture. The protagonist's name as a luchador is stemming from Navarro's music passion and the influence his father's musical taste and culture had on his own musical sensibility. As keen musicophiles, the artist and his father shared a liking for Santo & Johnny's instrumental rock track "Sleep Walk" (released in 1959), so that when shaping his protagonist Navarro considered giving him the luchador name of Sleepwalker. Nonetheless, he eventually chose to use the Spanish translation of the term upon his father's suggestion, inspired by the fact that the label on the single that Navarro had bought as a teen read "Santo & Johnny Sleep Walk (SONAMBULO)" (Navarro 2020) and including at the same time a trace of their familiar linguistic heritage. Throughout the comic book series, the synesthetic aspect of visually rendered music is exploited in different ways. Aside from its function as establishing element—participating in the construction of the settings—in *Sonambulo* music chiefly contributes to layering meaning and adding articulated nuances to the sequence. Music also becomes a tool to highlight focal points in the plot, relevant to the storyline and to the construction of the protagonist himself.

It is worth noting that Navarro exploits the relation between noir and jazz music and, at the same time, appropriates it and delivers his own unique blend of noir paradigms and Latinx cultural heritage. If jazz in its purest form isn't quite present in classic film noir, the genre was characterized by a change in the approach to the score, breaking with the tradition of pre-war Hollywood movies and introducing new elements to the composition. In line with the ambiguity, tension, and moral struggles characterizing noir plots, their music soundtracks verged toward darker moods, far from reassuring, romantic scores produced before the war. Proposing a modernist, more contemporary sound and distancing noir scores from "more conventional film scores through the incorporation of dissonance and atonality" (Ness 54), composers often opted for smaller ensembles rather than whole symphonic orchestras, infusing their work with jazz- and blues-inspired stylizations.

Even though it's been often taken for granted, the relation between noir ambiance and jazz has been exploited for marketing reasons, drawing on the noir representation of nightclubs and producing jazz reinterpretations of the noir scores, as film noir and modernist jazz flourished at the same time throughout the 40s and 50s (Wager 2007). As David Butler has pointed out in his thorough analysis, the scores adopted indeed some jazz elements and diluted them, giving shape to pieces that were merely remindful of actual jazz; nonetheless, the "perceived collaboration between film noir and jazz" (Butler 2002, 2) is very well rooted in the public's imaginary. Film noir proposed indeed sequences featuring bands playing music at times suggestive of jazz,



as clubs and bars became recurrent topoi in the noir urbanscape. Although it is not a most recurrent representation, some noir movies explore the jazz club milieu introducing African American tertiary characters to underline the perceived “authenticity” of the setting. As Jans B. Wager has analyzed, the jazz club sequence in Tourneur’s *Out of the Past* (1947)—one of the most renowned and appreciated classic noir films—is indeed populated by African American actors and delivers a certain vibrancy (2007); nonetheless, the place and the related culture—as well as possible social critique—come across as a sort of parenthesis detached from the protagonists’ habitual life. If almost a decade later the jazz sequence in Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) is built around a more articulated interaction (Wager 2007, 224), it still remains a rare case in which jazz in noir is not simply an evocation rather than having an actual, significant presence.



Figure 1 *Sleep of the Just*. *The Collected Case*, 9.

If noir scores tend to break with the previous scoring tradition, often structured in order to elicit nostalgic, secure feelings, Navarro exploits the intertextuality given by lyrics—and thus the evocation of the related music tracks—to add nuances to the reconstruction of certain contexts, in particular related with emotions lying deep within the protagonist’s soul. The artist brings forth his own personal taste and lends to his protagonist a passion for Afro-Cuban jazz, fostering occasional plunges into Latinx music genres and their fusion with jazz. The nostalgic quality he chooses to give his noir interpretation melts with the choice of music and permeates the sequences in which Sonambulo’s memories are constructed. The fundamental role and presence of music is set clear right from the beginning, as *Sleep of the Just* opens with a city view starring the sign of a club called “Mango Mangue”. The eponymous guaracha song was composed by renowned Cuban author Francisco Fellove Valdés in

the early 40s as a *pregón* inspired by street vendors in La Habana (Fellove Valdés 2005), and first recorded in the mid-50s after the artist fled to Mexico. Nonetheless, Navarro intends to refer to the homonymous Afro-Cuban jazz piece—whose title was possibly inspired by the popular guaracha—recorded in New York in 1948, written by Gilberto Valdez and performed by Charlie Parker with Machito and his orchestra. Francisco Raúl Gutiérrez Grillo, artistically known as Machito, was a Cuban musician fundamental in the definition and articulation of Afro-Cuban jazz. The genre developed starting in the 40s simultaneously in New York and Cuba, with gradual fusion between the Caribbean sounds and jazz arrangements, to which Cuban percussions would adapt while jazz drummers found ways to fit Cuban rhythms

(Acosta 2016, 59). If asked to choose, Navarro considers the jazz track [Mango Mangue](#) to be Sonambulo’s main theme song, along with the [Afro-Cuban Jazz Suite](#) (1950), recorded as well by Machito’s orchestra with soloist Charlie Parker (Navarro 2020).

It is worth mentioning that, among his favorite noir-related musical inspirations, Navarro mentions the soundtrack of *Touch of Evil* (1959), directed by Orson Welles and often considered as the last noir masterpiece marking the chronological boundaries of the classic American film noir. *Touch of Evil* forms part of a circumscribed range of noir representing the US Mexico border and related issues, among which it’s worth mentioning at least Anthony Mann’s *Border Incident* (1948) and Ida Lupino’s *The Hitchhiker* (1953). Aside from Welles’ direction and Metty’s cinematography, the gritty, complexly layered dynamics peculiar to the borderlands are rendered as well through the score composed by Henry Mancini, at the time on staff at Universal and covering all kinds of jobs the music department needed. Welles provided the composer a detailed description of the music he envisioned for his film, which corresponded to the idea he had already began to develop after reading the script; given the borderland realism that permeated the movie, Mancini thought of exploiting source cues and planned to give the underscore a “big band Latin sound in a Stan Kenton vein” (Mancini 1989, 79).



Figure 2 *Sleep of the Just. The Collected Case*, 26.

Navarro’s insertion of music happens in specific contexts that are, in fact, quite distinctive of the noir genre and a reconfiguration of public and private diegetic spaces, in which, as Sobchack has underlined, “a house is almost never a home” (1998, 144). Rather, the genre introduces all sorts of external, non-private spaces such as nightclubs, cocktail lounges, bars, hotel rooms, motels, gasoline stations, obliterating the reassuring settings of pre-war movies and their intrinsic warmth and familiarity. In film noir, domesticity results almost absent, a change strengthened by the evolution of music scores, whose profile drifted away from homely, reassuring feelings. Sonambulo himself seems to never feel at home in his new life in the present, living in his office and spending his spare time in dancing nightclubs, reprising some traits of the hard-boiled detective paradigm and yet incorporating a more cheerful and fun

note to it. In *Sleep of the Just*, part two starts with Sonambulo's trip to a club (2001, 27-28), where he dances mambo with a female journalist; the sequence is characterized by the guaracha-mambo track "Anabacoa" (26-27), rendered through lyrics, as well as both verbal and visual sound effects. Composed by Puerto Rican musician Juanchín Ramírez and famously recorded by Cuban bandleader Pérez Prado and his orchestra in 1949, the song is a renowned mambo standard representative of the genre evolution in the 40s and 50s, characterized by the aforementioned mutual influence between Afro-Cuban sounds and North American jazz. In the issue *Sonambulo Lives!* (2009), mambo dancing is a toll for the protagonist to be paid in order to proceed in his trip out of the underworld where he had previously ended up (16-18).

In between his adventures, the time spends alone in his "office-home" is often marked by memories haunting the private detective, bound to his perpetual insomnia. In this respect, an interesting sequence is found in *Sleep of the Just* (2001, 40) in which a whole page is dedicated to a somber, yet determined moment accompanied by "Mala Noche", bolero written by Mexican composer Alberto Domínguez Borrás—the version of which Navarro likes referring to is the recording made by Latinx group Trio Los Panchos with Eydie Gormé, an American singer of Sephardic ancestry and Italian-Turkish descent. In this case, the lyrics of "Mala Noche" are partially descriptive of Sonambulo's mood, bringing together multimodal images that otherwise could come across as incomplete or undefined on their own. Sonambulo appears alone, the visuals characterized by strong noir references, such as the texture created by the shade produced by blinds on the protagonist's silhouette; furthermore, Navarro reprises a classic hard-boiled detective archetype, as his protagonist is smoking in the darkness of his office, while drinking whiskey



Figure 3 *Sleep of the Just*. *The Collected Case*, 40.

and loading his gun. Reproducing a type of diegetic mechanism paradigmatic of noir narratives, he is setting off to solve the case resolutely and even though he forebodes that “truth will be hard, maybe even ugly”²; this determined feeling is accompanied and possibly fueled by Sonambulo’s own relapse into nostalgia, as his client’s words have brought back memories of the love that is lost to him forever. The choice of the lyrics is fitting and, extendedly, represents a reference to the whole song, as the opening verse of “Mala Noche” introduces the theme of a long, silent night of insomnia; something the protagonist copes with every night since he woke from his deep sleep.

Sonambulo’s long-lost love will then be outlined in *Ghost of a Chance* (2002).



Figure 4 *Ghost of a Chance*, 20.

In the standalone issue, the reader learns that—back in his luchador’s days—the man reunited with the woman he most loved at a club where she happened to be as a singer (20-21). The revelation happens through a long flashback, triggered by Sonambulo’s unexpected finding of a photograph portraying a woman he immediately recognizes; once he is alone in his home-office he delves into the related memories, which start on the day he abandoned his girlfriend to find fortune elsewhere as a young man. After a quick recap of his growth as a successful luchador—condensed in a few pages of lucha action—he visits a club where he’s supposed to shoot a film sequence and where his long-lost girlfriend is performing. The bolero she is singing is “Piel Canela” (composed by Puerto Rican artist Bobby Capó and first released with the Sonora Matancera in 1952) and its lyrics help outlining his relationship with Julia Verdin, filled

² Rafael Navarro. Personal conversation with the author, August 2, 2020.



with regret, impossibility, lost chances, but also unfaltering love and affectionate nostalgia.

The exploitation of intertextual representation of music is a device that has been exploited by other artists in the comic noir genre, at times with the same visual configuration; for example, it is considered as a distinctive trait of Díaz Canales and Guarnido's *Blacksad* (Austin 2019)—of which the first instalment was published in 2000—in which for example it is used specifically in a sequence marked by love and the implicit impossibility of the protagonist's sentimental relationship (Díaz Canales and Guarnido 2005, 40). Nonetheless, in the case of Navarro's *Sonambulo* it is evident that the choice of music is not only chronologically related with noir settings and thematically connected to the diegetic development of the sequence, but it also holds a very personal value for the artist.

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