

Transcript for Episode with Carlos Odria

SPEAKERS

Joe Aguilar, John Galante, Carlos Odria

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

INTRODUCTION

John Galante

Hi, I'm John Galante, I'm a historian of Latin America who specializes in migration and relations between South America and southern Europe. I also teach history and global studies at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, otherwise known as WPI.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer. I specialize in speculative fiction and Chicano literature. I also teach creative writing and literature at WPI.

John Galante

And you are listening to *Crossing Fronteras*.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++

MUSICAL INFLUENCES AND STYLES

John Galante

Today we have with us, Carlos Odria, a musician, writer, ethnomusicologists, composer, also a professor of music at Worcester State University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Carlos, thank you for joining us.

Carlos Odria

Thank you for having me.

Joe Aguilar

And so I thought we would start with just sort of a broad question. And feel free to go wherever you'd like with this. But looking at your online profile, reading a bit about your music, it looks like there's a wide range of musical influences. And I'm wondering if you might be able to talk about some of those what influences your music?

Carlos Odria

I think I should start with my early experience learning the instrument in Peru, where I was born and where I grew up. I got the chance to study with a very famous guitar player in Peru whose name is Pepe Torres, and he represents the olde school of the guitar in Peru. He plays folklore, popular music from different regions in in the country. And I studied to two years in his academy when I was 13 years old. And he not only introduced me to the rich folklore of Peru, but also to, to the world of classical music, right, and which really, showed me an amazing way to play music with this instrument with the guitar.

And so I studied a few years in Peru, but you know, being in high school, exposed to the music that was trending at the moment. And I got into heavy metal and hard rock, you know, and I formed a band with some of my classmates in high school. And I dropped the acoustic guitar and the classical guitar and I took the electric guitar for a few years as my main instrument channeling my inner beast on the instrument. But definitely that experience, you know, with heavy metal and the expressiveness of the of the electric guitar, it's something that I, I still have today and cannot deny that part of my roots, right.

And later on, after some years of wandering, in Peru, in the middle of a very chaotic situation in my country, right when Fujimori was, you know, running things very badly in the country. I stopped playing, you know, heavy metal and electric guitar and got in contact with, I actually discovered, I did my personal discovery of jazz, specifically bebop. And I listened to Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie. And that led me to Miles Davis, and of course, the "Kind of Blue" album, which it's in part the reason why I came to the United States to, to learn about jazz. And specifically, perhaps the most important discovery for me as a musician was the art of improvisation. That I will say it's the glue, that helps me to connect all the different bits of, of musical knowledge that I acquired through through my early life.

Joe Aguilar

I'm interested in in what you said about moving to jazz around the time of turmoil in your country, where do, So you see those things as connected?

Carlos Odria

Yes, I think so.

Joe Aguilar

Can you talk, unpack that a little bit. I find that fascinating.

Carlos Odria

It's I think the Peruvian society was at that moment suffering a lot there was there was a lot of inner violence, political violence and poverty, uncertainty. I remember, you know, all my friends from high school were kind of in the same situation that I was. There was no prospect for jobs. I couldn't finish my higher education because I, you know, I didn't have the resources at the time. And I also was almost getting closer to drop the guitar and my dream of being an artist, because there was really no, any prospect of making a living out of art in Peru. I know that making a living now is difficult, but in Peru was you know, at that moment, it was pretty bad.

And I had, at that moment, it was closer to the year 2000, when I had dropped the guitar, completely. I didn't play for three or four years. I use my time to read books, mainly, during those years. And I just one night, I, by chance, started to listen to this radio show. And this person was passionate about just the DJ of that particular radio show. And by listening to this show that happened, I think, every Thursday at 10pm, I started to learn about jazz, the sound of jazz, and then that led me to reading about the lives of bebop improvisers like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie.

And at the moment, I was not aware that most of the music that I was listening to was being composed in the moment, right? When I learned about that, that really showed me a way for me to come back to my dream of making music and, and making music a very immediate tool for expressing, you know, my feelings, and thoughts. So that discovery remain with me until today. And, you know, improvising music is really my, my main tool when playing music, right? It helps me to compose but also to be in the moment when I when I play music.

Joe Aguilar

And relatedly too you had said that you can't completely escape that influence of heavy metal in your music, despite moving into this, like more open and improvisational form. I'm what remains of heavy metal. I'm also a fan. I'm curious.

Carlos Odria

Well, I think the passion really the passion that the the the expressiveness of the music, you know, listening to, you know, guitar players playing very fast solos with a lot of energy. Sometimes the solos could be a little bit repetitive. But you can see, you can feel that, that, that passion and that energy, and that is something that I've learned to appreciate not only as a as an artist myself, but also because I know that that energy translates into engaging with my audiences. I think it helps me to convey better who I am, you know, by by shredding the guitar.

John Galante

So, yeah, I wonder if you could continue thinking about your influences. So you came to the United States, and I wonder how, you know, maybe your influences continued to evolve once you arrived here.

Carlos Odria

Coming to the United States, I will say that I became a real artist and musician. The first thing that I really learn about music, when I came to the US was that I didn't know anything about music. You know, I learned people from different parts of the world. I got in contact with Brazilian music, with Argentinian music, with Afro-Cuban music, which I was not really familiar with when while living in Peru. So the encounter of so many different musical traditions, different musical languages, was really humbling experience for me. I knew that I didn't know anything about the richness of music in this world, and that put me into a personal path of trying to learn as much as possible, you know.

And the first tradition that really absorbed me almost completely was Brazilian music, traditional Brazilian music, choro, samba, bossa nova. I was lucky enough to meet great musicians who knew about Brazilian music while I was living in Florida. But of course, also, living in Florida, I got in contact with Cuban music. And between those two polls, which for me are the leading polls in Latin America, you know, Brazilian, Afro-Brazilian music and Afro-Cuban music, I really started to, to learn about different ways of creating music. And by learning this, I started to think about ways in which I could develop, develop my own language my own way of, of expressing through through musical ideas.

John Galante

When you're playing, then do you feel like you're moving from one to the other? Or do you feel like, like, when you encounter it, a new form of music, let's say, right? Are you adding that in as an ingredient into the blend? Or are you actually evolving from interest in one form of music to another?

Carlos Odria

And as a, as a listener, I go through phases of being completely absorbed and passionate and obsessed with traditions, right. I had years in which I wanted to be a flamenco guitar player, right?

John Galante

Yeah let's hear something

Carlos Odria

I don't play flamenco, but I learned about things like the *picado* technique, right? When they do.

[Musical interlude]

Things like that. And I studied the forms let's say flamenco, the *rasgueados*.

[Musical interlude]

But then these elements became part of my vocabulary, as a musician, as a guitar player, right? I don't play flamenco music, but I learned techniques that I've, I like it, and I like how they sound on the instrument. And then I discovered Brazilian music, right, and started to see how Brazilian guitar players play beautiful and colorful chords, sometimes, right? Something like:

[Musical interlude]

So I studied how some guitar players in Brazil use the instrument. And I, some of the things that I learned became part of my vocabulary as well. And I move, you know, through my life in that way. It's really my my education has not been that focused on a specific tradition, I, I kind of shamelessly take elements that I liked from different parts, different traditions. And I tried to be honest to what I want to express that's that's kind of for me that the real authentic message, not really the bits of techniques and pieces of knowledge that I take from different traditions, but just what I want to express with it sounds.

But, to be honest, sometimes I I, kind of intuitively when I'm playing I tell to myself, well, now I want to sound like a flamenco guitar player. Now I want to sound more like, like Joe Paz

[Musical interlude]

Things like that, right? I want to sound like this are like that, because that's where the music pulls me. Right. But overall, I tried to just use my, I guess, my inner message, my inner intuition to glue together all these these elements. Yeah, I think in part that reflects my origins in Peru where there's a combination of different elements. And there is not really a one true culture dominating everything, but it's just a combination of things.

John Galante

Yeah, and I'm curious what's your thinking around maybe, like you said, you interacted with certain musicians, who knew a lot, because there's this like, training side of it, potentially. Right. But then there's also the listening, feeling, repeating that sort of thing. Or how did you approach that and the development of some of these skills.

Carlos Odria

As a student of the instrument, or any musical instrument, you begin with acquiring the technical skill, how to use your fingers to produce sounds, how to play scales, you know, what is the right way to, let's say, pluck the strings or things like that. And that training can take sometimes years. But if you want to go step, step forward, and play music with other people, and play live and perform for an audience, you need to learn other types of skills that are not necessarily connected to the instrument. And those skills, for me were the ability to adapt to music played by other musicians.

Especially when you talk about jazz, you cannot force yourself into, or you cannot force everyone else to follow you in certain way, you have to adapt. And you have to find a way to work with all the musicians involved to create nice music and nice artistic expression. So it took me years to develop that ability. But I think, especially by being able to work with a variety of musicians coming from different traditions, different different backgrounds, different personalities, different generations. I learned my way to be able to work in different contexts. And I think that that is what has allowed me to persist with the instrument.

John Galante

Yeah, this is a little bit of an aside, but I imagine are times where it doesn't work?

Carlos Odria

Yeah, for me it has to do first with that intuition that, that you can work well with a person that you can get along. When you meet someone. I mean, you need five minutes to know, if you can relate to that person, you know, with an honest conversation. And that's how I, I tried to, you know, before playing a concert, to get to know, well, my musicians and to, hopefully being able to choose the musicians that play with me on a particular event, and I know that I can be able to navigate with them the performance to relate with them and to create music in a joyful way, right. But of course, there are moments in which, you know, sometimes musicians don't have the right energy, or they don't communicate their ideas clearly, their musical ideas, and that sometimes require for, you know, more effort on my end, or, you know, other musicians to bring alive that performance, you know. Because that's what, that's what really, in my experience what audiences are looking for, a nice energy, something that transforms the audience.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++
CURRENT BAND/CURRENT WORK

Joe Aguilar

And sort of relatedly you're currently part of a trio, right? Yeah. I'm wondering how did you meet each other? What do you compliment about each other? What does that relationship look like? How has it developed?

Carlos Odria

Yeah, yeah, my family and I relocated from Florida, to, you know, Massachusetts in 2016. And, after a few months of settling down in Worcester, Massachusetts, I got to meet this band, that call itself the Worcester jazz collective, right? I learned about them through a few musicians whom I met during my, my first month in Worcester. And I love the idea of a collective right, which aims to create a group a number of musicians who are passionate about jazz, who want to play music, but at the same time not to be completely committed to a particular band. Right. And I liked that concept.

There were two members of this band, which right now, I think it's in its twelfth year, so they have been around for a number of years. And the drummer, Thomas Spears, and the bassist, Thomas Lubelczyk, both of them grew up in in Worcester, and they have been playing for a number of years professionally. And what they do is very, very unique in the sense that they play jazz, they improvise, but they play a lot of, you know, popular music, modern pop music, and they try to not only use the traditional standard repertoire in jazz, they want to appeal to, you know, younger listeners. So the the cool thing for me is that these two gentlemen are very good at playing a number of different styles, different rhythms, different groups, different sounds. And since I'm also very interested in fusing musical elements in my own creative work, working with them was just a logical decision.

And we are doing fairly well at a regional level. We are performing at festivals, performing arts centers, we play at the Falmouth jazz organization, and which is it's a very important jazz organization in the area. So I think we're doing well we just recorded and released an album last year with original material only, which it's a milestone for me. And, and so in part all what I recorded and what I have been playing with the trio is a reflection of our musical conversations with the members of the Worcester jazz collective right.

Joe Aguilar

Yeah. So as I was driving to the studio, I was listening a bit to your album, *Montuno negro*. And it was amazing, just this, you know, solo guitar, but it felt very narrative and had a lot of different modes. And speaking of improvisation, and maybe one way to start with that, how much of that was composed ahead of time? How much did you feel your way into? It also felt very narrative, like constructed in this way that told the story?. But yeah, what was improvisational, in that what was constructed ahead of time? What did how did the shape of making that album look to you?

Carlos Odria

That that album, was a commitment to myself, in the sense that I've been playing solo guitar for a number of years, but I never felt that I was that good of a guitar player to record a solo album, you know. So, I decided to take some, some compositions that I have written for the, for the guitar, and to practice them very well, and to create arrangements that I could remember, especially to, you know, because I took the decision of recording this album, I wanted to have a certain technical level, right.

A lot of the music that is recorded on that album is improvised, but I will say that most of it or maybe more than half of the music was pre-composed and pre-arranged for the instrument. So, I always like to leave open sections in my pieces to be able to improvise, using you know, the reference of harmonic progression, for instance, and I, I always give myself that moment of release and inspiration. But in most of the pieces in that album, I always come back to a pre-arranged section that helps me to integrate the music and to be careful with that narrative that I wanted to suggest, like repeating a section in a piece of music brings you back to something that happened in the past.

John Galante

And so, what what style then would you say the album is? I mean, given that you do improvise that you do have these very influences that how do you try and understand your style, right and even explain your style, you know, given given that variety?

Carlos Odria

Well, I could say, succinctly there is jazz guitar, but that label also implies certain sounds and certain, you know, assumptions. I could say also, a lot of people, you know, talk about Spanish guitar or Latin guitar, because of the use of the nylon string guitar, right. But also that will bring, you know, certain assumptions about the music. Lately, I've been using a lot the term fingerstyle guitar, which is pretty, pretty famous right now around the world. Fingerstyle acoustic guitar, which refers mainly to the technique of using the fingers. [Music interlude] The thumb, the index, the middle, [Music interlude] to play the instrument, right? And focusing on the technique gives me the chance to be completely open about the rest about the vocabulary, the sounds, the style, so it's something that I I've been using lately, and I feel good using that, that kind of very open umbrella term.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++ CREATIVE PROCESS (WATER); EL RÍO

John Galante

So as you're, you know, sort of creating these, where does that take place? Where do you like to be to create?

Carlos Odria

Yeah. Well, most of the time, the ideas come, you know, unexpectedly when I'm driving or walking, or when I'm going to a classroom to teach. So I usually have my cell phone and I record sometimes seeing the ideas. If I have my guitar, I quickly record those ideas. And those ideas, spend, sometimes years on my cell phone until I revisit them.

But in terms of forcing myself to be productive and creative. I think the beach is never fails. So that's why, you know, during the summer, every time I go to the beach, I have to carry my old beaten guitar with me. And at some moment, I sit down and just improvise. And there is always an idea that I, you know, I love and I record that idea and that becomes a song. Most of the time. It's just, for me, it's the beach is the place of my childhood, and also the place where I remember being happy.

John Galante

One of the things I was noticing in the titles of some of your pieces, El Río from 2019, an album, and Obomanye is that the right – Obomanye -- the spirit of the river. So there's a water component for sure. Yes, you know, and that connects maybe the ocean and the river. But I sort of wondered about the meaning of the river and El Río.

Carlos Odria

Well in general, for me as an artist and as a creative individual, the, the idea of fluidity, it's, it's so valuable and so important, right? In fact, for me, fluidity translates into being healthy into being, you know, a good person a good human being, right? And whenever there is blockage, whenever that fluidity is lost, there is something bad going on, right? So, I want to sometimes force myself to be fluid. And I know that when I acquire that quality of being fluid with my music, I know that my audiences respond well.

So I usually, I am inspired by, you know, bodies of water, the river, the ocean, waves, which is also reinforced by my readings of Daoism, for instance, and how Daoist poetry, you know, emphasizes, you know, just the importance of taking a look to the river and to the, to the sea, to the ocean to, to learn about these natural processes.

But in terms of that particular piece, El Río, it was inspired by the Amazonian River. And that song came to life when my friend, Juan Carlos Galeano, who is a Colombian poet and filmmaker. He's also a professor of literature at Florida State University. He started to work in this poetic documentary about the ethnic groups that live on the shore of the Amazonian River in Peru, in the, in the Peruvian side of the river. And he asked me, I need a simple theme song for the documentary. So the first thing that came to my mind was Cumbia, it had to be Cumbia, because Cumbia, it emerged in Colombia, but in that area in Peru is incredibly popular. Right? So I took the basic thing like.

[musical interlude]

That rhythm, very catchy, very rhythmic, easy to follow. And I created a simple theme for that, for that song. And something that I always do in my concert is that is that there is a, an, a section of open improvised solos after the theme, which for me, is when the real river really unfolds. Right. And that's where I want to really acquire that, that fluidity that that, that, you know, energizing momentum that improvisation sometimes, you know, allows.

Joe Aguilar

So, how much, in terms of the composition process for the documentary, were you responding to the images and the actual video itself? And how much was, what did the composition process look like in terms of that?

Carlos Odria

Well, I, I began with Juan Carlos' thoughts about what he wanted for different sections. In the documentary, he will say, I want something abstract, but at the same time, beautiful, so I will create a little piece to match that, that mood he wanted. And that was one element in my process. The other process, the other element in the process was my own memories, when visiting this, this part of the

country, and I went to, to that part of the Amazon River in Peru when I was a child. And I could remember, you know, the wild beauty of the section of this area in in the country,

But something that also was more inspiring to me, that was very inspiring to me, was that Juan Carlos interviewed a lot of people who live in this area and the people will talk about, you know, the river, the deities, the just the beautiful symbology and legends and mythologies that were unique. And that was also part of my my inspiration. You know, there is a there is an aura of mystery for me coming from that region that relates to music. There is a lot of music that I see as very intuitive and things that cannot be dissected through logical thinking. And that's where I made the connection.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++

MIGRATION; LATIN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES

John Galante

I mean, I'm starting to get really interested in this notion of fluidity and that sort of thing. I mean, it does seem like it connects so many different pieces of, of your, your own story, crossing borders, in your own life, your openness to different influences.

Joe Aguilar

Also language too, shifting between systems of language, language of music, Spanish to English.

Carlos Odria

Yeah, the journey continues for me, you know, I never suspected when I was a teenager or a kid that I was going to be an immigrant, right? I have been an immigrant now for most of my life. And that also has been, I mean it's an undeniable influence in what I in what I do. And the idea that now I feel that I can adapt, you know, wherever I go, something that I had to learn, you know, like any, any other person going through the experience of relocating or migrating to a different place, can be a traumatic experience, for sure. But also can be an amazing human experience, right? Where you adapt to different worlds. And you get a lot out of that experience, right?

As a musician, that experience has been incredibly important, you know, because, as I mentioned before, coming to the US and meeting different people exposed me to the richness of music, and the different experiences of creating music. So the way I play my music, the way I create reflects that personal experience, as well of, you know, moving from Peru to United States, living first in a place like Florida that has such a, you know, predominant influence of Latin American culture. But it is also unique because it's not Latin American, And now in Massachusetts. So all those experiences have been shaping my music. And I've been acquiring, I think, new skills through the, through my collaboration with the people, and the musicians with whom I play music in these different places.

John Galante

Yeah, I was gonna ask about this, like being a part of a Latin, right?, which is such a tricky term. You know, sometimes you might embrace being a part of that community at other times, you might think that, well, this is just being put on me. because I'm Peruvian

Carlos Odria

Exactly.

John Galante

And that might not be fair, in a way, or it might not be what you want, right, in a given situation. Right. And so I'm wondering how you engage with that.

Carlos Odria

Yeah, I mean, during the first years, when I moved to the US, I, I struggled a lot with those labels, right? Especially because I grew up in Peru and you know, and I thought that there were a lot of unique things about me being Peruvian. But then when I moved to a place like Florida, I first lived in Miami for for two years, before moving to Tallahassee. And I realized that everyone there, you know, coming from different countries in Latin America felt kind of similar. They come in from the different countries and cultures. But then I started to, you know, connect the dots and saw that there was really a lot of interconnections. Even if I came from Peru, and someone else, you know, is from Colombia or Ecuador or Argentina, we share a lot of very similar cultural elements that are defined by the history of Latin America, that is common to all the countries there, right?

So I started to see everything from a larger perspective, and how I can I could truly call myself a, you know, a Latin American musician, The hybridity as some people call in which you are really, I mean, I feel, I feel the freedom of, as I mentioned before, of taking elements of things that I like, and, and not, I try not to be defined by that past. Like, if I'm Peruvian, I'm supposed to play Peruvian music, I don't feel like that anymore. You know. And the same with the larger theme of Latin, a Latin musician, I can play, for sure, things that come from Latin America, but I can take things from the sensibility of other traditions that are part of me, for example, when you think about maqam music or radif music from the Middle East, I've learned to, sometimes, to think with that sensibility. And that's part of who I am as well, right?

John Galante

I wonder maybe, like, moving to Massachusetts, right, being maybe surrounded by, you know, the Dominican/Puerto Rican communities here, if that's had any impact, or maybe you're also more fully formed as a musician, at this point in your career, and that sort of thing.

Carlos Odria

Yeah I think it matters, because at some point, when you're a musician, you go through an education first, that sets the technical foundation of who you are, but then your, your, your learning process never stops, it continues out of your interactions with other musicians, right? So, I have played, for example, with an amazing Puerto Rican *conguero*, right? And that was, for me an experience that I never had before, right? So I learn, you know, the flavor of that playing, and I try to take the best of that, and try and try to infuse my music with those things.

Also, in terms of being a professional musician, now I'm interacting with an audience that is different. And I need to I need to be able to communicate with them by playing music that perhaps speaks better to this audience, you know.

So I was thinking that since we're talking about fluidity one of the themes, I wanted to speak about that fluidity through the instrument just to get the ideas going. And sometimes rambling with the instruments sometimes takes me to that moment of unifying all the influences, right. So

[musical interlude]

So using the that fluidity approach is a moment in which I feel freer, freer, as a musician where I get the most freedom to be who I am, right. And I, when I play in that way, I really don't try to force any sort of technical background, I just let the music flow as if I'm not doing anything.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++
SCHOLARSHIP AND SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVE

Joe Aguilar

Maybe shifting gears a little bit. So I'm a fiction writer. And this is maybe a stereotypical way of thinking about art but I think of music as more immediate like when you're reading words on a page you have to then form a picture in your mind and that picture leads you to sensations whereas music itself is this immediate sensation I guess.

And into this I'm finding my way into this question of your roles as a thinker. You have a PhD in ethnomusicology, you teach, you write critical articles about music. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you found your way into both of these roles, how do they complement each other?

Carlos Odria

Yes, for me, it's, it has been for a number of years was like wearing two hats really, because as a scholar, you need to analyze things, you have to compartmentalize things, you have to use labels categories, in order to be able to study things right. And as a musician as as a creative artist, things work in a different way, you know, you cannot really begin with a pre-planned method to create I mean, a structure is needed and helps to get you started, but you operate in a different way than a scholar.

Now, in the, I will say the last two or three years, I've been trying to trying to integrate these two sides of who I am. And I tried to nurture my creativity with the background that I acquired as a as an ethnomusicologist. Because I think that it can only improve what I do as a musician right?

For those who are not familiar with ethnomusicology, basically to put it in a nutshell, ethnomusicology is to study music from the perspective of of the musician or musicians who create the music, right? It's not only about analyzing the end product of rhythms and sounds and instruments, but to know how musicians translate their, their surroundings, their social experience, their education into actual sounds, right? From this perspective, culture and history, define music, right? So, as an ethnomusicologist, I had to study, you know, certain number of traditions from that perspective, from the perspective of culture, history, how religion or philosophy influence the sounds that we hear, right? And that, for me, just gives more depth to music and make me think about music as something that goes much, much

farther than just being entertainment. In fact, music it's, it's, it's something necessary for a lot of communities and, and societies.

So, nowadays, I try to think, as a scholar who uses the experience of playing itself to inform my thinking. So I try to be more what they call, I don't know, like, an applied ethnomusicologist. I tried to begin with a musical experience and then try to find a clear way to communicate that to someone else through through writing, for instance, right? But I've been, I guess, methodically trying to get rid of certain scholarly approaches, right?, if that makes sense.

Joe Aguilar

I also have a PhD, but there is sort of a lot of fear, especially around fiction writers and poetry writers that you can overthink things and that creates, it's against this kind of fluidity you're talking about. Like if you're analyzing things, and in sort of getting meta about things all the time it takes away from the organic production of the art itself. Yeah. So I'm always trying to negotiate that too, in my role as an academic, but also an artist. How do you stay close to the heart of the thing rather than getting into the head?

Carlos Odria

It's difficult, sometimes, because it's like having two different brains.

John Galante

So if, you know if you look back at some of your academic writing, right, where, where a lot of it deals with this place called Villa El Salvador. Maybe we could first talk a little bit about that work, and then maybe tie it into this this theme of heart and head and that sort of thing. Maybe give us a sense of what Villa Salvador is, what kind of place it is and also why you chose to study it.

Carlos Odria

Absolutely. If you go to the city of Lima, which right now, I think the population is almost 11 million people living there. There is this area that is known as metropolitan Lima, which is the most urban more developed part of the city, and where most of the middle class lives right. Now, because of issues of poverty and, you know, under development in in the rest of the country, there is a lot of communities that migrated to Lima, starting in the 1950s. And until today, they keep coming, because that's the only way for for many, many families to be able to find jobs and to make some progress living in the capital. Right?

But when these folks arrive, they don't find houses or affordable houses in metropolitan Lima. So they started to colonize the desert that surrounds metropolitan Lima. Right? Lima is basically a desert with just a small green area. And so thousands/millions of people came from rural areas in Peru. And they settled down in these deserts. One of these areas today known as Villa El Salvador was one of the first areas to be colonized in the 1970s. Ss far as we know, the first hundreds of families that arrive to this part of Lima, were fleeing the devastation of an earthquake that happened during that time.

So they, they came to Lima, they didn't find any support from the government. So they went to the desert. And they applied the techniques that they had learned in the Andes, where things like *ayni*,

which is this ancient social institution that uses communal work to fulfill basic needs, right? Using that technique many of these families learn in the Andes, they were able to build a city, right? So a lot of people call Villa El Salvador a city within the city, because it grew up just on the basis of the effort of these families who built everything there.

So something unique about Villa El Salvador is that it started with a constitution, like a country, you know, the first families got together and they said, if we want to live well, we have to set the rules first. And they established a constitution that was that relied heavily in ideas coming from socialism, but also, more importantly, from communal techniques used in the Andes, right? A lot of people like to say that, you know, these Andean techniques are socialist, but it's really something different.

Well but these families acquired this knowledge and they organized the city. And through the next 20 years, the city grew up. And the first generation of children born in Villa El Salvador started to put into practice the concepts of this constitution, and it became model in entire Latin America about how poor people or poor sectors of the society could organize themselves to take care of themselves when the state don't help them. Right?

So when I was a kid, a lot of people in metropolitan Lima used to say, you know, that area Villa Salvador is filled with thieves and people who, you know, are not good, and you shouldn't go there.

When I was working on my PhD and I had to decide on a topic for my dissertation, I said, I want to go there and really learn what it's all about. So I can, I can take out that preconception that was forced into me, you know. And pretty much a lot of that misconception was based on the fact that most of the people in Villa El Salvador were of Andean descent, right. And, you know, unfortunately, in Peru, or in Lima, there is a lot of, you know, things that still are alive from colonial times in terms of racism and segregation and things like that. It's still there.

So I went, I went to Villa El Salvador and got to see how they, the people live there. And I discover, to my surprise, how important was this adaptation of Brazilian *batucada* that a lot of the youth in this area were using for social and political purposes. Right. And that became the topic of my dissertation.

John Galante

A number of the, I guess, articles that kind of came out of some of that research seem to be focused on these *tambores* groups in Villa El Salvador. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what those are? And maybe some of the, not just the performance of it, but also the meaning of it. And some of the advocacy and innovation associated with those groups as well.

Carlos Odria

Yes. It's amazing how this music Brazilian *batucada*, which emerged in Salvador de Bahia in Brazil has spread around the world, not only not only in Lima, but it's you can see, you know, this type of ensembles in many different parts of the world. What remains the same is idea that usually, there are neighborhood organizations that, you know, center on practicing this music, usually in public spaces, because these are very loud instruments that require space.

So, that format appeared in Villa El Salvador, I believe, in the early 1990s. where actually a few Argentinean musicians who have learned the music in Salvador de Bahia, in Brazil, they went to Lima, and taught a few, you know, musicians in Villa El Salvador, or how to play some rhythms, some of the rhythms that are traditional to the *batucada*.

These Argentinian musicians continued they're traveling, they left Peru. But what they left in terms of these rhythms that they taught to to the youth in Villa El Salvador became its own tradition, right? The teenagers who learned this music started to start to teach that to younger kids, in their own way, taking different elements and recordings watching videos on YouTube. They came out with their own version of *batucada*. And they call it *tambores*. Sometimes they call it *batucada* as well. They also incorporated some Afro-Peruvian rhythms, and they created what I see as a hybrid form of *batucada*.

But the for me, the most important part is that they were using the *batucada* as a vehicle for teaching the youth in this area about the rights of citizens, about the right to be creative, to have a say in their lives and to also tackle that segregation that I was talking about, right? The *batucada*, and these neighborhood organizations, according to the people who who, who, you know, were leading these organizations, when I went to Lima, they use the rehearsal as a sort of workshop and lab, where they teach the youth not only to play the drums, but also to free their bodies of what they see as the remnants of colonialism, right?

They teach them to be spontaneous, to feel rhythms, to be joyful while playing music with others. And just experience of playing this music. I'm not sure if you ever have heard this music in a live situation, it's very loud, very energetic, it conveys a sense of energy. And as I write in my dissertation, that energy is crucial for for many of these organizations. Actually, perhaps the main leader in this movement, her name is Pamela Otoya, she told me literally that for her, the *batucada* is an urban technique to liberate the youth. So it's not, they don't see it necessarily only as music but as an integral way to train the youth to be creative. And to free their bodies.

John Galante

Yeah, I got a sense, you know, reading some of your work, that there's almost a the way you're describing it, we might even associate it with the term wellness today, right? There's like a physical exercise, maybe mental/physical and the connection between those. And you can see if you watch a video that this is a very physical thing, right? It's very loud, it's sweeping movements. And I really appreciated that as not just, you know, social activism, right, but also a more localized kind of community-based wellness process for marginalized people to not just collectivize but pursue wellness collectively. Right, right. Exactly. You use this term at one point of time, social moral knowledge. Right, that's the translation from Spanish, which doesn't sound as good. There's a soulfulness there maybe or a mindfulness or wellness element to this.

Carlos Odria

to go back to to this leader that that I interviewed a few times in Lima, Pamela, and other leaders as well, they will point out when we start to work with a new group of kids from Villa El Salvador, they always start being very shy, afraid of playing drums, afraid of being boisterous and energetic while playing. And Pamela said that they have to retrain their bodies in order to be spontaneous. And she

said a lot of these things come from the fear that they have acquired, because growing up in this area, and, you know, a lot of social problems with Lima and the poverty that that defines, you know, this area in Lima, has created a sense of fear, right? So, she says, she thinks that by retraining the their bodies by means of playing the drums, they find themselves.

And this is something that I also know happens, for example, with other traditions such as taiko drumming, Japanese taiko drumming. It's, it leans more into the spiritual side, but it also it's about freeing that physicality of the body itself as the first step to being musical.

John Galante

Yeah, I thought of capoeira a little bit when I was reading some of this stuff or even breakdancing. It just kind of like stirred some images of sort of urban environments and creativity and music and movement in bodies. And counterculture, which is also another thing that you write quite a bit about, for sure.

Carlos Odría

Yeah, absolutely.

John Galante

So what, what couldn't you do, right, with these papers, these articles, the dissertation that you might have wanted to? So you mentioned that going forward, you'd love to be able to blend together more the two sides.

Carlos Odría

I think, you know, seeing it retrospectively, I had to use the framework of the discipline, right, the language, the ideas. I had to rely on the scholarship related to my work, and I had to use a language that another ethnomusicologist could follow, right? Not necessarily a general, you know, reader. So if I were to do it today, perhaps I I would have been more, I will rely more into an accessible language. And maybe it's, I wouldn't use so much of, you know, other theories that I learned about. Everything began with a sincere desire of, you know, do something positive for this particular community. But I realized that my language and my framework was too limited to the discipline itself. So in fact, one of my, one of the projects that I hope to develop in the next years is to rewrite that from a perspective of a musician who was born in Peru, and who lives now in the United States. And, and to talk about this experience of what I learned in Villa El Salvador from a more from a more, I guess, everyday perspective.

John Galante

Yeah. Right. I mean, it sounds like you, you want to improvise, maybe?, or you want to find the free flowing piece that allows you to express more precisely in your mind what you saw. Right?, which, which academia doesn't allow improvisation, maybe, right, in the same way that music does?

Carlos Odría

Yeah. Yeah. I think it's, that's kind of the the limitation that I found. Right now, I think I'm in the, in the stage in which I'm processing what I learned as a musician there. And I realized how I, how much I needed to go through that process of liberating my body of, of things that I acquire growing up in, in

Lima. And by seeing how many of these folks process that creatively that really inspired, inspired to, you know, start doing that myself.

Joe Aguilar

And kind of a general question I have is, how can we stay fluid as academics? What have you learned from music that we can bring to our own practice as scholars?

Carlos Odria

Well, for me, for me, the best exercise once again, is that of fluidity, right. It's like, I don't know how to call it, but I tried to break the blockage by just expressing everything at once, you know, and then I tried to polish from, you know, that experience and try to come up with the most succinct way to say something musically, right. And that, in my case, for example, I will record something that I improvise, and then I will find ideas that I think can be repeated. And then that helps me to find a narrative that connects to that idea. So, in other words, it's just to practice to be fluid, you know. It can be practiced, you know, sometimes works and sometimes it doesn't.

John Galante

Thank you Carlos, so much for for this conversation. So interesting, so multifaceted, which speaks to your you know own career and philosophical and mindful and really soulful. And so we really appreciate your participation.

Joe Aguilar

Thank you so much, Carlos.

Carlos Odria

Thank you very much. My pleasure.

**+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++
CREDITS**

John Galante

You've been listening to *Crossing Fronteras*. I'm your co-host John Galante, a historian of Latin American and an Associate Professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute as well as the creator and executive producer of the podcast series.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm your co-host Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer and an Assistant Professor at WPI, and an executive producer of the podcast series.

John Galante

This show surveys the unique ecosystem of contemporary scholarship and art being generated by scholars and creatives in New England who are working in Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

Joe Aguilar

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