

CHINGO BLING "THE MASA MESSIAH"

by Robb Walsh

THEY
CAN'T
DEPORT
US ALL



"TEXAS ISN'T ONLY THE BORDER between the United States and Mexico, it's also on the border between the South and the Southwest—and Chingo Bling is a walking manifestation of where Atzalan meets the Dirty South," writes Houston music critic John Nova Lomax.

When I first heard about Chingo Bling in 2002, I assumed he was another dangerous rapper from the Houston barrios like the South Park Mexican, who had just been sent to prison. Dressed in a cowboy hat, aviator sunglasses, and ostrich-skin cowboy boots with oversized Nike swooshes on the sides, Chingo Bling certainly looked like a postmodern pachucøthug.

But people kept asking me if I had tried Chingo Bling's tamales and his hot sauce. A rapper who sold tamales? Then came his "Money and Masa" tour and his over-the-top nickname, "The Masa Messiah." (Masa is the corn dough you use to make Mexican tamales.) I was still puzzled when I watched his video titled "Taco Shop" and laughed hysterically at the scene where the semi-clad girlfriend is covered in chopped iceberg, grated cheese, and tomato slices. (Check it out on YouTube.) Finally it dawned on me: It was all a spoof.

The subject matter of gangsta rap was urban violence and dealing drugs. Rappers like 50 Cent had to prove they were the real deal by detailing their vast criminal experience. Chingo Bling was doing a send-up of the drug dealer/musician shtick. In his debut album, *Tamale Kingpin*, he told the story of his rise as the "kingpin of an international tamale cartel." Instead of a pimped-out car, he drives a tamale truck festooned with his album covers. He once complained that a shipment of his piñatas was seized at the border by FDA agents, who smashed them all open looking for masa.

Chingo Bling's given name is Pedro Herrera III. He was born in Houston to Mexican immigrants. His father worked several jobs to put his kids through school. Chingo Bling attended Trinity University in San Antonio, where he studied business administration and marketing. He learned about rap from his older sisters, and he started out in the music business as a DJ at frat parties.

In San Antonio, his comedy-rap antics earned him a Sunday-night show on the college radio station. That got him introductions into the local rap scene. In 2002, Chingo started Big Chile Records and released his first underground tapes. He began showing up at recording sessions and providing feedback to other musicians. He

aspired to become a producer, à la Russell Simmons and Sean Combs. The other rappers begged Chingo Bling to add his comedy routines to their recordings.

But comedy took a backseat in 2007, when Chingo Bling released a national album titled *They Can't Deport Us All*. As the son of immigrants, he wanted to add his voice to the immigration debate. When Chingo plastered the album cover on his tamale truck, the truck started getting vandalized and shot at in Houston.

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Somebody painted out the *CAN'T* and spray-painted *GO HOME* on the side of his truck. When Chingo Bling restored the cover art on the side of the truck, the vandals struck again—and this time, they broke out the windshield. It's been a tough couple of years. Though he's glad he took on the social justice issue, he has promised fans that it's back to tamales on his next album.

Even if Chingo Bling goes back to his tamale-kingpin persona, *They Can't Deport Us All* has given his humor an edge. While his early raps cast him as the Weird Al Yankovic of Tex-Mex, his foray into politics and social criticism has brought a Chris Rock-like consciousness to his act.

If you walked away from the 2010 SFA Symposium with a Chingo Bling—autographed corn shuck, consider yourself lucky.

Robb Walsh is a founding member of Foodways Texas and the author of *Sex, Death, and Oysters: A Half-Shell Lover's World Tour*.



THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

www.southernfoodways.org
662-915-5993
sfmail@olemiss.edu



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