



WHY TACO TUNES MATTER

There's potential beyond punch lines.

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

THE SONG STARTS WITH MARIACHI TRUMPETS blaring a serpentine melody. Next, a man says, "Ready to eat some f---n' tacos, bro?" Lil' Jon repeats the line in his signature gleeful growl as a drum machine joins the horns.

The rush of sound builds to a double-tracked Lil' Jon screaming "Taco Tuesday!" This two-word chorus, repeated over the horn hook, forms the backbone of the song's two minutes and eleven seconds.

"We came to eat some fire Mexican food!" the Atlanta-born-and-bred artist boasts. "And if you like to eat like me/You gonna eat everything!" His enthusiasm spills over into shout-outs to enchiladas, burritos, quesadillas, pescado (fish), and chorizo.

The inspiration for the 2019 release came from NBA superstar LeBron James, who frequently takes to social media along with his family to yell "Taco Tuesday!" with stereotypical yelps and an exaggerated Mexican accent. Lil' Jon doesn't do that, thankfully. Neither did fellow Atlanta rap stars Migos, who released a "Taco Tuesday" single of their own for Cinco de Mayo 2020.

"We servin' tacos/Get 'em with the nachos" Takeoff sings, describing a party where everyone

is enjoying home-cooked Mexican food (with an unnecessary scoop of misogyny, to be honest).

Friends texted me these Lil' Jon and Migos tracks as soon as they dropped. Most of them thought both versions of "Taco Tuesday" were hilarious. Others thought they mocked Mexicans and Mexican culture, and assumed I would agree.

I've long tracked depictions of Mexican food and drink in American culture, especially music. I appreciate twentieth-century Southern songs that lionize tamales, including Robert Johnson's

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"They're Red Hot" and Clifton Chenier's "Hot Tamale Baby." Tequila, another popular topic, has historically been treated as a license to party or sob. (That's how Mexican songs treat the liquor, too.)

But songs about tacos? They barely register in the Mexican songbook. They're just too ubiquitous and

rudimentary—it would be like writing ballads about toast. In American music, however, taco songs tend to be the equivalent of a whoopee cushion.

You can practically hear the tongues planted firmly in the cheeks of singers across genres: metal, pop, hip-hop, children’s, country. The taco is a subject not to be taken too seriously. And by extension, these songs imply, neither are Mexican people.

Doris Day began the trend in 1947 with her “Tacos, Enchiladas, and Beans,” a slinky number that’s cute until the end, when she says in a mock Spanish accent “They make me kind of sick/But I love them.”

Even “Weird Al” Yankovic, whose 1992 “Taco Grande”—a parody of Ecuadorian rapper Gerardo’s 1990 hit “Rico Suave”—is genuinely funny and clever, throws away his goodwill at the end of the song, when he cautions listeners not to drink the water at a Mexican restaurant.

The “Taco Tuesday” tracks by Lil’ Jon and Migos ostensibly fall into this category. Yet I immediately thought they were great.

I was pleasantly surprised that two of my favorite hip-hop acts cared enough about the titular occasion to record odes to it, with no backhanded insults. I liked those songs so much that I even gave their respective videos a pass on things that would usually draw my ire, like Migos members wearing sombreros and serapes, and a Lil’ Jon emblem that features a handlebar mustache and tequila bottles.

How could I like a song that might be interpreted as a patronizing joke? It’s because I feel seen.

Even now, my stance on these two songs confounds some of my friends. How could I possibly like them?

The answer is simple: It’s because I feel seen.

Whether knowingly or not, Migos and Lil’ Jon offer tacos not as novelty, but as mainstream. They correctly center Taco Tuesday around what the namesake meal represents: community. A time when everyone is happy and everyone is sharing.

To see Quavo, Offset, and Takeoff (who died

in 2022) cook ground beef, fill hard shells, then gobble them like many families of all ethnicities on a Tuesday night is comforting. To hear Lil’ Jon rattle off nine other food items besides tacos reminds me of my cousins trying to entice me to weekend get-togethers with the promise of an abundant spread.

That these artists happen to be Black men from the South makes their songs that much more powerful.

Despite millions of Mexican American hip-hop lovers, the industry rarely acknowledges this fan base. Most of us can only quote one such shoutout: the line in Tupac Shakur’s 1996 song “To Live & Die in L.A.,” in which he sings “It wouldn’t be L.A. without Mexicans/Black love, brown pride, and the sets again.”

Lil’ Jon and Migos could’ve been more artful in their depiction of Mexican culture. But it wasn’t negative. It’s out there. May it not be a one-off.

I talked to Nate Jackson, a deputy editor for the *Los Angeles Times* and my former music editor at *OC Weekly*. He was one of the friends who texted me each song when it first came out.

“Hip-hop artists are masters of remixing elements of American culture to fit the scope or the beat of a good song,” he told me. “Taking the time to work Spanish music or words into a rhyme scheme in a witty or crafty way isn’t prejudice. If anything, it shows how far Mexicans have come in terms of cultural acceptance.”

I differ with Nate on the question of acceptance. The United States, for Mexicans, is still too often a place where other Americans are more than happy to consume our food and culture while not accepting us as neighbors. That’s why I hope if any other musical acts from the South craft their own taco songs, they go beyond the fiesta.

Maybe someone can pen a ballad about a taco vendor’s struggles, like the Delta tamale tracks of over a century ago. Or bring in Latin American genres. The crossover success of Spanish-language singers like Bad Bunny and Rosalía suggests American ears are ready. The ties that bind Mexicans and Southerners are deeper than a short song about a single food. I think we just need the right bard.

Hey, Outkast, can y’all reunite? I’m sure *ustedes* would make a taco track for the ages. 🍷

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