United by Music: Latino Musicians in the D.M.V.

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Dedication

In dedication to my parents Carlos Julio Martinez & Isabel Cristina Martínez.

Thank you for your unconditional love and support.

Acknowledgments

I would like to give a special recognition to Susan Sterner and Gabriela Bulisova for their continuous support and guidance.

Thank you for challenging and believing in me.

Abstract of Thesis

United by Music: Latino Musicians in the D.M.V.

Through the platforms of film and photography, this documentary project lends perspective on how local Latino musicians in the Washington metropolitan area use their music as a vehicle for establishing community, and empowering both performers and audience. These musicians share their personal points of view as they share their anecdotes providing an insight into the world they've been able to create around music. As part of this project, an article style essays shines light into backstories of some of these musicians. The reader can learn about the different obstacles and forces these musicians have overcome in order to follow their passion of music.

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Chapter 1: United by Music

United by Music

In the 1980's, the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area saw a huge wave of immigrants from Central America. Some were feeling the violence of their homelands. Other Latino immigrants came to this country to pursue the American dream and escape economic hardships back home. One of the things they brought with them as part of their culture was music. After they arrived, Latino immigrants used music to make friends and to connect with other immigrants. Immigrants using music as a path to become part of the larger Latino community have historically formed local Latino bands. That's how the local Latino music scene began.

Each musician that has started bands in the local area has a different story. As the numbers have grown, so has the music[1]. In 1990, there were very few local Latino bands. Now there are many. And here are some of their stories.

LEAVING BEHIND GANGS, AND A GUITAR

The decision to leave everything behind and start a new life in the United States wasn't easy but it was the only one for Lilo Gonzalez, a 23-year-old schoolteacher from El Salvador if he wanted to live. Gangs had already taken the life of several family members and friends. Lilo narrated his story for the online interview section "MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR." He was sure he was next. He had no choice but to leave the country with his family. Although he did not have enough money to pay the *coyote* for him, his wife and child, he made arrangements to be able to make the payment in installments. It was 1981 when he said goodbye to El Salvador.

After arriving the United States a friend helped Lilo fly with his family from the West Coast to Washington, D.C. (His friend offered to pay the airfare since Lilo didn't have much money.) In Washington, D.C., his friend had a job waiting for him and allowed him and his family to stay at his mobile home. The only issue was that other people were already living there, too - 12 in total.

Despite the violence and struggle Lilo could never forget about his true passion: music. Lilo has been a musician since he was 12, but had to leave his guitar behind. After a couple of paychecks, he bought his first guitar since leaving El Salvador. . He started a musical group called Izalco, and focused on writing songs that would help express all the struggles immigrants faced as they left their countries looking for a better way to live.

In addition to Izalco, Lilo launched a new band: Lilo González y Los de la Mt. Pleasant. In her book *Departamento 15: Salvadoran Transnational Migration and Narration*, Rodriguez states, "They took migrant narratives into the Salvadoran heart(land) of Washington, D.C., as they compose and perform songs that chronicle the lives of people in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood." With the band, Lilo toured both nationally and internationally. He also has received several awards, including a Wammie for best Latin vocalist. He was given a grant from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Arts, which he used to record one of his first records. In 1997, he performed at President Bill Clinton's inaugural celebration.

Currently he teaches music to young kids in school and he is also the father of Lilo Jr., who was born in El Salvador but spent much of his childhood in the nation's capital at the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood.

FOLLOWING IN A FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS

Lilo Jr. has grown up to be a musician like his father, and has attracted attention for his talents. In his article "Machetres: Cutting Edge Latino Punk" Eric Brace from the *The Washington Post* interviewed Lilo Jr. when he was still a teenager and the band was promoting its first self-titled record in 1998. Guy Picciotto of Fugazi produced the record, which has three songs. On the cover of the record there is a picture of an electric guitar, a Fender Stratocaster. It has two stickers. One is the famous face of Che Guevara, (an Argentine Marxist revolutionary that became a major figure in the Cuban Revolution) and the other a bumper sticker that reads, "No human being is illegal. Support Salvadoran Refugees." Next to the body of the guitar there is a standing empty bullet shell.

Lilo Jr. eventually returned to El Salvador to finish high school, and then once again moved back to D.C., where he started the band Machetres. The band was chosen to be the opening act for the 10th anniversary concert of Fugazi. After the show took place, Lilo Jr. told his friends back in El Salvador about the show, but they did not believe him. While he was going through high school there, he and his cousin would sing and play bootleg records from Minor Threat and Fugazi. Having been chosen to open the show and play that night was a dream come true for Lilo Jr.

Although Lilo Jr. and the band Machetres trace their roots to Mt. Pleasant in Washington, D.C., they now reside on the West Coast. Lilo Jr. moved there about four years ago in order to further pursue his music career. He recently returned to the the D.C. area for a couple of days to record some tracks for a new album. During this time the band played two shows and many people from the local Latino music scene showed up.

The first show was in Chapala Blue Beetle bar, in Burtonsville, Maryland. This is a Tex-Mex restaurant that also has a sports bar and live band performances on the weekends. More people than usual showed up, including relatives of Lilo Jr. whom he hadn't seen in years. The next night, the band performed the same set at the Pinch on 14th St in D.C. Just like the night before, relatives and friends showed up in order to see Lilo Jr. play. Even an 82-year-old woman showed up. She used to be his teacher and tutor he had when he was young. Once she knew that Lilo Jr. was coming to town, she knew she had to go see him.

FINDING HIS VOICE

Like Lilo Jr., many of the local musicians that make part of the Latino music scene in Washington, D.C., are from El Salvador. Ron Recinos is also from El Salvador, and like Lilo, he and his family had to leave the country to escape from gang violence. After arriving in this country and entering school in the early 90s, Ron took a music class at a high school where half of the semester students were taught how to play guitar by reading the music sheets, and the other half trained to sing.

One afternoon while at school, their music teacher was walking around the halls trying to recruit singers who had a soprano voices, since the school choir need them. The teacher asked Ron about his voice tone but he was unsure. So the two of them went to the music room, where the teacher would play a note and ask Ron to sing it. After playing several notes, the teacher told Ron that he was a soprano and asked him if he wanted to join the choir.

He did join the choir - and one of the reasons was to keep out of trouble. He was a

small kid and did not want to be bullied. Being part of the choir meant he wouldn't have to spent time with other students since they would always be practicing and they also hanging out in a separate part of the school.

With the choir Ron was able to visit different cities and travel to different competitions. On one of these trips the school choir went to New York City to a competition at the famous St. Patrick's Cathedral where he performed a solo. He was nervous, but did well. Once the competition was over, a member of the audience walked towards him and after congratulating him on his performance asked him why the whole time he was singing, he was stroking his right hand up and down. Ron had not realized that the whole time he sang , he had been moving his hand as if he was playing a guitar.

Ron started to write his own songs when he was in college. Someone he met inspired his first songs. He created an online account and started to upload some videos of himself playing the guitar and singing. John Angel, whose family owns the Chapala Blue Beetle restaurant and bar in Maryland, saw the videos and invited him to play at the restaurant. His events became a regular event at the bar and John Angel introduced him to some of his friends who were all part of the Latino music scene. Until this point his songs were more acoustic and very sentimental. Once after he finished playing at a restaurant, a customer asked him why his songs were so sad. He was never invited back to that restaurant.

For some time after that, Ron stopped playing music. But a friend told him he had joined a new band and that they were looking for a singer. He met with the band and became the singer for the band Versus. After a couple of weeks the band started opening for Latino Bands that were touring the country. For Ron, it was very difficult at the

beginning because he wasn't use to singing in a band. He was somehow shy in public and when it was time for him to sing, he would do it - but his tone was very low. He felt uncomfortable hearing himself singing. The sound engineers would increase the reach of his microphone so the sound would increase, but Ron would sing even more softly. The band soon after started recording their first CD entitled "Sumergida en la Luna", (Submerged in the Moon) which included original songs from both Ron and a band mate, Carlos Romero. As time went by Ron became more comfortable at signing now enjoys it.

BUILDING A BASE FOR MUSIC

Carlos was born in Peru, but he has been living in this country since the early 80s. He arrived here pursuing a dream to become an accomplished musician. In his early days, he played metal and was part of the band Parasite. He also played rock en Español in a band called Eclipse, which he believes was the first local band to play that genre. Eclipse became one of the few local Latino bands to go on international tours. They toured the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Peru.

In addition to playing with Versus, Carlos is the owner of Nazca Records. It's a home studio that took several years to build. Everything started with him having rehearsal space in the basement of his house, in suburban Virginia. Around 1995 he started buying equipment and recording bands. Nowadays, his is one of the recording studios most often used by local bands.

After recording and promoting its first CD, Versus lost two of its members, the guitar player and the drummer. In the process of looking for new members Carlos and Ron took some time off from the bands to work on personal projects. Around the

beginning of 2016, they decided to make a new record. “Vertigo” will be the title of the CD and it will be the name of the first single, which is written by Ron.

CHANGING GENRES AND NEIGHBORHOODS

In the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood there are a few restaurants that currently have live Latino band shows throughout the week, but it hasn’t always been that way. In the article “A Counter offensive on Mt. Pleasant’s ‘Voluntary’ Music Bans” Published in the *Washington Post*, reporter Mark Fisher talked to Alberto Ferrufino, owner of Don Juan Restaurant. The article details how restaurant owners were forced to sign voluntary agreements that didn’t allow them to have any live music shows, including mariachis. Several restaurants lost customers who were forced to go to other neighborhoods like Adams Morgan in order to see a live show. This happened as a consequence of some of the neighbors complaining about the noise levels. The neighbors had complained and said that the neighborhood was a residential area and that the main street was getting too busy. But for at least the past five decades, bands of one kind or another have played live music in Mt. Pleasant. The type of music being played has changed from country bands to rock, then punk, and then Latin sounds. Each genre of music has been a reflection of the people that live in the neighborhood. Thankfully after a majority of neighbors got together and came up with a new agreement, live music has returned to the neighborhood. Marx Café and Haydee’s Restaurant, two local establishments, are venues where live local bands usually perform.

A night of local Latin music usually takes place in restaurants that open a space for the bands after dining hours. Usually two to four bands perform one after

another, and during the time they set up, a DJ plays music. While one band sets up, members of the audience, comprised mainly of members of the other bands, mingle and catch up. More than a gathering of friends, these nights resemble a family reunion.

Notes

1. The following figures were pulled from the report, " New Americans in Washington, D.C.: The Political and Economic Power of Immigrants, Latinos, and Asians in Our Nation's Capital." Done by the American Immigration Council.

The number of Latinos in Washington, D.C. grew from 5.4% in 1990 to 10.1% (65,560 people) in 2013 according to the census bureau. This can also be seen in the number of local Latino bands in the DMV. Around 1990 Eclipse and very few Latino bands made the local Latino music scene. Now the number of local Latino bands has increased almost exponentially.

As the number of Latinos in Washington, D.C., grows, so does their importance in the local economy. After a 540% increase from 1990, the 2014 purchasing power of Latinos in Washington, D.C. was $3 billion.

The 3,428 Latino-owned businesses had sales of $975 Million and employed 7, 201 people in 2007.

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Chapter 2: Visual Review: *United By Music*

The community of Latin local bands in the DMV

This project documents the creation of a special type of community that is constructed around the music scene formed by local Latin bands in the metropolitan area of Washington, D.C. The scope of the music genre is broad and includes alternative music, rock en Español, DJs and some tropical music.

Most of these local bands or local artists are Latino immigrants who have come to this country either with their families or by themselves in order to escape from hardships that were happening in their countries. Some of them come to this country to pursue the American Dream. Since they have had to leave behind many of their relatives and friends, when they come to this country they feel vulnerable and alone. In order to overcome this, they rely on music as a way to make new friends. New relationships are made when people attend live shows and when they find out that they know how to play an instrument and have similar taste in music. If they know how to play an instrument the friendship will strengthen and this will lead to the creation of a band. And the interaction of these bands has created a specific niche that has evolved into a community.

Four different works have had a strong influence on the *United By Music*: two documentaries, and two television shows. The first documentary is called *Los Punks: We Are All We Have*. The documentary was released in 2016 and made in collaboration with the Univision Documentary Unit, Vans Off The Wall and Fusion TV. The documentary is interesting since Vans Off The Wall is a clothing and shoes brand company targeting the the skateboarding lifestyle. This is probably due to the geographical location where the documentary takes place, which is Los Angeles, California. The plot in this film centers on a couple of characters involved in the underground, backyard punk scene of L.A. and its suburbs. Camera crews follow them around as they arrange, promote and go to backyard music shows. The documentary shows the

arrival of police before the concerts end since the venues are frequently stage in residential backyards or homes and neighbors call in complaints. The style of filming is similar to what we know as reality TV. (fig. 1)

Fig. 1. Screenshot of the documentary *Los Punks: We Are All We Have*. A character in the documentary is followed by the camera in a Reality TV-style.

The show is very interesting and eye-opening. There are two different types of characters - one is the stereotypical "punk" who has a weird hairstyle and wears jeans and t-shirts and always ends up getting into trouble inside and outside the shows; and one is the opposite, who, in in order to get a better job, cuts his hair and aims to be accepted by society.

The film's depiction of the community created by the underground Latino backyard punk scene from L.A. is an influence for *United By Music*. The documentary shows a community created around the local music scene. There are a few people, like the promoters, who struggle to make the shows happen and to put them together. And there is a small circle of people who work together to make that happen. Then there are the bands and their loyal audiences. The promoters must work hard to find new places to put on shows since usually the shows are very disruptive, and it can be hard to have a recurring place where bands can play.

Similarly, *United By Music* will also focus on a community created around a music scene. Although located in Washington, D.C., *United By Music* tells a similar story of the tie between communities and music. One of the first bands that started in the D.C. area left for Los Angeles years ago, and still returns for performances and to connect with longtime fans. Like the documentary, *United By Music* will be filmed in a more informal style, with the main characters followed by a hand-held camera so the shots are not completely steady.

The other documentary influence is called *Salad Days*, released a couple of years ago and based on the decade from '80s to '90s. The documentary is about the local punk scene in Washington, D.C. It's often hard to remember that D.C. has a great history of music since this is overshadowed by the importance of politics and more prominently represented in the media as the nation's capital. *Salad Days* talks about the punk culture of that time and revolves around Dischord Records, a DIY record label that was started by members of a local punk band as a last resort of getting their music, and the music of their friends, recorded and distributed.

In the production of this piece a lot of pictures were used as tools to tell the story, and they were digitally enhanced in order to animate them in order to make the piece more dynamic and engaging. It also used footage and recordings from live performances of these bands (fig. 2). In contrast to the Los Angeles documentary, *Salad Days* goes a step further and uses motion graphics in combination with the old photographs in order to create maps and as a tools to better tell the story

Fig. 2. Screenshot of the documentary Salad Days. Pictures have been modified in order to create movement and make them part of the video.

Salad Days also describes the community that created around the local punk scene, and it shows and describes how conflicts arose with that community. It also explains how the term "Straight Edge" was created. While on tour in San Francisco, a member of a local Washington, D.C., punk band saw how underage kids were allowed to enter to see music shows by having "x" drawn in the top of their hands. When the band member returned to D.C. he asked the owners of music venues to implement the same policy in order to have all ages shows. At the time, in D.C., underage kids were not allowed on punk shows since they generally performed at venues where alcohol was being served. In 1981 the band Minor Threat, comprised of locals from D.C., wrote the song Straight Edge, which soon became an anthem for the movement with the same name.

Salad Days addresses how the music was related to the social issues of the time and how local punk bands differentiate themselves from English punk bands. The main idea is that the messages of the song are more relatable and more personal which helps the local audience have a stronger connection to that genre of music. One of the bands in the documentary also is featured

in interviews for United By Music; yet, while this project looks at a music community, it does not focus on the past D.C. punk music culture. It is notable that *Salad Days* fails to mention the participation of any Latino bands in the punk scene during that decade. *United By Music* uses different interviews to shine light onto this matter since during this period of time, a couple of Latino punk bands had already developed and a local community of Latino musicians was starting to grow.

There also are television shows that are visual sources for *United By Music* . The first TV show *Sonic Highways* talks about the music scene in Washington, D.C., especially the second episode. *Sonic Highways* is a series developed by HBO and created by Dave Grohl, a local D.C. musician who is one of the most famous and loved music personalities. He is the lead singer of the band Foo Fighters, and prior to that, he was the drummer of Nirvana. This show is strongly related to the previous documentary *Salad Days*. The relation is as follows: The characters in the previous documentary were the idols and music heroes of Dave Grohl, and he grew up in Virginia looking up to those musicians. Now a grown man, we see how these musicians all were part of a local community.

Both *Sonic Highways* and *Salad Days* interview most of the same musicians and talk about the same issues. It was hard to believe that there was a punk scene in Washington ,D.C., since the city has always been seen both nationally and internationally as a city related to politics. *United By Music* also brings attention to a local music scene that is not usually recognized. Some might think that Chicago, Los Angeles or New York have a much better Latino music scene than D.C. but the reality is something else, which *United By Music* attempts to show.

United By Music uses the same personal and less formal interviewing style as *Sonic Highways*. The artists who are being interviewed see it more as a conversation than as an interview. Some of the interviews take place inside moving cars, or rehearsal studios as the musicians play instruments and share anecdotes, which usually include mutual friends. In *United*

By Music, interviews take place at performances, while people are dancing, or while they are gathering for food or at community events, so it will also have a less formal feel to it.

Sonic Highways has a good use of motion graphics, especially at the introduction of the show where there are many symbols and signifiers of Washington. (fig. 3)

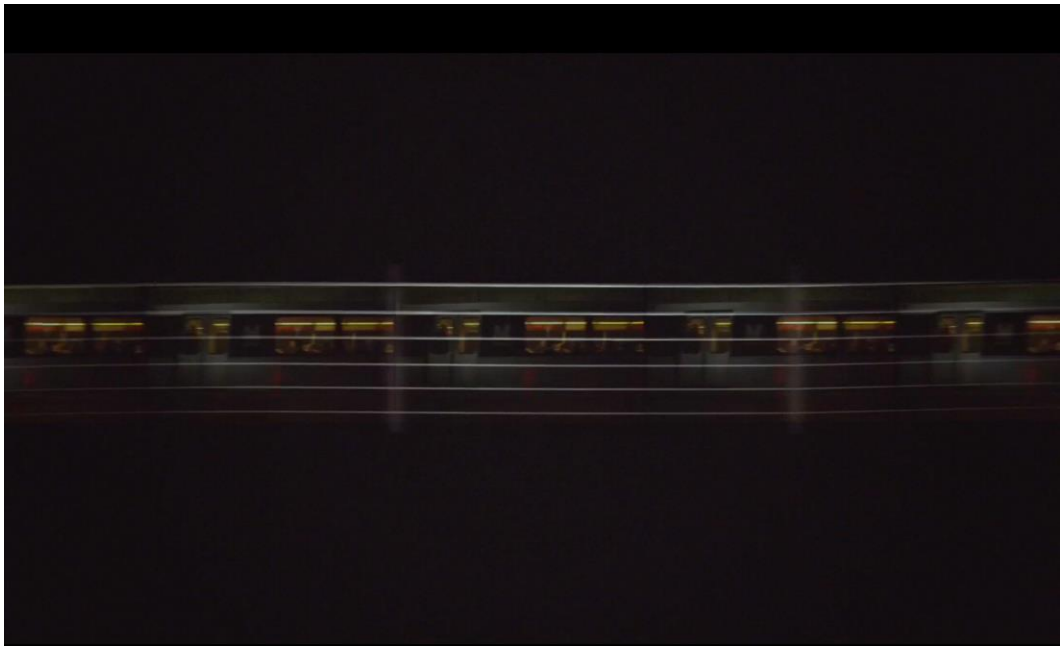


Fig. 3. Screenshot of the introduction of the TV show Sonic Highways. In this shot, a video of the Washington DC Metro is isolated and becomes guitar chords.

United By Music also will utilize graphics, but will highlight a specific neighborhood, such as Mt. Pleasant. The facades and street life reflect the neighborhood's Latino heritage. Just like previous documentary *Salad Days*, *Sonic Highways* does not mention any participation of the Latino community in the development of the early Punk scene in Washington, D.C.

Another television and visual influence is *Encuentro en El Estudio* which was produced by an Argentinean TV channel. This show usually starts with members of an Argentinean music band entering a recording studio that is located in Buenos Aires (fig 4). They greet the sound engineers (fig.5), who are pretty well known in the Argentinean rock community, and they exchange some hugs and then the interview starts.

Fig. 4. Screenshot of the TV show *Encuentro En El Estudio*. Musicians from an Argentinean band enter the studio where the show is recorded. This is how the show starts.

Fig. 5. Screenshot of the TV show *Encuentro En El Estudio*. After entering the studio, the band members cordially greet with hugs the sound engineers who are the show anchors.

The whole show takes place inside a recording studio

In this show only Argentinean bands are interviewed. This is understandable since this is a TV show from Argentina. Historically rock music from Argentina has a very special presence and meaning in the rock en Español genre. The bands that usually appear in this show are the

music heroes of the musicians who live in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. *United By Music* also will feature and talk about these musicians - there is a lot of nostalgia in the D.C. music community for these bands. The subjects of *Encuentro en el Estudio* have deeply influenced the D.C. music community, and this project will explain that.

United By Music will be a documentary that uses several technical aspects from the movies and television shows mentioned above, it will have a contemporary feel where music is one of the main characters of the story.

Annotated Bibliography

Los Punks: We Are All We Have. Directed By Angela Boatwright, Agi Orsi Productions, Fusion, Univision Documentary Unit, and Vans Off The Wall, 2016.

This documentary is about the punk scene in Los Angeles. It shows how a community was created around this music genre. Even though this documentary takes place in Los Angeles, Calif., it is very related to the subject of my thesis since it's about music and how a community is created around it. This documentary focuses on punk music; in the case of my thesis I'm focusing on alternative music, which also includes punk. One of the things I'm including or I'm using from this documentary is the use music to help edit my piece. What I mean by this is that in different parts of my documentary I will use the rhythm of music in order to edit the video. One of the things I'm doing differently is having a broader set of music genres. I'm not focusing only in punk bands.

Salad Days. Directed by Scott Crawford, New Rose Films, 2014

This is a documentary that talks about the decade from 1980 to 1990, specifically about the punk scene in Washington, D.C. It uses a lot of footage from the past as well as many old photos and new title sequences that are animated in order to make the piece more attractive and fluid. Many musicians who were part of those music bands are interviewed and they give their perspective of what it meant to be punk in the nation's capital. They use a lot of anecdotes in order to help the audience understand what that was like. This documentary was released only a couple of years ago. A special point they make in this documentary is how the music was related to the social issues of the time, and the differences that social classes made within the same music genre. Something important

about this documentary is that it is specific to Washington, D.C. and its suburbs, which is the same geographical location that I'm basing my thesis in. Another difference is that I'm focusing on the Latino bands. This documentary doesn't mention any.

Dave Grohl, Creator. *Sonic Highways*. HBO, 2014.

This eight-episode series shows the history of American music. Each episode is based in a different city, including Chicago, Washington D.C., Nashville, Austin, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Seattle and New York. In each city, the band Foo Fighters writes a song using the cultural and historic characteristics from each city and incorporates them into a song. The obvious reason for using this series as a source is because this is a series about music. The show is relevant because the band interviews members of the local music scene from each city and this way it finds out what is relevant from each city and music community. From this source I'm using how I approach my subjects similar to how the different subjects from the series were approached. Also, watching this series has showed me how to approach the subject of music. This series talked about the history of music but my paper talks a lot more of the people that make the musical community in the local Latin music scene.

Hassan, Ariel and Woody Gonzalez, creators. *Encuentro en el Estudio*, 2009-2014.

This is an Argentine television series that has been on the air for seven seasons and has thirty-seven episodes. Lalo Mir interviews bands from Argentina and talks about their history, their issues and their music. This source is relevant because it is about interviewing musicians talking about not only about their music but also about the history of the different bands. I will use the style that this show was shot, and it has also taught me how to talk to musicians about their music and their lives. This show is based on

Argentinean bands only. I will talk about local bands in Washington D.C. whose members are from Central and, or, South America.

Chapter 3: Methods

For the documentary project *United By Music* a website and a documentary film were created. For the development of the documentary film, in order to do the interviews around Washington D.C., a mini van was set up as a recording studio: Two microphones were set up, and two LED lights installed. Interviews were done driving around the city. When the mobile interviews were not possible, the musicians were interviewed in their homes. In order to gather footage for B-roll, Several hours of local Latino nightlife were recorded. Marx Cafe, and Haydee's Restaurant were frequented since many local Latino bands perform there every weekend.

For the development of the website, Portraits were taken of the local Latino musicians. Some portraits were shot at their homes, and some at different places around the Washington D.C., Metropolitan area.

Appendix A: *United By Music* Photographs and Film Stills

El Chato Lopez, from Guatemala, poses for a portrait before a show in the restaurant Mi Mariachi in Wheaton, Maryland.

Cindy Zavala, known as La Salvadoreina poses for a portrait inside the restaurant Haydee's in Mt. Pleasant in Washington D.C.

Elvis Rivas, from El Salvador, poses for a portrait inside this apartment in Silver Spring, Maryland.

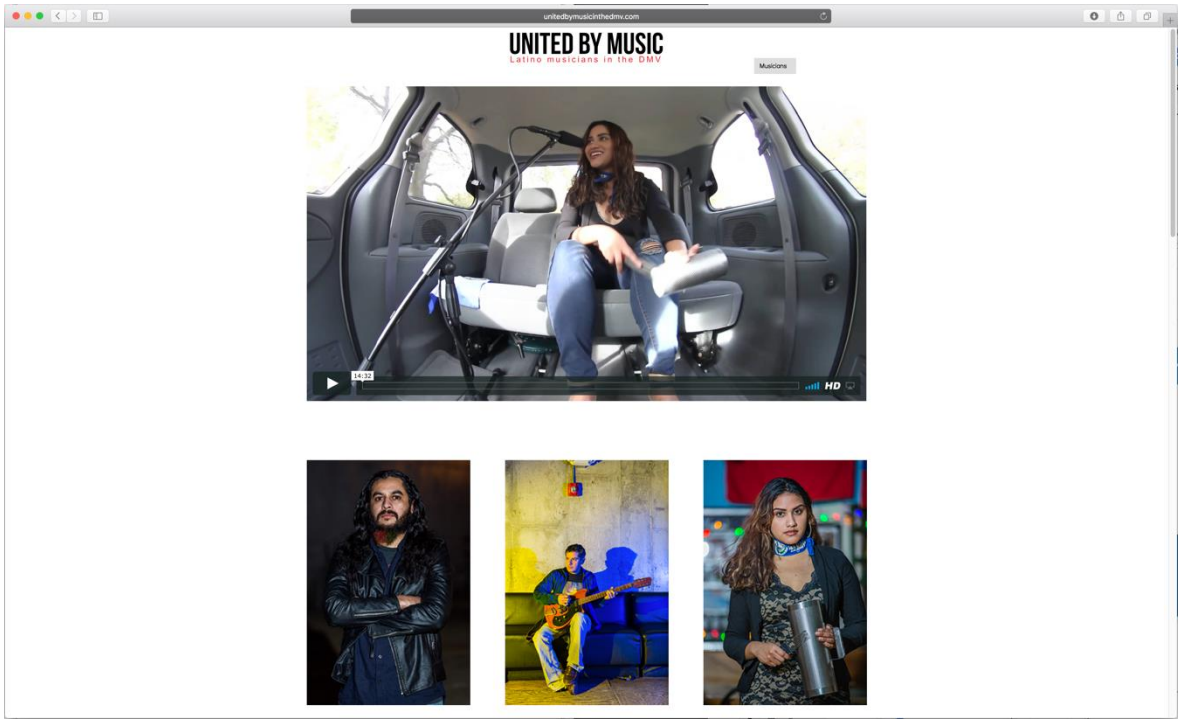
Carlos Romero, from Peru, poses for a portrait inside his recording studio that is in the basement of his house in Alexandria, Virginia.

Apendix B: *United By Music* in NEXT 2017, CSAD

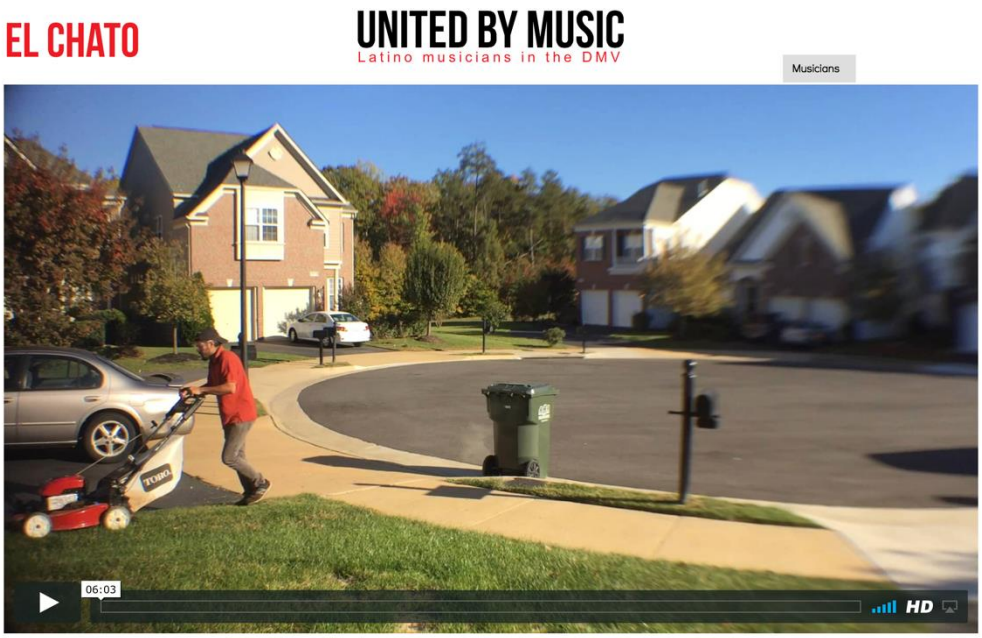
Picture of the installation

Appendix C: *United By Music* website

United By Music's website is designed to be very user friendly and nice to look at. At the top of the homepage, the documentary film is located. The rest of the page is a grid of the portraits of the local Latino musicians from the Washington D.C., metropolitan area. Once the user clicks on the portrait of any musician, a profile page for each musician will open, there the user will find videos and images of the musician



Website home page



El Chato profile page

Appendix D: *United By Music* Community Engagement

For the community engagement project an acoustic music show war organized at the Hammer Auditorium on May 6 from 6pm to 8pm. Rock de Madera, Ron Recinos, Daniel Gomez and Elena Lacayo each perform a 3o minutes set

Rock de Madera performs at the Hammer auditorium on May 6, 2017

Ron Recinos performs at the Hammer auditorium on May 6, 2017.

Daniel Gomez and Seth Elias perform at the Hammer auditorium on May 6, 2017.