

Handout 4 - “La Bamba”

“La Bamba’ is one of the few songs at the fiber of Mexican folklore. Traditionally a wedding dance from the region of Veracruz, it is often performed to this day even at weddings north of the border. The origin of the word ‘bamba’ is African, meaning ‘wood’ ... it referred to what the dancers originally performed upon, emphasizing footwork that showed a heavy Spanish influence. The highlight of the dance would be one solo couple tying a ribbon, using just their feet, to symbolize unity. The song itself is an old huapango, a Mexican song consisting of nonsense verses, which usually have undertoned meanings, often private in context.

“When the traditional dance is not performed at a wedding, often the band will play ‘La Bamba’ in a more popular vein, changing the original 6/8 tempo to 4/4 time. The popular rendition has been performed in America since World War II, yet in spite of all the popular Latin songs that became renowned in the 30’s and 40’s, ‘La Bamba’ was apparently not successfully recorded until 1958, with Ritchie Valens’ version.

“Ritchie’s relationship to ‘La Bamba’ goes back to at least Pacoima Junior High, where both students and teachers remembered his playing it. Ritchie in return learned it from Richard ‘Dickie’ Cota, his cousin, who supposedly played many of the familiar riffs and chords in similar fashion.

“[Record producer Bob] Keane maintained that Ritchie did not initially want to record ‘La Bamba’ because, as Keane said, ‘Ritchie felt it would demean his culture. It was a national folk song and he was afraid it would be exploiting his ethnic music. He was funny that way.’ But Keane also mentioned that Ritchie may have been following the feelings of his mother about commercially recording ‘La Bamba.’

Another problem was Ritchie’s Spanish. He may have been reluctant to record the song because of his Spanish. ‘Ritchie had an accent when he sang “La Bamba,”’ said [his half brother Robert] Morales. ‘The words were mispronounced. Keane was behind him whispering the words to him! But I liked the way Ritchie played it.’”

—adapted from *Ritchie Valens: The First Latino Rocker*, by Beverly Mendheim

Lyrics (in Spanish)	Lyrics (in English)
Para bailar La Bamba	To dance La Bamba
Para bailar La Bamba	To dance La Bamba
Se necessita una poca de gracia	You need a little grace
Una poca de gracia	A little bit of grace
Para mi, para ti, ay arriba, ay arriba	For me, for you, ah up, ah up
Ay, arriba arriba	Ah, faster, faster
Por ti sere, por ti sere, por ti sere	For you I will be, for you I will be, for you I will be
Yo no soy marinero	I am not a sailor
Yo no soy marinero, soy capitan	I am not a sailor, I am a captain
Soy capitan, soy capitan	I am a captain, I am a captain
Bamba, bamba	Bamba, bamba
Bamba, bamba	Bamba, bamba
Bamba, bamba, bam	Bamba, bamba, bam