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January 2011. Vol. 15, No. 1. – Instances of Cultural Entrepreneurship: Arturo Zavala

BY CULTUREWORK, ON JANUARY 18TH, 2011

In the latest issue of *CultureWork*, Arturo Zavala explores ways in which broadly dispersed individuals holding interest in mariachi stay connected to mariachi music and culture through technology, social media, and informal community arts networks. Complex networks have been developed in previously niche worlds and challenge notions of who is an expert as well as the means of collection, exhibition, and support for such efforts.

Regards,

Julie Voelker-Morris
Robert Voelker-Morris
Editors

Instances of Cultural Entrepreneurship (1)

Arturo Zavala

(Note: Below article links open in a separate browser window or tab)

The purpose of this article is to explore how mariachi leaders function as cultural entrepreneurs within local, regional, national and international mariachi communities. By understanding the "problem solving processes and approaches" of the cultural entrepreneur, we may be able to better understand the needs of marginalized and underrepresented communities

and develop solutions that will serve the needs of these communities.

In the communities I observed and interacted with in Portland, Oregon and Los Angeles, California mariachi group leaders did more than just book gigs and perform. Many of them are passionate artists, creative business people, community activists, social workers, and educators. They function as creators, producers, and distributors of cultural goods and services. They play an important role in developing and sustaining informal cultural infrastructures within their communities.

In Portland, Humberto "Beto" Guillén and his father, Apolinar Guillén, established the first planta restaurant gig, making El Puerto Marquez Mexican Seafood Restaurant the center of mariachi activity in Oregon. Clients show up at random to book events or to pay for a few songs while they eat. Mariachi musicians from all over the United States and Mexico also come around hoping to find work with Beto's group. In the last few months, Beto has opened his own restaurant in Beaverton, Oregon, in an attempt to create a more formal cultural hub, similar to La Fonda and Cielito Lindo Restaurants in Los Angeles (owned and operated by prominent mariachi leaders).

The cultural entrepreneur has the skills and resources to develop environments of cultural interaction and enterprise. Furthermore, the cultural entrepreneur understands the inner workings of the community and confidently navigates and interprets cultural values held by community members. El Puerto Marquez is then an important cultural resource that cannot be dismissed as "just another restaurant" because it plays a key role in mariachi culture infrastructure in these communities. Why is the center of mariachi activity in a restaurant and not at a conventional cultural institution?

Let's look at the question from a different perspective, one that accounts for social and virtual networks. From his home in Southern California, Alex Gonzáles, also known as El Mantecas, started posting independent, as well as rare and vintage, mariachi albums on his YouTube site, Mantecas1972. Within a year, Mantecas had over 8,000 songs posted with over 6 million views; his channel is often ranked in the top 50 most viewed channels in the Musicians Mexico category. The Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, also posts mariachi resources such as music and education materials, however, they have significantly fewer views on their Youtube channels (434,236 views compared to 6,000,000 views). These are two separate entities with perhaps similar missions and goals (documentation, preservation, and dissemination of audio recordings and educational materials to strengthen people's engagement with their own cultural heritage), yet every different resources and results.

Though it is difficult to compare a national institution with an individual cultural entrepreneur due to the differential scale of factors, resources, and considerations, I propose that juxtaposing these two examples allows us to see who has access to which communities (rather than who is 'right' or 'wrong', more efficient or less efficient, etc.). This is why it would be hard to dismiss Mantecas's work as irrelevant, not only because of the quantity of people watching, but also the specific demographic the Mantecas channel caters to: primarily mariachis and aficionados. Humberto "Beto"

Guillén and El Mantecas have combined their individual entrepreneurial skills, varying resources, and insider knowledge of the mariachi community to develop informal cultural resources and environments.

On the surface, it appears that mariachi cultural entrepreneurs are independent actors, but they are actually working within an established system, a transnational network of mariachi musicians. In Portland, Beto confidently overbooks his summer calendar, knowing that the first wave of mariachi musicians will arrive just before cinco de mayo. He takes considerable legal risk based on his intimate knowledge of community migration patterns. His relationship with the mariachi community at large not only gives him access to personnel, but also access to cultural goods and services on an international level. Beto's home becomes the community's music store/pawnshop where cultural goods are bought, sold, and traded. Because these transactions occur below the radar, assessing community need is difficult without access. Perhaps, the cultural entrepreneur can be that access.

The wave of musicians that provides Beto with personnel and cultural goods is perhaps the same wave that spreads Mantecas's work throughout the United States and Mexico. Though Mantecas only makes 1,000 copies of any of his many albums, his work spreads virally through the hands of community members. The same people who purchase his CDs will make copies for their friends and colleagues. I can't help but to think of my first introduction to Mantecas's music. A fellow mariachi was playing a burned copy of Mantecas's CD in his car stereo. "Where can I get a copy of this?" I asked. My colleague shrugged, "Take this one, I'll copy another one later." He ejected the burned CD and handed it to me. Across the disc, hand-written in permanent marker were the cryptic words, "El Mantecas." Though I did not know it at the time, the audio files on the burned CD had traveled nearly 1,000 miles through the hands of mariachi musicians.

This unorthodox method in which Mantecas's work is distributed is difficult to track and monitor. It's hard to say how many copies are available beyond the thousand copies Mantecas sold, the bootleg copy I randomly received, and the five copies I made for my family and friends. Yet Mantecas's work is widely known throughout the community. Pirating music can mean several things. Perhaps it reflects a value system that this music is important enough to share and to listen to, but not important enough to pay for, at least more than once. Or perhaps it highlights a need for more independent media outlets; bootleg copies are made because it is the only way to have access to the information. Regardless, we begin to ask the right questions, and again, the cultural entrepreneur is a key player.

In recent weblogs (e.g., **ArtsJournal.com**) the discussions suggest that this gap between cultural entrepreneurs and mainstream artist and culture institutions will have to be addressed by art and culture sector leaders, perhaps functioning as cultural entrepreneurs themselves by doing away with or modifying traditional models (i.e., non-profit, public). Doing so may help art and culture leaders interface with cultural entrepreneurs which are open to a full range of other business options, meaning they will follow the path of least resistance (economically, physically, socially, politically, etc.) and may have the skills and flexibility to address the needs of a dynamic community.

Still, the professional nonprofit will continue to be an essential part of the arts and culture system. However, those structures are not appropriate to every artistic or creative endeavor. Both cultural entrepreneurs and art and culture sector leaders have many cultural resources that would benefit the other.

Cultural Entrepreneurs and the Mainstream Arts and Culture Sector Recommendations

Cultural entrepreneurs in this study have challenged art and culture sector leaders to revaluate the cultural environment. Where does art happen? How do people interpret and value art in their communities? By interfacing with the cultural entrepreneur, we can better answer these questions and develop culturally relevant and sustainable programs and resources for marginalized communities.

The following list of recommendations provides insight on how to better interface with the cultural entrepreneur.

1. **Money**: Cultural entrepreneurs need access to seed capital. Though funding individuals through grants can be controversial (as seen at the national level with the National Endowment for the Arts funding controversial artists), but cultural entrepreneurs have little resources available to them aside from credit cards. I suggest providing low or no interest cultural loans.

2. **Professional Development and Hands-on support**: Along with funding, organizations should provide resources to help cultural entrepreneurs develop realistic and sustainable business plans. Though the cultural entrepreneur may have great ideas, they may not always understand the large-scale political, social, and economic landscape, which could have a profound impact on their endeavors. Most importantly, organizations must teach cultural entrepreneurs how to interface with their organizations. For example, many cultural entrepreneurs have "community access," yet, that access is organized in very different ways than formal organizations. For example, most cultural entrepreneurs such as Beto do not have a formal database of past clients or community members, a skill that if developed can be very valuable for both the cultural entrepreneur and the organization. As leaders, we cannot assume or expect that all stakeholders share our organizational culture.

3. **Space**: Not all support needs to be financial. Many organizations do not utilize space to its full capacity (particularly studio space). Allowing cultural entrepreneurs access to this resource could possibly bring new audiences and communities to these organizations, perhaps transforming these organizations into cultural hubs for these communities.

4. **Promote and support the value of art in our communities**: Non-profit art and culture organizations are always expressing the value of art and culture, yet, many times they are the first to ask for "free performances" or discounts. If we truly believe in the value of "arts and culture" then we must be wiling to pay the market value.

These recommendations come from my own formalized research and informal personal experience as a cultural entrepreneur. Though there was an attempt to generalize my recommendations, I am aware that there are

specific factors in the communities I researched which may not be present in others. Further research must be done to identify the function of cultural entrepreneurs in other communities and how they interact and interface with each other.

In conclusion, I do not believe that all cultural enterprise needs to fit in a neat box that is the formal cultural infrastructure. There are many times where organizational resources may not be compatible with the specific needs of the cultural entrepreneur, and vice versa. The real purpose of this article was to illustrate that there is a system already in place, even if we as art and culture leaders do not see or understand it. As long as we keep applying the same format, we will only attract those compatible to that format.

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1. This article is a shorter version of *Instances of Cultural Entrepreneurship*, a Master's Project presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Master's Degree in Arts Management at the University of Oregon. The full version is available here: https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/10432. [back to text]

Born in Santa Ana, California to immigrant parents from Mexico, **Arturo Zavala** comes from a long line of mariachi musicians. He has been performing professionally since the age of fourteen and has been involved in the mariachi education movement for over a decade. He earned his master's degree in Arts Administration from the University of Oregon in 2010, and currently volunteers his time working with community mariachi programs at the Shedd Institute for the Arts in Eugene, OR, and Springfield High School in Springfield, OR. For more information on Arturo's work, visit his website at **www.mariachicalavera.com**

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