

BOOK REVIEWS

Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City. By Mike Davis. London and New York: Verso, 2000. ISBN 1859847714. Pp. 172. \$19.00 (cloth).

1. When *ECHO* asked me to review the new Mike Davis book, I thought that this flashy, but solidly grounded author would have something neat to say. I was wrong. The book is a quickly-written small-format manual on the demographics, low standing, and bad treatment of America's largest minority group. Primarily portrayed as victims, Latinos seem not to possess the dynamism that is so much a part of their communities. Davis's chapter titles are depressing enough: "Falling Down," "The Puerto Rican Tragedy," "Broken Rainbows"—not much "magic" here.
2. So there is little to review, especially since Davis completely overlooks music as a key component of local identity and transnational bonding in cities nationwide. The sparse references occur out of any cultural context: we hear a complaint that the LAPD busts *banda*, not heavy metal, for noise, but since most readers will not know what *banda* is, the reference is meaningless. Another throwaway citation comes in a description of the "notorious drug barons who...brazenly lounge at Caliente racetrack or boogie the night away in trendy discos" (37). A chapter title like "Buscando America" shows just how flip this enterprise is, especially since there's no more reference to Spanish than there is to music. This neglect is striking, considering that we have just seen the first multilingual broadcast on a major network—Latin Grammys. It's shocking to find an appreciation for the way Latinos "have a genius for transforming dead urban spaces into convivial social places" (55) that lists shopping possibilities and artsy bohemia as the main triumphs of local spirit, skipping dance and music.
3. This kind of supposedly sympathetic writing by a "progressive" media star like Davis represents yet another disappointment along the path to full recognition of expressive culture as a shaper and mover of ethnic consciousness. Davis also sidesteps one of the main ways the US has discovered Latinos: to serve as what one article calls "low-hanging fruit" for marketers. Here music stands out prominently. Some dialectic between marketing and an internal esthetic might have been in place, but then Davis would have been an ethnomusicologist. As it is, he can't even be bothered to cite the important work that people like Steven Loza have done. The most curious fact about *Magical Urbanism* is not its completely unsupported title, but the "Foreword" by Roman de la Campa, a Latino apparently brought in to validate the book, who closes,

quite accurately, by telling us that "the study of Latinos can only begin by charting unsuspected encounters," and that these "demand an ear for artistic flows." Too bad Mike Davis is tone deaf.

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