SONtrack Original De La Película "Al Son De Beno"

Album Notes by Josh Kun

To renew the old world- that is the collector's deepest desire
Walter Benjamin

This is a father and son story. The son protects the father by smuggling the father's gun in his suitcase to hide it from customs agents. Later the father uses the gun to shoot himself in the head. Now that he is older, the son wants to know who his father was and since the father spent so much of his life recording other people making music, the son has only one true recourse. The son must listen to what his father recorded. He must listen to *everything* his father recorded. Because when he listens to everything his father recorded, all the music made by other people, he is listening to his father listening. The way we listen can give us away. It can unlock a door. The son, now the same age his father was when the father took his own life, makes a film about his father listening, re-traces his father's travels to all the places his father went to listen. He listens where his father listened. He meets the musicians his father listened to. He chooses songs that his father recorded for the soundtrack of the son's film. Now his father listening is the score of him listening for his father. Now the *son*—the Spanish word for a type of song that his father loved above all other songs—has become the score of the son finding his father and finding himself, the score of this father and son story.

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Baruj 'Beno' Lieberman was born in 1932, in Aguascalientes, and raised in Mexico City. His parents, Polish Jews, had immigrated to Mexico a decade earlier, leaving behind a darkening Europe that was about to get darker. During WWII, much of their extended family perished in that darkness, and in 1949 Beno was sent to Israel to live on a kibbutz with his sister and cousin. He completed his required military service as a topographer—spending his days thinking about land and territory and how we come to know who we are through our relationships to valleys and regions and turns in the road—and started writing and collecting songs. Maybe he thought about how hard it was to describe land just by looking at it. Maybe to describe land, to understand land, to go beneath the surface of a territory, he would one day need to listen to it.

He returned to Mexico in 1959 and enrolled at the National Autonomous University of Mexico where he studied physics and formed his first musical group, The Choir of the Faculty of Sciences. In the 1960s, he founded the Asociación Mexicana de Folklore AC known as *El Pesebre*, an influential hub for traditional Mexican music that quickly became a key node in an international folk network. He started to make recordings here and there

but then in 1971 it began in earnest: Beno's obsessive, maniacal ten-year quest to record the folkloric music of Mexico, this country that was his and not his, to be its sonic topographer and know the land through the songs its people sing. He started in Ciudad Valles in San Luis Potosi, recording a series of *trios huastecos*, and then the map unfolded quickly: Queretaro, Veracruz, Hidalgo, Guerrero, Tixtla, Costa Chica, Oaxaca, and the boiling, state-crossing lowlands of the Tierra Caliente. In each region, he went off-roading. He went backcountry. On foot and by horse-back. Pueblito by *pueblito*. Beyond the shadows of cities. He sprayed insecticide on the condenser microphones to keep the bugs from buzzing on his recordings. Beno paid for it all himself (no university grants, no NGO support, no museum funds) and made the trips on weekends and during vacations when he wasn't working at the plastics factory he owned back in the capital. He had plenty of fellow travelers over the years, including his most loyal partners Enrique Ramirez de Arellano and Eduardo Llerenas, whose work as sound engineers, recordists, and producers shape most of the music you hear on this album. But the fever dream of capturing the musical heart of Mexico belonged, uniquely, to Beno.

What was he after? What does the folklorist want from the folklore? There was of course the cultural mission: to document, preserve, and celebrate the traditional music of Mexico. The recordings have been recognized by UNESCO for their cultural value as heritage, and all of Beno's tapes now reside in the Fonoteca Nacional, a storehouse of Mexico's sonic patrimony. That mission, accomplished. But what did the recordings do for Beno himself? The musicologist Dylan Robinson has described the listening of folklorists and ethnologists gathering field recordings as "hungry listening." What was Beno hungry for? Where is he in all this music made by others? When we listen to the recordings gathered here, we are hearing Trio los Rancheros del Panuco, we are hearing Los Marineros de Apatzingán, but we are also hearing Beno. The way he stood, the way he wore his headphones, the musicians he chose. He was listening for something that led him back to himself.

"There is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order," Walter Benjamin wrote the year before Beno was born. Did Beno make and collect these recordings to create an order for them, or an order for himself? Was it an internal disorder that drove him to record over one thousand tapes? Benjamin argued that in any collection what we really see are not the things themselves, but the biography of the collector— "it is he who lives in them." Nine years after writing his essay, on the run from the darkness that erased so many in Beno's family, Benjamin committed suicide at the border between France and Spain. Two years after Beno completed the bulk of his Mexican recordings, just days after the Mexico City earthquake, he too committed suicide. Maybe the recordings were not enough. Maybe the disorder was too much. This too is part of the collector's fever, that when one is collecting to collect oneself into a fantasy of order, when one listens to fight off disorder, when the music made by others is your only medicine, sometimes no amount of accumulation will ever be enough.

The most famous result of Beno's collecting is the monumental *Antología del Son de Mexico*, six albums featuring eight variations of Mexican *son* across nine different Mexican

states. There are over three hours of *sones* on the anthology, over three hours of violins and harps and strings galore (*huapangueras, jaranas, requintos, bajo quintos, guitarras*), over three hours of rhymed *coplas* and *decimas*, over three hours of voices that crack into otherworldly falsettos, voices that harmonize and call and respond, voices that sound like the earth and the dirt and the dust. The son is revealed to be less of a fixed genre or invariable musical form and more like a climate with fluid weather systems; there is *son*, but there is never just one *son*. The liner notes to the 1985 re-issue of the *Antología*– which insisted that rural campesinos need to be understood as the center of Mexican music, not its marginal co-stars—argued that there are five features common to all *sones*: they are generally anonymous (songs have no clear authorship); they are oral and not written down; they exist in multiple interpretations and versions; they represent tradition; and they are still alive and in use, circulating within contemporary communities.

If the *son* was originally a 16th century Spanish serve, the *Antología* is an anthology of its many powerful Mexican returns across the net of conquest—Andalusia and Extremadura in a rally with the Zapotec isthmus and the Río Balsas. First released in 1981, the project was the first of its kind. Comprehensive, genre-focused, and longitudinally assembled like no other Mexican musical compilation was before it, *Antología* now has cult status in Mexico. It remains something of a sacred text, a sourcebook of *son* that has been handed down and revived across generations (is it too much, Baruj, to call it a musical Torah that has inspired more than one Talmud?). Any serious aficionado of Mexican music has at least one copy of the *Antología*, and the real ones have it on vinyl, cassette, and CD, and then when they're on the move and want it to be everywhere, they stream it too.

After the *Antología* was first released with liner notes by his old UNAM friend and famed music scribe Federico Arana, Beno decided to issue a self-made version of it that included his own liner notes. In a florid type-written essay he explained his view of the anthology's value both as a vessel of cultural tradition ("Like the huicholes say: the day that they forget the customs of their parents, when they leave behind the white dress and the cardinal crosses, the sun will no longer shine") and as a project dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of beauty. "We looked for beauty and we found it," Beno wrote, "We captured it and have re-animated it on multiple occasions, enjoying that hard and sober, proud, and tenuous 'taste of old' that tells us about fundamental values." In a way, Beno's *Antología* is reminiscent of another antología, one released three decades earlier up north across the border, *Anthology of American Folk Music*, and helmed by Harry Smith, an eccentric collector with a fever like Beno's. The writer Greil Marcus has suggested that by assembling the three volumes and eighty-six songs of his anthology, Smith not only created an album, he created his own country, an "old, weird America" that he advocated for and wanted his listeners to learn about. The *Antología* had a similar effect. Beno and his fellow recordists created a sonic republic of their own: an old, weird Mexico that they wanted to ensure would never be forgotten.

The scholar Raúl Fernández, in an essay on the Cuban son (a cousin of Mexican son), suggests that son has an ontología, an ontology all its own. Similarly, Beno's *Antología del*

Son was also an *ontología del son*, a case study of the Mexican son as a philosophy of existence and being. What is existence according to the Mexican son? Love, lots of love--unrequited love, lost love, consuming love—and its accompanying states of being, el triste (sadness), el llorar (crying), la pasión (passion). The *son* presents these not as quick bursts of affect, but as extended ways of life, as psychological fields that envelop us and define our sense of self. For the *son*, existence is also about deep connections to the environment, to the natural world, to the land. The *Antología* can sound like a Mexican bestiary, with its little calves, little does, little goldfinches, little goats, alligators, ladybugs, herons, roosters, and turkeys. It can also sound—yes, Beno—like a topo map, with all its hills, rivers, banks, flowers, and hollows, a landscape alive in sound.

There are two versions of "La Mariquita" on *Antología*, one of which is on this soundtrack, by Conjunto de Bardomiano Flores. Featuring an ensemble of three guitarras, violin, and tamborita (recorded by Beno in Tlapehuala, Guerrero), Flores' version captures the ontology of son well; it is bestiary, topo map, and philosophy of love, all in one. The song unfolds through the eyes of a brown heron who cries out in pain. He begs the titular ladybug to take away—*quita, quita, quita*-- his suffering. If she only knew how much he loved her. The talk of love and melancholy is set against the natural landscape. The heron speaks of the morning star, and of water. The water runs and it spills and is never collected back up again. And as a song of ontology, it also ponders the finitude of existence. "There are dead people that don't make noise," the heron says, "and their sorrows are greater."

The line made me think of Beno. He has been dead for nearly forty years and he is making plenty of noise. The *Antología* keeps finding new sets of ears. This soundtrack and its film could create a new era of Benophiles as well. Perhaps, like the heron said, his sorrows are now fewer.

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The soundtrack to the son's film about his father begins with a one-two punch. First, an opening salvo by the actor Sergio Guzik, reading a verse from "La Josefinita" that hearkens back to Calderon de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* from the 17th century: "Qué mundo tan engañoso / Todo es un sueño / Todo es una ilusion." He delivers it with theatrical precision, like it's the highlight of a soliloquy, but when Beno records Antonio de la Cruz and Tomás de Jesus singing it in Jaracuaro, Michoacan in (circa) 1963, the verse is casually folded into the high-pitch quiver of their tangled voices. The poetry is incidental, the philosophical inquiry informal. In this simple, humble song—just singers and strings—the ideas are big: the deceptiveness of life, the illusion of it as something real.

Beno recorded it eight years before the earliest of his *Antología* recordings. It's just one example of how different this soundtrack's song choices are from the *Antología*. Here the goal is not to document a tradition or its values. Here the goal is to piece together a puzzle of the collector himself. This is the son's album, not the father's. This is the son listening to his father listening, this is the son listening for his father. The son chooses songs from the

father's many tapes in an attempt to figure him out. There are plenty of field recordings from the world of *música huasteca*, Beno's favorite style, and historic, final recordings— the son calls them "milagros," or miracles"— of legendary musical elders who meant a lot to the father, and who the son was determined to include here. Bardomiano Flores passed away not long after Beno recorded him in 1978. Beno recorded the esteemed violinist Carlos Castillo Villeda (El Zurdo) of Trío Tamazunchale that same year, and soon after, Castillo vanished and never made music like that again. The son also includes a version of "La Malagueña" by Los Marineros de Apatzingán, which features violinist Jesús Espinoza Mendoza (El Jazmiche) right before he too passed away. Recorded in 1977 in Apatzingán, Michoacán, the performance has an additional value: it was the only one that the son was there to witness first-hand. Listen to Los Marineros' "La Malagueña" and you can hear the father and son listening— you can hear the son listening with the father.

This soundtrack also includes four 1960s live takes from *El Pesebre* in Mexico City, complete with audience coughs, foot-stomps, and applause, that offer us a rare window into the urban space that Beno made for the rural music that he loved. We hear the stark, waltzing Oaxacan lament of "La Sandunga" in the moment it is shared with the capital crowd, the jerky accordion whirl of "Sube y Baja," a reminder that Beno liked *música norteña* too. *El Pesebre* was a link between Mexican folk music and the folk music of the world, attracting occasional guest visits by international folksingers like Pete Seeger and John Joast. So it's important that the son includes the latter performing "Hangsman," a haunting gallows tree folk-blues. Beno understood that Mexican traditional music wasn't happening in some nationally sealed vacuum. Whether during the international folk revival of the 60s, the "world music" days of the 80s and 90s, or right now throughout the United States where Mexican immigrants and their children treat *son*—from *huasteco* to *jarocho* to *jaliscience*—as a living resource for a contemporary bi-cultural and bi-lingual life, the regional music of Mexico has always had many lives.

Maybe Beno anticipated that too, that his recordings of *son* would soon be as much about their roots in Mexico as their migrations north across the border. He was, after all, a Jewish Mexican and a Mexican Israeli, a native and an immigrant, sharply attuned to the double life of diaspora. The son's soundtrack ends in this doubleness, re-asserting Beno's Jewishness. For the first time we hear a recording not of others making music, but of the father himself. Accompanied by guitar and violin, Beno sings "Shma Bni" in Hebrew. "Listen my child to your father's lessons," he sings. "Take these wings to fly with, with these roots you will grow." The son obeys. He has listened to his father's lessons. The roots have been passed down, and with this collection, we hear them grow. They are wings.