Son Jarocho is a musical structure and lyrical expressivity native to the eastern Gulf of Mexico coastal area known as Sotavento (“leeward”). The concept of Sotavento and that regional name predate national and state divisions; it denotes cultural affinities within a shared geography. The Sotavento geographical area encompasses parts of the Mexican states of Oaxaca, Tabasco, and Veracruz. Many of the people from Sotavento refer to themselves as Jarocho or Jarocha, hence the term “Son Jarocho.” Son Jarocho features a defined musical structure that also allows for improvisation. It is performed by ensembles using locally made traditional string instruments. Son Jarocho performance is traditionally embedded within communal festivities that include instrumental music, dance, food, and other social activities associated with the festivities. It features prominently in the Indigenous community celebration known as fandango, a fusion of performance praxis, dance, food preparation, and poetic expression that is often tied to spiritual practices such as recurring fiestas patronales, rites of passage, and other celebrations.

This book is the study of a chapter in Son Jarocho’s long history: the professionalization of Jarocho musicians in the twentieth century and the role of Mario Barradas Murcia (1926–2018) in that process. From his youth in rural Tierra Blanca, Veracruz, to his success in Mexico City and his international resonance, many parallels to his life are apparent in the experiences of today’s professional Son Jarocho musicians.

In its place of origin, the Sotavento region, Son Jarocho was a rural, aurally transmitted musical form. Once it moved into the city, it became an international musical commodity, assisted and in some cases defined by the technological advances of the early twentieth century. Mario Barradas’s migration to the capital city brought changes to traditional Son Jarocho as the musical
form adapted to the spirit of a nation torn between the continuity of regional tradition on the one hand and a perceived modernity on the other. In the mid-twentieth century, Barradas was among the first to record Son Jarocho and play it live on the radio, along with iconic ensembles such as Conjunto Tierra Blanca and Conjunto Medellín. As Jarocho music increased in popularity, its performers increased in number.

The style created by Barradas and his colleagues remained the high-water mark of Son Jarocho for nearly half of the twentieth century, but the cycle of rebirth, flowering, dissemination, and decay has long been a characteristic of traditional music, and Son Jarocho traditions fell into decline as younger consumers turned to media and as corporations marketed foreign recordings on the radio and television. By the late 1960s, Son Jarocho and its fandango were disappearing. For many people, these customs became a way of the past and even an embarrassment. Barradas’s style was dismissed as touristy, folkloric, or passé. Why play jarana, a traditional Son Jarocho instrument, when one could play the electric guitar? However, the late 1970s and ’80s saw new interest in rural Son Jarocho. This was due to the rescate (rescue) movement, whose mission was the revitalization of marginalized rural traditions. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Son Jarocho tradition had again exploded in popularity not only in Veracruz but all over Mexico and among Mexican/Chicano youth in the United States.

There now exist two separate schools of Son Jarocho, one imagined as more commercial and the other imagined as more traditional. Each school questions the other’s legitimacy, and each is largely unappreciative of the other’s history. In truth, both have responded to the demands of their respective times. The two schools share many similarities; technology, popular culture, and the commercial music markets have affected the image and performance dynamics of both. The greatest similarity is in the schools’ origins; both arose from love of their homeland and its deeply rooted music.

Music has never respected borders, and Son Jarocho is no exception. So, too, is this book a transnational creation of four collaborators: two musicians and two scholars. It has involved shared writing, critique, translation, transcription, tons of coffee and pan dulce, and extensive travel between Mexico and the United States. Our collaborative discussions consumed hours, weeks, years, as we wrestled with each segment of the manuscript. As a collective, we examined and refined our individual contributions, viewpoints, and experiences. We are happy to begin with Mario Barradas’s oral history. Following Barradas’s lifetelling, each member of our team contributes an analytical text on aspects of Son Jarocho and Barradas. The first contribution is by Francisco González,
who explains the genesis of this project: his apprenticeship and friendship with Barradas, which spanned more than fifty years. A Chicano musician from East Los Angeles, González examines the Son Jarocho factions that developed in the 1980s. He has harvested the Mario Barradas legacy in two ways: he recorded the oral history featured in this book, and as a master harpist, he has paid tribute to Barradas’s musical importance.

Yolanda Broyles-González, an elder of Tucson’s Barrio Libre Yaqui ceremonial community, is an ethnic studies performance scholar. Her essay positions Son Jarocho within an Indigenous knowledge system as a poetic community manifestation of Indigenous land-based roots and sensibilities. The essay contextualizes Son Jarocho within the mutually sustaining relational elements of a larger ancestral knowledge system: the memory arts of Indigenous America. Broyles-González highlights Son Jarocho’s connectivity to the land base, expressed with rich nature imagery that brings forward a love of the physical environment, and that includes social justice demands. Son Jarocho challenges colonization, builds community, and asserts ancient ties to the land base in both Mexico and the United States. Broyles-González translated the book’s Spanish-language portions into English. All translations are hers, unless otherwise noted.

Rafael Figueroa Hernández, whose personal and scholarly roots are in Sotavento, Mexico, edited the Spanish-language narrative. He also prepared the Mario Barradas discography. Figueroa’s essay examines the relation between Barradas and the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, beginning in the 1940s. He follows Barradas’s childhood experience of the film Huapango in 1938 and continues with an assessment of Barradas’s involvement with film media as a musician from 1946 to 1979.

This book was born amid border crossings, recording sessions, pláticas y sones (conversations and sones), instrument making, string making, academic dialogues, all-night fandangos, the Chican@ movement, Mexican migrations northward, Chican@ migrations southward, and the rescate movement of Son Jarocho. It is with great joy that we affirm our ancient continent without borders, especially at this time when politicians and white supremacists criminalize migrants at the US-Mexico border as “invaders.” We present this volume as part of an American music history that thrives outside the academy.
Mario Barradas and Son Jarocho