

Lil Smiley's East Side Story

By Roberto 'Rob' Camacho



Photo of Lil Smiley by Brandon Aguilar.

For local DJ Melissa “Lil Smiley” Dueñas, oldies music is not just merely a musical canon, it’s a way of life. Featuring a broad assortment of music spanning across different genres and eras, this collection of music has not only maintained steady popularity for decades but, became a defining hallmark of Chicano culture.

As the former co-host of ‘Lowrider Sundays’ a bi-monthly oldies music podcast; as well as being a regular performer at lowrider oldies and Old School funk shows such as ‘Sleepwalking’, Dueñas has immersed herself playing and sharing the music that she has loved for much of her life.

Dueñas’ love for oldies music began in her early childhood where influences from her family and the local radio scene played a large part in the thirty-one-year-old DJ’s musical palette.

“Oldies music was introduced to me at a really young age, from my dad and brother in particular; my brother had oldies tapes that I would often steal from him,” Dueñas said. “I used to listen to Xavier the X-Man’s Sunday Night Oldies radio show and make my own mixtapes from those in elementary school, it was one of those things that was just always around.”

These days however, the San Diego DJ has pursued

a new passion, amateur filmmaking. For close to the past four years Dueñas has been working tirelessly on the East Side Story Project, a docuseries exploring the mysterious history behind the iconic album covers of the East Side Story compilation series and the individuals who graced their covers.

Her catalyst for the project began in 2015 after attending an art show which showcased LGBT inspired re-imaginings of the East Side Story album covers that drew a flurry of criticism from fans of the iconic series online.

While arguments ensued over whether or not those pictured on the albums would appreciate their image being re-appropriated; it quickly became apparent that very little was actually known about those pictured on the covers, let alone the history of the photoshoots.

“I wondered if these people knew if their image had become such an icon,” Dueñas said, contemplating whether those pictured on the album knew they had become part of a decades old enduring legacy.

“The East Side Story series has such powerful iconography that subverting it in such a way sent a ripple effect in the community, opening up a dialogue about the Chicano experience and what it means to be Chicano and Chicana. It was then that I realized East Side Story was an icon that people cherished very much and were willing to defend it.”

Dueñas initially began searching for the cover shoot backdrops by traveling to random parks and venues in L.A. equipped with only the album covers as a reference for the original locations. Eventually she began receiving tips through social media on the Instagram account she had set up for the project.

Lil Smiley soon discovered that an unwritten history of the albums was alive and well known in specific communities throughout L.A. “It’s like urban folklore” Dueñas said, “this history has always been kept alive in certain circles, it’s just never been publicized”.

While searching for the album’s original photoshoot locations played out like a scavenger hunt, it’s the behind the scenes inner-workings that proved to be

the most difficult task, particularly in regard to leasing the film's musical rights.

"When I first went into this I didn't know that the music industry is like the mafia. Even using music for aesthetic reasons cost a lot and these big record companies won't cut you a break just because you're an independent filmmaker." Obstacles aside, Dueñas has not allowed adversity to detract her from bringing the project to completion.

Nearly four years into her work on the East Side Story Project, one reoccurring quality Dueñas has seen is the music's broad cross-generation appeal. "Most people that I've talked to discovered this music through family," she said regarding the music's vitality.

"This music has become like a cultural tradition, it's not just being passed from parents to children. Now it's being passed from grandparents or even great-grandparents. It's something that's become



East Side Story photo by Jose Salvador Sanchez.

the fabric of a culture”.

Ultimately, it's her hope that the documentary will not only shed light on the little-known back-history behind the albums but, likewise explore the unique origins which define and epitomize Chicano culture.

Dueñas anticipates rolling it out in non-chronological chapters as a web series, with each episode to center around specific stories. As of now the project has a tentative release date, with the fledgling filmmaker hopeful that the debut episode will be ready to screen at festivals by the end of the year.