

“Amor Eterno”—Juan Gabriel (1990)

Added to the National Registry: 2024

Essay by Noel Hernandez (guest post)*



“Amor Eterno,” or, “Eternal Love” is a universal phrase that can be felt across languages and cultures, across nations and peoples and generations. “Amor Eterno” signifies a cultural moment frozen in time. Juan Gabriel’s 1990 live recording in The Palacio De Bellas Artes in Mexico City, is now persevered forever via the Library of Congress’ conservation and inclusion of the song in the 2024 National Recording Registry.

Perhaps one of the most well-known songs in the repertoire of Latin American music in the last century, “Amor Eterno,” like Juan Gabriel himself, has transcended national boundaries and has become one of the most recognized Spanish language songs worldwide, including among the millions of Latino/a’s within the United States.

Juan Gabriel began his musical career in the streets of Mexico almost two decades before “Amor Eterno.” Born Alberto Aguilera Valadez in 1950, the singer spent his early years cutting his teeth in the bars of Juarez and Mexico City, where he wrote many of the songs which would later be among his biggest hits (including the famed “El Noa Noa”).

Eventually after an arduous youth, Valadez was discovered by Enriqueta “Queta” Jiménez Chabolla, or, La Prieta Linda, who helped him obtain his first recording contract with RCA Victor--beginning his professional recording career in 1971 under the name Juan Gabriel.

Juan Gabriel would go on to have a legendary career which transcended his home country of Mexico and reached the hearts of listeners worldwide, recording and performing for over four decades, and selling over 100 million records. His celebrated career would be recognized by many of the most prominent cultural institutions of the music industry including “Billboard,” The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), and The Latin Recording Academy.

His recognition in the industry however was but a small part of the much larger impact Gabriel

had, and still has, on the millions of fans his music has been embraced by around the world. Gabriel's musical contemporaries, for example, were among the many who treasured his songs, with artists such as Rocío Dúrcal, Ana Gabriel, and Jose Jose (whose 1978 international hit song "Lo Pasado, Pasado" was written by Juan Gabriel) all released versions of Gabriel's music on their own most well-known albums.

Juan Gabriel broke records by becoming a household name both in his home country of Mexico, in the United States, and abroad. Gabriel skyrocketed to fame in Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly after the release of "*Recuerdos, Vol. II*," reported to be the best-selling album of all time in the country.

His songs then broke national boundaries, becoming cultural treasures in Hispanic communities across all of Latin America and within the large and growing Latin community within the US. Former President Barack Obama, who in 2016 commented on Juan Gabriel's legacy put it bluntly when he said the musical idol's songs represented an epic career of "transcending borders and generations."

Within this powerful musical legacy the story of "Amor Eterno" came to be. While the song was originally composed by Juan Gabriel in 1984, it was initially recorded by fellow Spanish singer Rocío Dúrcal, who first popularized the song on her Grammy nominated sixth album to Gabriel titled "Canta A Juan Gabriel Volumen 6." Upon its release, the song immediately resonated with listeners due largely in part to its touching lyrical content--the song was a passionate poem of simultaneous emotions of both adoration and loss, dedicated to an unidentified personification of love.

Indeed, the lyrics to "Amor Eterno" never reveal *who* the song's passionate cry is directed to. The mystery likely helped solidify the emotional connection between listeners and the song in the Rocío Dúrcal version (nominated for a Grammy Award and inducted into the Latin Grammy Hall of Fame in 2013), who could imagine their own lost loved ones in the song's lyrics.

However, Juan Gabriel himself revealed his inspiration for "Amor Eterno" when he informed his fans that he wrote the song after the death of his beloved *madre*, who passed away in 1974 just as he was beginning his career with RCA Victor. Thus, by the time Juan Gabriel's own version of "Amor Eterno" would be captured at a live performance in Mexico city in 1990 at The Palacio De Bellas Artes, the song's emotional content would take on a vast array of identities, with listeners connecting the song to their partners, their children, and subsequently even the love of their mothers, past and present.

The 1990 recording of Juan Gabriel's "Amor Eterno," now preserved by the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry, has since become one of the most recognized and beloved songs from Latin America in the 20th century. The live recording begins with Gabriel's statement that the song is "more than a song, but in fact a prayer of love" to which he dedicates to "all the mothers that have come tonight to visit me" as well as those "who are further away."

The song, already made famous by Rocío Dúrcal's version for its emotional connection with fans, became even more illustrious to listeners in the 1990 live version by Juan Gabriel for its

notable middle chorus. Videos of the recording at The Palacio De Bellas Artes are well known for Gabriel's emotional behavior during the performance, seemingly at the verge of tears throughout the entire rendition as he adds the words "mama" to the song's original lyrics.

But the most breathtaking moment of the performance occurs at the midpoint of the song, when Gabriel's purposefully lowers the microphone during the chorus and the voices of the audience overpowers the recording, as the song fills with the sounds of hundreds of fans singing:

*Cómo quisiera, ay [How I would want]
Que tú vivieras [That you would live]
Que tus ojitos jamás se hubieran [That never would your eyes]
Cerrado nunca y estar mirándolos [ever had closed, and to be looking at them]
Amor eterno [Love, eternal]
E inolvidable [Is unforgettable]
Tarde o temprano estaré contigo [Sooner or later, I will be with you]
Para seguir amándonos [To continue, loving each other]*

The reactions to this powerful piece of music and the career of Juan Gabriel reverberated far past Mexico and even Latin America, becoming a cultural icon among Latinos in the United States. While Gabriel would notably perform at large theaters in his home country (such as the 1,500 capacity Palacio De Bellas Artes) his star power in the United States skyrocketed his reach even further. In 1993, just three years after the live recording of "Amor Eterno," Juan Gabriel became the first Latin musician in history to perform in one of the biggest arenas in the US--the 100,000 capacity Rose Bowl in Los Angeles California.

Fans in the United States have embraced Juan Gabriel's music with a great sense of pride associated with his rising fame. Though born and bred in Mexico, it was through massively popular songs like "Amor Eterno" which reached the very heart of millions of fans of the Latin diaspora community that Gabriel's musical culture traveled across borders and nationalities.

Historian Adrian Burgos Jr. has noted how generations of migratory Latinos in the United States have often seen themselves as belonging to various communities simultaneously. At times, identifying with their national origins generations back in Latin America, while also seeing themselves as wholly American, or finding unity through an imagined community of "Latinos."

The push and pull of identity however is often most strongly linked to culture--with music being one of its most powerful foundations. The decision to include Juan Gabriel's "Amor Eterno" into the National Recording Registry for preservation within the US is itself a testament to the power which music holds to transcend nationalities and connect with people across both time and place. As Gabriel himself noted in a 1993 interview: "*La musica es lo que une todos los paises*" [Music is what unites all nations]

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.)