

# Love What You Love Podcast

## Episode 6: Cumbia with Stephani Candelaria

### June 9, 2020

Hey, I'm Julie Rose. Welcome to *Love What You Love*. I'm an author, creator, and enthusiast, and I've always been fascinated by the things that people are super into because they're always a unique expression of curiosity, and joy, and wonder. So every other week I'll introduce you to another fascinating human who's into really interesting stuff. The point of this podcast is to offer a little bit of wonder and joy to, hopefully, help you get through the challenges of being human in this world.

It's important to acknowledge that it's especially difficult right now, and a crucial time to acknowledge and *own* our attitudes and our privilege. Having the freedom to love what you love is a form of privilege. To take action to help Black Americans have the freedom to love what they love, check out the links in the show notes.

Diversity of thought and people has been a cornerstone of my philosophy on this podcast, and that will definitely continue. If there's someone you'd like me to interview, drop me an email at [LoveWhatYouLovePod@gmail.com](mailto:LoveWhatYouLovePod@gmail.com). I've got loads of interesting guests scheduled into the fall, and I'm always on the lookout for more. Speaking of interesting guests, let's meet Stephani.

Stephani Candelaria, a queer, third-generation Xicana, fronts a popular Los Angeles-based cumbia-salsa band, La Mera Candelaria. She's a singer, performer, sometimes actress, fierce feminist, and all-around badass. We talked about community, the challenges of being a woman in a male-dominated music scene, opening for Los Tigres del Norte, La Mera's new album, and so much more. So let's find out why Stephani loves cumbia, and why you might learn to love it too.

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**Julie:** Hey Stephani! Thank you so much for joining me.

**Stephani:** Thank you so much, Julie, for having me on. I'm really excited to talk with you.

**Julie:** Me too. I'm so excited! I've been following La Mera for a little while. I know that you guys are super popular and super into the scene in LA. Can you talk a little bit about the style of music that you perform, the scene that you're performing in, and maybe a little bit of background on the type of music you're performing?

**Stephani:** Sure. La Mera Candelaria is a six-piece group. We perform, kind of, our own little fusion of cumbia rhythms, Caribbean son cubano styles, sometimes we'll throw other rhythms in there like reggaetón, or merengue. But we kind of stick to cumbia and son as our main two styles. We are a live music performance group. We describe ourselves as, like, a tropical dance band. And yeah, we're based in Los Angeles, which is a very diverse community. There's quite a lot of innovation happening in the Los Angeles music community, specifically in the Los Angeles Latinx music community. So, we're definitely not the only innovators out here who are creating new fusions, new styles on a daily basis, but it's a very exciting scene to be a part of, for sure.

**Julie:** So, for someone who... I know that I like what I hear, but I don't know if I understand what it is. Can you explain a little bit about what cumbia and son are?

**Stephani:** Sure. These are two distinct sub-genres within the Latinx dance genre. So, it gets very complex very quickly so I'll try to keep it simple. Cumbia is a style of music that can now be found all over the world, specifically in Latin America, and each region kind of has its own take. You've probably heard Mexican-style cumbias in the supermarkets. It's very

accordion heavy, sometimes very synthesizer heavy, if you can think to the Tex-Mex cumbia that was popularized by people like Selena.

But we do more of a live instrumentation. We actually don't use any synthesizers, or beats, or anything like that that are pre-programmed. I kind of compare it more to the simplified Columbian cumbia, which is actually where the style originated. It's a very simple rhythm. The dance itself is a two-step. And this was a style of music that was created as a fusion itself back in its day between influences of the indigenous people of South America, enslaved Africans who were being brought to the Americas during that period of time, as well as Spanish influence. So, we talk about fusion, and innovation, and this music scene today, but really in and of itself that style was already considered a fusion from the styles that were happening then.

So, we've got a lot of cumbia influences as well as a very strong Caribbean flavor. That's mostly due to our instrumentation. Our lead instrument is called a tres, which means three. It's a Cuban instrument that can be found in older son cubano. A very basic explanation of son cubano is it's the great-grandfather of salsa. So what we think of when we hear Celia Cruz, or Héctor Lavoe, and you've got these big orchestras playing certain types of rhythms, son cubano was the ancestor of that type of music. It's a lot more simple, a lot more stripped down. It's got a lot of African influences as well.

These are two very distinct musical genres that come from a similar region of the world; South America and the Caribbean specifically. But they do have a lot in common, and they actually flow very nicely together in the way that we combine them.

**Julie:** When did your band first come together? And at the time, were there other bands doing anything like what you're doing?

**Stephani:** The Latin music scene is so beautiful because it's constantly shifting and constantly changing. I first, kind of, had this spark of an idea, actually, when I was still living up in San Jose. There was a group up there, that no longer exists, but they were called La Colectiva, and they were around... I think they probably started in 2006, but really started kind of blowing up in 2008 or 2009.

I was a young musician at the time, and they were doing something very similar to what we do. They also had accordion and quite a larger group of people playing onstage, so... We do have a different flavor, but their utilization of cumbia rhythms and Caribbean instrumentation really kind of stuck with me when I moved to LA. Here, we see so many different Latinx dance groups, kind of, taking these same genres and doing their own things with them. But at this point, I can't think of another group in Los Angeles that's doing quite what we're doing in terms of the Caribbean flavor of our particular style of music.

There's a lot of groups who are focusing more on, like, regional types of cumbia. One band that I really know and love is called La Chamba, and they're doing their own twist on Peruvian chicha, which is its own...

**Julie:** Oh, wow.

**Stephani:** Yeah, there's just so much great stuff going on here, and there's really no... Each one's like a snowflake. It's not like anyone sounds the same. We all have our own beautiful

space within this, kind of, patchwork quilt of the geography of the Latinx music scene out here.

**Julie:** So how would you say that the music you create creates community and/or reflects community?

**Stephani:** Again, just talking about how much change and how much creativity is happening in Los Angeles right now, especially in the Latinx community is very reflective of our time. Los Angeles in general, and California, the United States, is really seeing a massive shift in what the face of our community looks like, what the makeup of our language is, and our skin colors, our religions. There's this beautiful tapestry that creates our community, and I think the music directly reflects the diversity and these vastly different influences from around the world. Not just from Latin America but from, really, around the world that we're drawing.

All of these different aspects of life that are visible here in Los Angeles, where you've got, really, these small pockets of communities from everywhere. Everywhere you can think of, there's a little city of that somewhere in LA, and California in general. I think that Latinx folks who are making music are doing a really wonderful job of interpreting the diversity of our community and celebrating all the differences that make us special, and unique, and beautiful.

**Julie:** Now, I have to admit, I don't speak Spanish, so...

**Stephani:** That's okay!

**Julie:** ... which is a big failing of mine, living in California. But I understand from things I've read about your lyrics that you, kind of, set yourself apart a little bit as well because you include, kind of, queer themes in your lyrics. Is that right?

**Stephani:** Yeah! So, that's totally not to say that there are not Latinx musicians and spaces who are making a really big splash right now within our communities. There are so many organizations, and groups, and DJs, and collectives that are doing a lot of great for queer Latinx folks, queer undocumented folks, all these pockets. So, I'm merely building on the momentum of... You know, the LGBTQ movement has been gaining steam, and especially within the music industry where there has been a lot of silence around LGBTQ issues, and feminist issues in general. I kind of see the two as going very, very hand in hand. It's like an intersectionality that's important to me.

So, being a female musician within this particular subgenre of the music industry is very interesting because, as a whole, the music industry has always been historically male dominated. There hasn't been a lot of room for female innovators, and the ones who eventually make it to our list of The Greats had to hustle really hard. And they paved the way, and I'm merely here walking in those footsteps trying to make my own voice heard amidst this beautiful roar that has been happening for generations and hopefully will continue to happen.

So yeah, Latin music, being a queer woman in the Latin music scene, I'm trying to use... this particular genre has not been known to be overly feminist or supportive of feminists, let alone queer voices and ideas. But it's such a part of our community, and it's something that... You know, we love our community despite our flaws, and we love it so much that

we're here to work really hard to overcome our challenges and our flaws; things like machismo and the patriarchy that is entrenched in Latinx culture and in this music scene.

It was important to me to, kind of, fight from within, I suppose, to use this particular genre and style of music that has, for so long, been both a way to objectify women or to keep women in a certain type of box, and to flip that on its head from within these familiar melodies and rhythms.

**Julie:** And I noticed, especially in the image that you project on stage, and your photos, whatever, it's very sexy. Is that a purposeful approach that you take?

**Stephani:** I've had so many... As a queer person, it's always interesting... And I think any person. I don't want to just box it into people who align themselves with the queer spectrum. But I feel like at many points in our lives, identity is always a very big question, and a very important question for us to navigate, and it's never necessarily the same answer on any given day. So, yes, I do present, especially performing, as very femme. I've kind of gone down the path of using fashion... I'm trying to find the right way to explain it.

Like, I'm not necessarily one for the objectification of women and to use your body and your looks as a way to sell things, but I *am* really all about if a woman wants to make herself look a certain type of way, she should be more than capable of doing that without having to worry about repercussions of, like, violence, or shaming, you know? I feel that fashion also speaks a lot to my politics. The reason why I style my hair, if your viewers ever get a chance to look me up, I do a lot of, like, older Xicano... like, victory curls, pompadours, and that in itself is a statement for me. During that era there was a lot of feminist talk amongst Xicanas and the Xicana rights movement, the early Zoot Suit Riots. And there was a lot of quashing of that talk by our male counterparts using the word *lesbiana* or lesbian as a way to shame women and put them in their place.

So, hair and clothing as a political statement, to me, has become important. All these different factors have created this persona of, like, people expect the hair, people expect the heels, and the flashy outfits, and it's just become a whole thing. And you know what? It serves me, but there's plenty of incredible artists out there who don't do flashy. They perform in sweats and sneakers, and I have so much respect for that. It's really every woman to her own and what serves you, what serves your message, as long as it's intentional, I think, is the most important.

**Julie:** Have you always been a performer, a singer, from the time you were young?

**Stephani:** Yeah, well I grew up in a theater family, so I grew up spending a lot of time on stage and around performers. I also grew up in a musical household. My mother is a singer, and as a child she was fairly active in a salsa band up in the Santa Cruz and San Jose area. So, being around musicians, and actors, artists, creatives, has... I don't remember a time in my life when that wasn't a constant in my day to day. So when I started to explore my own musical tastes, or just my own artistic expressions... Music was not really a question. It kind of was, almost, just a given that I was going to fall into music because I had it around me so much as a kid.

And I didn't start exploring my own musical taste until I was around, maybe, 17 or 18. I taught myself enough guitar to accompany myself and started off singing covers of my

favorite songs and street performing. In my early 20s was when I started to write my own music, and I kind of discovered... not discovered, but rediscovered the dance world, and haven't left it since.

**Julie:** Nice! So by the time this comes out a few months from now, you have an album coming out this week. Is that right?

**Stephani:** Yes! Your listeners will be hearing this a little bit after my release, but we are just about to put out an album this week, February 21st, so you can find it now, listeners, anywhere that you listen to music. Spotify, iTunes, all the good ones.

[sample of La Mera Candelaria's "Dame un Beso" plays]

This is actually our third release, but it's actually our first full-length album, which is very exciting. We've been hard at work on it for quite a while. It just feels like such a long time now. I'm excited to get it out into the world and see where it goes.

**Julie:** Is it, kind of, more of the same? I noticed the first single that you released was more of a classic, early rock & roll song, rather than kind of cumbia.

**Stephani:** So, "Lose a Good Thing," I recently also put out a single, almost as a side... Not as side project because it's still under the name La Mera Candelaria, but I do a lot of collaborations outside of the Latin music world, and that was one of them. The oldies is a very big part of Xicano culture, for sure, and definitely was a part of my upbringing. So I decided to collaborate with a local band from Salinas, California, to create our rendition of the Barbara Lynn classic, "Lose a Good Thing." And it is very, very different from the stuff that I release with my group, but there's nothing wrong with showing a little range, a little dynamics. It's all for the cause.

**Julie:** Right. Yeah. I was surprised when I heard it. I loved it.

**Stephani:** Thank you.

**Julie:** When did you know, or did you always know that you wanted to be a singer and performer? Was that always your thing?

**Stephani:** I think it was always something I was really interested in. I grew up watching my mom on stage as a lead singer of her own group. Music was just such a part of my life that I couldn't even imagine not giving it a try, so learned guitar, and I began performing, and I found the world of cumbia, which was such an amazing experience for me, and it taught me a lot in my early years. I was with a couple of groups in Oakland for about seven years and really developed my songwriting skills, realized how special this music is to me. I had considered for a while, "Maybe I'll start an R&B, or some kind of cool soul project," but I just couldn't find it in me to leave that world behind, that cumbia, salsa. Gosh, it's such an infectious experience.

I remember my very first performance. I was scared to death, of course. In the pictures I'm petrified, frozen to the mic stand. But just seeing the audience dancing to words that I had written, and smiling, and laughing, and dancing, it was one of those experiences where you're like, "This is what I was meant to do for sure."

**Julie:** So, a few months ago you performed with a couple of other singers on the steps of... well, two things; LA City Hall, you sang with the other two singers, but then you also had a performance on the steps of the LA City Hall. Maybe you can talk about what those were both about?

**Stephani:** It was so interesting because they kind of happened back to back, and they were completely isolated events. So, over the summer I collaborated with two other Latina musicians from Los Angeles. They're both doing incredible work here. We all have very different genres, but we all happen to know each other and decided to partner with this organization called Al Otro Lado that does pro bono work at the border helping to reunite families who have been separated at the borders of Mexico and the United States.

It actually started off as just, like, a very casual conversation, like, "I wish there was some way that we could participate and use our music to keep this momentum going," because we get these little splashes of color, like, "Donate at the Border," "Help Families," help this, help that, and then we forget because our society is so hard to hold captive for more than five seconds. So, I was just talking with one of the other singers, like, "We should do something." And it started off as, "Yeah, we'll meet up, learn the song, do a couple takes in my backyard." And then it just spiraled into this beautiful... I mean, we were completely funded by another organization; camera fees, filming fees, everything was waived. The rental of the beautiful basilica of Los Angeles City Hall, we had it all to ourselves. It's this, almost, cathedral.

[clip of live singing from event]

So, it was a beautiful moment for a lot of reasons. It was beautiful because the cause that we were supporting is a beautiful one, and we were so thrilled to be able to do even just a little bit to highlight the work of that organization and to bring attention to all the good stuff that they're doing. But it was also really beautiful to, like, pay homage to three of the great country singers of our nation as Latinas. This next generation of female vocalists who are out here, you know, in the music industry, facing the same issues that those three ladies were... Not much has changed since the '70s *Trio* when Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, and Linda Ronstadt were performing. It's still difficult. So, as three Latinas, to come together in the middle of the most important building in Los Angeles and sing this song, "Calling My Children Home," was just such a moment that I'll never forget.

Just a short two weeks after that, La Mera was honored again to perform right there on the front steps of City Hall for the city's annual Grito celebration, the Independence Day of Mexico, and we got to open up for the legendary Tigres del Norte. And again, I mean, within a one-month span I had these back-to-back memories of these unforgettable moments in my career as a musician. They were both such incredible experiences.

**Julie:** In terms of singing and performing, what questions does it answer for you, personally?

**Stephani:** I think that everyone asks themselves probably very similar questions at different points in their life, and most of them have to do with our purpose and the meaning of all of this. For me, music, performing, the message that I have, and kind of this network that I'm trying to build with other female musicians in Los Angeles, I think, is a big part of that for

me. It's not an easy career choice, deciding to become a musician, especially when you're Latina, especially when you're a woman and you're queer. It's not the easiest industry to go into.

I actually was a teacher for quite a number years after college, and the decision to leave that, to leave the salary and the nice benefits, and move to LA to really pursue my music was not an easy one. I did have a lot of questions, and I still have a lot of questions. But especially in those first couple of years when I was struggling to build a name, to build a brand, the question of, "What are you doing?" kept coming up over and over. Like, "Why are you putting yourself through this?" And just watching it grow now, I mean, there's still a long way to go. The journey's never over, but watching it grow, and watching these ideas begin to take shape in a tangible, meaningful way, I think is a big part of that question for me. Like, this is why I'm here.

I'm here as an ambassador, I guess, to gather together to create space for other women, for younger women who are trying to navigate this difficult career choice but are passionate about it, and get discouraged, and get talked down to, or the door shut in their face. I think that as a performer, and the platforms that I'm trying to create, the spaces that I'm trying to nourish, is a big part of that for me. It's starting to take shape now, but it's definitely been quite a process, and a lot of these answers are still, kind of, becoming clear.

**Julie:** So, has this, performing... and I know that you've also done some stage performances as well, has this branched off into other interests that you did not anticipate at all?

**Stephani:** Hmm... I've definitely been immersing myself more into dance and learning more about it in order to heighten my own performance so that it's not just a bunch of people standing on stage with a microphone. I feel like the dance aspect has become a newer interest of mine that developed the more I performed. But also, I suppose my interest in composition and songwriting. My early years as a musician, I really took the backseat when it came to generating new material and I was more than happy to sing other people's songs. But with this project and with the response I'm receiving to this project and our message, I've definitely had to increase my songwriting skills and my composition skills, especially as we're dipping deeper into the world of Caribbean music where it can get very complex. And I do sometimes feel a little out of my league.

But thankfully, I've surrounded myself with people who are very well versed in that field, who are very patient and amazing teachers. So, it's been a very cool journey, and definitely, I never would have imagined myself dipping into this, kind of, Caribbean music world, and dance, and culture. But it's been good, it's been very invigorating to experience something new within the Latin music scene that I hadn't really considered before.

**Julie:** Now, what frustrates you about any of it? Songwriting, performing, or the scene, or anything, what's the most frustrating thing for you?

**Stephani:** Well, this is actually something that I'm working on right now, almost as a side project. Being a woman in the Latino music industry is not easy, and we all... All of us female musicians, kind of, commiserate together, and swap stories, and share horror stories of

the things that we've had to put up with from, you know, sleazy promoters, or not getting booked until your male drummer sends the email, or musicians who don't take you seriously and think that you're just trying to hit on them. There's so many things that we experience.

And then, as a public figure, the issue of fans feeling entitled to cross the line over social media, or even in person. There's a lot of complex issues that female musicians face that our male counterparts may be aware of but will never directly have to experience for the very fact that they are male. So, that's always been one of my biggest issues with this career path and with this particular genre of Latinx dance music and I'm trying to do something about it.

So, *Reinas de Los Angeles* is a project that's starting to form very organically. It developed around our CD release show that's happening this week on February 21st. That album is called *Si Reina*, which means Yes Queen. So, I only invited other groups that feature frontwomen, because I said to myself, "Self, we need to have show that has some badass queens from LA making beautiful music and I want this to be a woman-centric night." And I had so many bands who were interested that I was like, "Oh my God, I need to make this a series!" And then along with that, just talking to some of the women who are interested in performing, they were, like, just telling me why they're excited about this, "We need this space. We need to do this for ourselves."

From that developed a video series that's about to begin happening with some of the women performers speaking, making transparent the things that we have lived through every single day but has been treated with such a glaring silence, and bringing it to our men, to our families, or communities of fans who don't understand the complex issues that female musicians, and especially Latina musicians, face from within our communities. It's not to talk down and say, "You guys are wrong for doing this." It's to make it very apparent, like, "This is what's happening. Let's work together, let's do something about this. Let's support each other. Let's build one another up." Because the worst thing you can do about an issue is to stay silent about it.

So, *Reinas*, I feel like, is going to become that for me. It's going to become, hopefully, an avenue for really facing some of the biggest issues that I have with the music industry and, really, the only things that could ever possibly have the power to turn me away from this life choice, because poverty hasn't done it, and living in a tiny studio with two dogs hasn't done it. Working my ass off for hours on end hasn't turned me away from the music industry because it's what I love, it's what I'm here to do. But finding ways to make it more equitable, to have our voices be heard, to not be just the token female musicians out there. There's plenty of us out here. We just need to make ourselves heard and seen.

**Julie:** I can probably guess what this is, but if you had one wish about singing, or performing, or the scene, what would that wish be?

**Stephani:** I wish that choosing to live the life of an artist were more accessible to people who have something to say. There's a lot of us out here, and there's a lot of us who hustle really, really hard, and get discouraged by the hustle, and give up because it's so difficult to make a living as any kind of creative. There's a very particular look and sound that is receiving accolades at the moment within the entire music industry and it's not



representative of our stories, of the things that we value as a community. And the ones who are out here making extreme sacrifices to tell our stories are not... It's very difficult to stay in this industry without fatiguing yourself, without stress, and all of these other factors that come from overwork and not enough support.

So, my wish would be that it were a more accessible avenue for folks who really believe in it and are passionate in it, that we could really, truly make a living off of doing something that's amazing, and doing something that does change the world for the better. I do believe that music is one of the most beautiful things that you can do as a person. And, I guess, I'm a musician so I'm biased. But it's worth it to me. It's worth it, and it's sad to see so many of us struggling so hard.

**Julie:** If a listener wanted to get into cumbia son, the scene down in LA, or just generally, what's a good starting, entry point for a new listener to learn about cumbia and son?

**Stephani:** Spotify is actually really amazing with their algorithm, and they're getting a lot better at creating playlists, like cumbia playlists or salsa playlists. You can really spend hours going down that rabbit hole. Some of the... like son cubano, one of the most famous performers of that genre that you could plug into Spotify or iTunes and just listen to their radio would be, like, Buena Vista Social Club. They were one of the most renowned Cuban groups doing that particular style, Ibrahim Ferrer, Compay Segundo, all kind of from the same general time frame in Cuba and, kind of, immortalized that style of music.

As far as cumbia, goodness gracious, there's Columbia cumbia, Mexican cumbia, Texan cumbia, Peruvian cumbia. There's so many avenues that you could go through. Cumbia is such a huge... I can't even think of, like, a Western equivalent to how diverse one particular subgenre is. It's crazy.

**Julie:** So, I guess people should start on Spotify with La Mera's album, and then build a playlist from there.

**Stephani:** Yes. It's definitely been exciting to see that our online presence is growing. And the way that Spotify in particular works is, people who listen to your song, Spotify looks at what else they are listening to, so it begins to build commonalities, like, "Oh, these are other artists that your fans are listening to." So, our radio station is actually getting really cool as more people are listening to our songs, and it's building, and it changes subtly every day. New songs get added, or shifted, or moved around. We actually have a really cool radio station. A lot of local bands, obviously from LA, but also a lot of bands from Latin America that have a similar kind of style, and it's nice. So yeah, that's a really good suggestion. Check out La Mera radio on Spotify and find your way from there.

**Julie:** Perfect! And I will be giving listeners links to all this stuff a little bit later. Stephani, thank you so much for joining me today.

**Stephani:** Thank you! That was really nice.

[sample of La Mera Candelaria's "Si Reina" plays]

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Listen, if you're not dancing - in your chair, in your kitchen, on your walk - I don't even know what to say to you. Big thanks to Stephani for the time, and for the music. Check out [La Mera Candelaria](#) on [Spotify](#), [Apple Music](#), [YouTube](#), everywhere. All the relevant links will be in the show notes.

Just a reminder that you can find the podcast on Instagram [@LoveWhatYouLovePod](#), on Twitter, [@WhatYouLovePod](#), and the website is [LoveWhatYouLovePod.com](#). If you'd like to support the podcast, consider subscribing and leaving a rating and review on Apple Podcasts.

Zeke Rodrigues Thomas at Mindjam Media provided hardcore, amazing editing assistance on this episode, You can find Zeke at [MindjamMedia.com](#). Also, as always, huge thanks to Emily White for the episode transcripts, which are available to Patrons at [Patreon.com/LoveWhatYouLovePod](#).

Be good to yourselves, and be good to each other. Thanks for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

### **Links:**

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