

NEWS

Latinos' growing presence at SXSW expands impact on mainstream

by Marisa Arbona-Ruiz / Mar.17.2018 / 8:31 AM ET / Updated Mar.17.2018 / 8:53 AM ET



Director Abner Benaim and Ruben Blades from the film "Ruben Blades Is Not My Name" at the 2018 SXSW Film Festival on March 11, 2018 in Austin, Texas. Corey Nickols / Contour for Pizza Hut

AUSTIN, Texas – Amidst the sights and sounds of a bustling Austin Convention Center, you can pull on a pair of Virtual Reality (VR) goggles to walk through a Peruvian rainforest. You can dance the night away to a DJ mix or to Peruvian rock, electric, funk and folk bands at Peru House, a spot dedicated to Peruvian arts, culture and technology.

Latin American and U.S. Latino presence at the annual [South by Southwest](#) (SXSW) tech, film and music festival has grown significantly – particularly through music – since the festival's inception in 1987. Veteran attendees of the massive three-week festival are quick to point to various Latin performers and artists at SXSW to underscore how Latinos are influencing the content of the festival. But they also note how the festival is influencing Latino innovators throughout the United States and Latin America and as a result, their impact on mainstream culture in general.

While the festival has come under fire over the years for its lack of or limited Latino representation in its tech, film and music events, an increased effort in music has resulted in Latin artists reaping some of the same benefits as other artists seeking connections, agents, publicists and record deals at the event.

According to festival organizers, of the 2,000 artists scheduled to perform this year, 200 of them can be categorized as Latin music artists.

“Once we started reaching out to the (Latino) community, it started to become the global event it is now,” Alicia Zertuche, SXSW senior music programmer, told NBC News. “The overall goal is to integrate Latinos as much as we can within the platforms that we offer.”

In addition to U.S. Latino artists, SXSW highlights talent from various Latin American countries. This year, the festival had showcases of performers from Colombia, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay and Spain.

“It has a long way to go, (but) 'South By' has been such an incredible experience for me,” Austin's own [Gina Chavez](#) told NBC News. Her story reflects how musical discoveries happen.

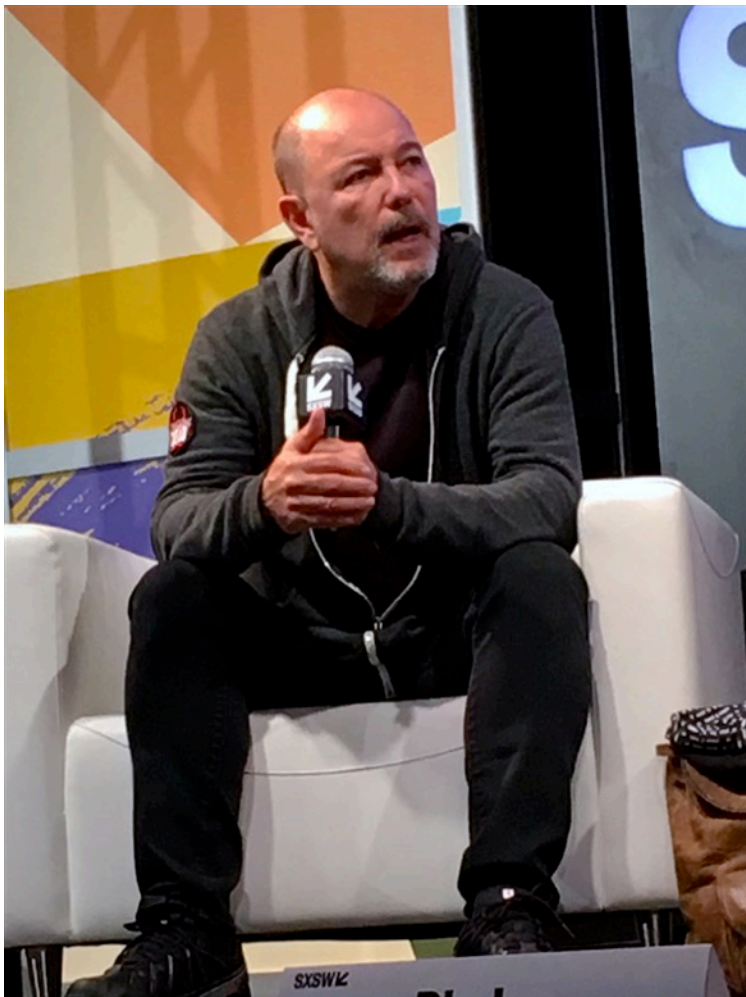
Her initial showcase at SXSW was in 2010, which came just as she had released her first major record. While taking in other performances at the festival, Chavez stumbled across a producer of "All Things Considered" who knew Chavez's music and invited her to be on the show.

“That led to continued coverage on [Alt.Latino](#), a [Tiny Desk Concert](#) and record sales," she said.

Chavez said that after her story aired on NPR, her Amazon sales jumped to No. 278, ranking with top Latin artists Shakira and Enrique Iglesias. "It was wild," she said.

Gina Chavez, a bilingual, Latin-folk singer, songwriter performs at SXSW. [Marisa Arbona-Ruiz, Nbc News](#) SXSW has become a valued asset for established artists as well. ["Yo no me llamo Rubén Blades \(My name is not Rubén Blades\)"](#) is a documentary film about the iconic music and film star that premiered at the prestigious SXSW Film Festival. In an onsite interview with NBC News after the screening, Blades said being an indie artist in any genre now has greater possibilities than ever

“The corporations used to control access to media and entertainment, and that created sort of ghettos in terms of music,” Blades said. “Now it’s a whole different game. There is access to all types of music and all types of audiences.”



Ruben Blades, a Panamanian, singer, songwriter, actor, and activist discusses his career in front of a live audience at SXSW. [Marisa Arbona-Ruiz, Nbc News](#)

After 25 albums, 17 Grammys and 30 films, Blades has become a respected elder statesman of Latino arts and culture and has advice for the emerging artists who flock to SXSW hoping for their big break: “Be original. Try to see what you can produce to add to what is out there. Try to create your own voice and contribute to not just the world of music, but the world at large.”

Creating your own voice applies to the [tech world](#) as well. Consider Ana Ribeiro, a virtual reality game developer from Brazil who participated in the SXSW panel Emerging Visions: Game Studios of Latin America. Dressed as a fantasy character from [“Pixel Ripped”](#), a game she developed, she said her creation “grabbed a lot of attention in the world ranking and among YouTubers.” She said by adding “the flavor of Brazilian culture” her work stood out.

Ana Ribeiro, a virtual reality game developer from Brazil dressed as a game character at

SXSW. [Marisa Arnona-Ruiz](#)

Lilia Davis of [Mujer Magazine](#) said she created the panel to make up for the lack of Latino gaming presence at SXSW, and to highlight the contributions by women. The other panelists, from Mexico, Colombia and Argentina, all attributed their success in mainstream gaming to adding cultural elements, which boosted interest in their countries. Every year, the growing influence of Latinos on SXSW is also reflected in themes and acts of social consciousness and this year is no different.

“Sounds from Puerto Rico” features the myriad genres (from punk to electronic) being played on the island and also benefiting [musicians who are still struggling to make a living on the island](#) after Hurricane Maria hit last September.

Last year, SXSW was clouded by controversy over a clause in contracts for foreign artists. It threatened that officials would contact immigration authorities if performers violated SXSW rules and policies. Although in effect for five years and never used, its revelation amid the Trump administration's immigration crackdown triggered heavy criticism for the festival. After the uproar, the clause was removed.

This year, advocacy group [Voto Latino](#) presented the concert “Dream Out Loud,” and dedicated to [DREAMers](#), immigrant youth who arrived or stayed in the U.S. without legal permission. It featured a mix of legacy musicians such as [Los Lobos](#) and emerging artists like [Centavrvs](#), a Mexican rock band.

The cause of DREAMers hit home for them. “It’s especially close to my heart,” said [Los Lobos member Louie Pérez](#). “I’m glad to be here to support that.”