

Law makes Venezuelan music mandatory – but also popular

BY MONTE REEL
The Washington Post

CARACAS, Venezuela – If Britney Spears & Co. aren't selling as many records here as they used to, they should point their fingers at a man who would be thrilled to shoulder the blame: President Hugo Chávez.

The National Assembly, which is dominated by Chávez, recently passed a law requiring that no less than 50 percent of all music played on the nation's radio stations be Venezuelan. Of that, half must be classified as "traditional," showcasing the "the presence of traditional Venezuelan values."

Chávez backers say the harps and *bandolas* that now resound through this country of 25 million are playing the overture to a musical revolution.

"We've always had traditional Venezuelan records in stock, but before a few months

ago we never sold any — not one," said Miguel Ángel Guada, manager of the Disco Center Superstore in one of the capital's largest malls.

"It was all Britney Spears, Backstreet Boys and that sort of thing. But now I'd say one-third of our business comes from Venezuelan artists, which is absolutely incredible."

The new law can make listening to the radio an adventure in dizzying contrasts. One minute a disc jockey might spin Puerto Rico's Daddy Yankee rapping about "Biggie and Pac," and the next minute it's flutes and fiddles from the Andean highlands. Some Venezuelan rock and pop artists have begun to record cover versions of traditional songs to take advantage of the mandates. Almost all local artists, regardless of age or genre, are reaping the rewards.

Members of Venezuela's Traditional National Orches-

tra used to lament how their compact discs would languish on vending tables at their concerts, but this year they watched sales take off with whiplash force — from zero to 200 copies sold at a single performance. The orchestra is using the extra income to record more albums, according to Sigfrido Chiva, its president.

Radio listeners say they occasionally detect muted grumblings from pop and hip-hop DJs when they introduce the songs that meet the law's requirements.

But a casual survey at Caracas record stores suggested that many Venezuelans are enjoying the variety.

"It's kind of the fashion now to listen to traditional music," said Rafael Quintero, 19. "It has just taken off in the last three months."

The recording industry outside Venezuela, not surprisingly, isn't fond of the radio mandates.

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