



**Loud, loyal, and a little bit loco, San Lorenzo's fans are the world champions when it comes to starting songs that travel the world...**

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# THE SCHOOL OF THE TERRACES

**W**e call them songs, don't we? The fits and starts of noise blurted out from the stands that we bark across heaving pubs at half-two on a Saturday afternoon with a Carling in hand; that we bellow through echoing train stations a couple of hours before that, arms aloft, clapping defiantly in front of confused families who just want to go shopping and don't care about the quantity of tits—or fanny—in South London. But besides a couple of long-standing terrace anthems, particularly in the North West and Scotland, it's hard to find much melody and rhythm to the British football chant to justify it being called *'song'*.

Argentina is the counterpoint. In the country's crumbling *canchas*—the term used for football stadiums—a vibrant musicality with dexterous lyricism is the beautiful, if bizarre, constant in a terrace culture often typified by drugs, violence, and organised crime. We've all seen the ticker tape, flags and flares that make games like the Boca vs. River Plate *superclasico* such a visual treat, but it's the soundtrack to these iconic scenes which makes the Argentine football *fiesta* the greatest, most soulful on Earth.

I was lucky enough to witness those scenes for three years, and it's something that has to be seen, heard, and, in truth, *felt*. Every

club has its *banda*, who's drumming reverberates up through your body, the beat whipping fans into a jumping frenzy that makes the concrete terrace literally shake beneath you. Overlaid are impossibly melodic voices; throats defying the fags, spliffs, and cheap cartons of wine they're subjected to every match day. With lyrics offering phrases like *'Cada vez te quiero más'*—'Every time I love you more', or *'El sentimiento que hay en mí, no te lo puedo explicar'*—'This feeling inside of me, I cannot explain it to you', tributes to the team seem more suited to a love song than a football chant.

And in one corner of the capital, Buenos Aires, there's a particular set of supporters whose creativity and passion goes that little bit further, and has been more influential than any other in orchestrating the sound of Argentine football. The *hinchada*—the fans—of San Lorenzo de Almagro; often referred to as the *Escuela De Tablones*. 'The School of the Terraces.'

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Every fanbase in world football likes to think of itself as distinct, that it's 'the best' in some way. But when it comes to



the creativity and depth of the San Lorenzo songbook, even Boca fanatic Diego Maradona admits that there's something special about 'cuervos', as San Lorenzo supporters are known.

"San Lorenzo has the most ingenious *hinchada*," Diego wrote in his autobiography. "For me they're the most creative of Argentina: they make the most ingenious songs, they have fun... I love them. I would have liked to play in that shirt."

The worldwide popularity of club anthems like '*Vengo del barrio de Boedo*' suggests Diego's remark wasn't just some baseless assertion. The song, translated as, "I come from the neighbourhood of Boedo", and using the tune of Creedence Clearwater Revival's '*Bad Moon Rising*', was presented on a forum by a prominent fan called Juan Manuel in 2011, and became the terrace hit of San Lorenzo's nerve-shredding relegation fight the following year. (*Manchester United fans, incidentally, have sung a version called 'Stretford End Rising' for years - Managing Ed.*)

Of the heartfelt lyrics laid over the catchy melody, one line resonated the strongest: '*Te juro que en los malos momentos, siempre te voy a acompañar...*' Translated as 'I swear that in the bad times, I will always stay with you...' The famously loyal *cuervos* promised their side they would be going nowhere, even if the unthinkable happened and San Lorenzo, one of the five giants of Argentine football, were relegated to the B Nacional.

Remarkably, the graver the situation became on the pitch that season, the more frenzied the scenes became in the stands, with '*Vengo...*' ringing out in times of both despair and euphoria.

Never was this more powerfully demonstrated than during the visit of Newell's Old Boys in a crucial, must-win tie for San Lorenzo and their survival hopes.

When Newell's summoned the grim reaper of relegation by taking a two-nil lead in the first half, it was '*Vengo...*' that burst from the terraces to drown out the celebrating away fans. Likewise, when Emanuel Gigliotti nodded home a late winner for San Lorenzo to complete a stunning 3-2 fightback, the song was belted out from every corner of the *cancha* amid the scenes of ecstasy. In footage that would move even the least sentimental, heatmaps-over-heart football fan, a blind *cuervo* called Walter Lo Votrico (who attends each game with his red-and-blue flag reading 'I don't see you, I feel you') is shown screaming the song through tears: pocket radio in one hand, white cane clenched in the other.

A few weeks later, Walter and the other *cuervos* who stood up to

be counted in those '*malos momentos*' were rewarded with Primera survival, as San Lorenzo overcame Instituto in a two-legged play-off to stay up.

The stirring backing track to the great escape didn't go unnoticed, and scores of Argentine *hinchadas* made their own lyrics to fit the '*Bad Moon Rising*' melody in the following seasons. Most notably, Boca used the song to goad River Plate with 'Tell me how it feels to have played in the B Nacional', after River's catastrophic relegation.

Then, in 2014, the song went global, as Argentina supporters produced the most prominent song of the World Cup, '*Brasil, decime que se siente...*', taunting their South American neighbour and great footballing rival with the opening line: 'Brazil, tell me how it feels to have your Daddy in your house...'

With nearly 300,000 *Albiceleste* supporters travelling across the border during the tournament, footage of Argentines colonising Brazilian territory with their banging drums and swinging shirts became a feature of international television coverage. And be it in the stadium, the street, or on the beach, the soundtrack to the scenes was always the same: '*Brasiiiiil, decime que se sienteeee...*'—born from the work of San Lorenzo's *Escuela de Tablones*.

The infectious chant stuck in the heads of those watching on TV around the world, as it soon spread across Spain, Italy, and even England. By the end of 2014, Everton fans were excitedly circulating their new song, '*We've got a diamond called Ross Barkley*', on internet forums alongside videos of the delirious Argentines in Brazil who'd planted the earworm.

So, with their songs travelling from Boedo all the way to Merseyside, you can understand why one of San Lorenzo's recent ditties includes the line, '*Esta es la gloriosa banda de Boedo, es la que escuchan en el mundo entero...*'

'This is the glorious band of Boedo, the one they listen to across the entire world...'

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So where did this all start? How did San Lorenzo fans become masters of the football songbook?

"You have to go back to the beginning of the 20th century," says actor and supporter, Martin Cutino, a specialist in the 'culture' of the club. "San Lorenzo's neighbourhood, Boedo, is the barrio of artists, the birthplace of Tango, where writers, painters, actors, dancers, and

sculptors co-exist. Art is a source of beauty and creativity, and all of this beauty proceeded to 'impregnate' San Lorenzo. Because Boedo is San Lorenzo, and San Lorenzo is Boedo."

With the identities of the club and its *barrio* so inextricably linked, the historic and highly controversial eviction of San Lorenzo from Boedo in 1979 traumatised the club, and the scars remain. In the 1970s, San Lorenzo's owners were cash-strapped, and its famous Gasometro stadium was beginning to crumble. Argentina's ruthless military dictatorship spotted an opportunity and began to pressurise for the sale of the property, claiming the site would be better used for construction works in the *barrio*.

It's even reported that members of the San Lorenzo board were threatened into complying with the eventual cut price sale, which cost less than a million US dollars. Five years later, having failed to deliver the promised regeneration of the area, the government sold the land on to French retailer Carrefour for nine times the original price. San Lorenzo didn't see a peso of the profit and have been fighting to return to Boedo ever since.

Their current stadium lies in a dangerous *barrio* nearby that simply isn't 'home', but thanks to remarkable campaigning from supporters, culminating in the current system whereby fans can buy a symbolic square metre of land in Boedo to finance the building of a new stadium, a return is finally due to be completed in 2020.

The pain attached to the loss of Boedo, followed by decades of struggle to return home, seems to have instilled an added profundity and romance to the *cuervo* support.

"The San Lorenzo *hinchada* uses a poetry in their songs that is distinct from other *hinchadas*—and this makes it unique," says Cutino. "I don't know of an *hinchada* that uses such an extensive vocabulary. A case in point is the song that uses the term 'utopia'—'*Demostramos que no existen utopías, somos la gloriosa hinchada de Argentina...*'"—in regard to the club's struggle to return to Boedo. It translates as: 'We've shown that utopias don't exist, we are the glorious *hinchada* of Argentina...'

"A San Lorenzo fan is born with a DNA to invent a song for their club. It's a creative exercise that we have all been through, some with more talent than others, but we have all done it. The songs define who we are. We are *barrio*: culture, ingenuity, and above all, joy."

This vibrant terrace personality and reputation for creating songs earned the *hinchada* the nickname of *Escuela de Tablones*. In recent years, a group of 14 supporters have formed a group dedicated

to maintaining the creativity of the San Lorenzo songbook under that very 'School of the Terraces' moniker.

"We take existing songs and create our own lyrics, which get passed around the group and modified along the way," explains *Escuela* member Juan Cruz Martinez, fresh from composing the group's new song based on Oasis' '*Wonderwall*'. "Then, when we have the final version, we get the whole group together with a drum and a trumpet and everyone sings the song. We record this and upload it to our social media channels. If it spreads online we'll sing it before the next match at the stadium, underneath the stand before the game."

Juan Cruz refers to the *previa*; the Argentine match day ritual of gathering around the drum and trumpet players in the concourse to sing, smoke, and generate a carnival, before entering the ground as a bouncing mass of mad men—a ritual routinely more entertaining than the game itself. The towering concrete pillars of San Lorenzo's *Nuevo Gasometro* create the perfect amphitheatre for the *previa*, as the drum beats reverberate all around you, creating a visceral pre-match energy that even the hanging clouds of marijuana can't placate. You simply can't help but sing, jump, and melodically insult all of the mothers of that day's opposition.

Longtime supporter Guido Gallo says the *previa* party is essentially choir practise for the fans.

"When I was younger, we would print the lyrics to new songs, photocopy them, then pass them out to others when they arrived at the stadium. Now videos are uploaded to YouTube, and during the week it's very common that San Lorenzo fans listen to the songs like you'd listen to your favourite bands. They get millions of views, meaning they spread far and wide to other *hinchadas* in Argentina and the rest of the world."

Proof of the songs' global diffusion can be found in Abdellah, a San Lorenzo fan hailing from Marrakech in Morocco, some 6,000 miles away from the wild *previas* at the *Nuevo Gasometro*. "I first heard the song of '*Vengo del barrio de Boedo*' on YouTube, randomly", he says. "Since this moment I fell in love with the club and with the fans. San Lorenzo is a source of inspiration for a lot of supporters around the world—even here in Morocco, several songs are chanted by different groups. The songs directly touch the soul and are different from what we see in Europe. Simply: they're special."

Miraculously for Abdellah, a few years after discovering the club, San Lorenzo were visiting his home city to play in the Club World





# “Without a shadow of a doubt we are the best in the world.”

Cup, qualifying by virtue of winning the 2014 *Copa Libertadores*. They may have lost the final two-nil to a Real Madrid side that barely needed to change up from first gear, but the boys from Boedo left an indelible mark on the tournament and the city. A staggering 14,000 of them made the epic journey across the Atlantic Ocean, and in the days leading to the final the sweeping Plaza Jemaa el-Fnaa in the centre of Marrakech echoed with the ingenious songs they were famed for back home. “I made a lot of friendships with *cuervos* who still my friends until now,” says Abedallah.

He wasn't the only one impressed. With the San Lorenzo fans continuing to show off their back catalogue throughout raucous terrace scenes during the final, even the Madrid players were noticing something different about this crazed, yet soulful band of Argentines.

When the full time whistle blew, Iker Casillas ran straight up to San Lorenzo full back Julio Buffarini and pointed up at the red and blue hordes, still singing and bouncing despite the defeat. “Are they always like this?” he asked Buffarini, somewhat shocked. The Argentine simply laughed and shrugged: “Sí”.

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This increased exposure of the San Lorenzo *hinchada* means their songs are now copied faster than ever.

At the end of 2016, videos of the Nuevo Gasometro rocking to a new chant to ‘*Duele El Corazon*’ by Enrique Iglesias became a hit across South America and Spain, prompting rivals Boca, and countless others, to create their own adaptations within weeks. The beginning of 2017 brought an even bigger hit for the terraces, as *Escuela de Tablones* uploaded its version of ‘*Despacito*’ by Luis Fonsi and racked up a million YouTube views within a week, before moderators removed it for apparent copyright infringement.

But the Spanish speaking media was already spellbound by the poetic adaptation of an otherwise standard Latino pop hit: ‘*Ciclón, vos sos mi locura no puedo parar, y cada domingo me enamoro más, por estos colores doy la vida entera...*’ “San Lorenzo, you are my madness I cannot stop, and every week I fall further in love with you, I give my whole life for these colours...”

The likes of Atletico Madrid now have their own *Despacito*, along with the usual suspects across Argentina and Uruguay.

“We feel a little sad when others copy us so quickly,” says *Escuela de Tablones* member Diego Jerkovic. “Seeing other Argentine clubs use the songs can make you angry, but when they go global it gives you a sense of pride. San Lorenzo had the first true *hinchada* and we’ve always been the same in terms of constantly inventing. We will continue that and will never copy the rest.”

Gallo is even more bullish on the matter. “It makes us laugh when other *hinchadas* copy us because it demonstrates that in terms of football culture and passion, the San Lorenzo *hinchada* has no comparison. It’s way ahead of the rest. Without a shadow of a doubt we are talking about the best in the world.”

While it may be hard to reason such a claim, outlandish in its sense of pride even by Argentine supporter standards, the creativity and inventiveness of San Lorenzo fans cannot be disputed. Even followers of Boca, River, Racing and other rival clubs will sheepishly admit as much in discussions about Argentine terrace culture, even if they’ll swiftly follow it up with a barrage of insults about those homeless rogues who now have a supermarket instead of a stadium in their barrio.

“The name ‘Escuela De Tablones’ didn’t come randomly, it’s 100 per cent correct,” says Abdallah, despite being far less obliged to propagate *cuervo* folklore like those born into dyed-in-the-wool San Lorenzo families back in Argentina.

“My dream is going to Boedo one day and jumping with the *cuervo* family. When I collect enough money for that I won’t hesitate one second before I do it.” **M**