

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

## TO THE SOUND OF MARIMBA / Al Son De La Marimba (1941)

Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre : Comedy

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/albDEpgr4Ws>

**Contents** (Overview – Synopsis -Story – Themes – Characters)

### OVERVIEW

With *Al Son de la Marimba* (*To the sound of the Marimba*), director Juan Bustillo Oro creates a delightful “turnabout is fair play” farce that above all celebrates Mexican cultural traditions. Filmed in the years immediately following land reform, the overwhelming sentiment is a populist one that mocks the elitist relicts of colonialism while still suggesting that, despite their snobbery, given exposure (or immersion) redemption is still a possibility. The folkloric traditions of Chiapas are placed in center stage, and the music, dance, and tradition of improvisatory rhyming “roasts” (“bombas”) serve to create a sense of community, unite people, and provide a vehicle for the expression of love. The humor is kind-hearted as it cheerfully acknowledges human nature, and while the technology, culture and idioms have evolved over time, it remains, like plays such as Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer* and Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, universally appreciated and essentially timeless. Bustillo Oro uses Expressionistic camera techniques he successfully deployed in *Dos Monjes* and in *Ahí Está el Detalle*, to exaggerate or heighten the impact. Further, he gives his ensemble actors the freedom to work in their own expressionistic manner, which allows them to heighten the comedic impact, and to respond to each other’s timings in a way that resonates with the audience. For these reasons and more, *Al Son de la Marimba* remains one of the most-loved comedic works of the Mexican Golden Age of Cinema. It was so popular, in fact, that it was remade a decade later in *Por Ellas, Aunque Mal Pagueen* (*For the Ladies, Although they Pay Badly*), but where this film features the marimba music from Chiapas, *For the Ladies* features mariachi music from Jalisco.

### SYNOPSIS

When the aristocratic and high-living Escobar family realizes that they are flat broke and in danger of being evicted, and all their finery repossessed, Don Palemón Escobar goes on the hunt immediately for a rich husband for his daughters. He finds one in the form of a naïve and an instantly smitten owner of a large hacienda in the southernmost state of Mexico, Chiapas. The plan works, and Don Felipe marries Margarita Escobar. However, the family’s profligate spending horrifies the conservative Don Felipe, and he cuts them off and returns Chiapas. Once completely broke, the family makes their way to the hacienda in Chiapas, Don Felipe decides to teach them a lesson. He claims he was impersonating the owner, and he is actually just an employee. The real owner, Agapito, demands that the entire family work to pay off Felipe’s debt. Miserable at first, the family blossoms in the countryside, where traditional Mexican culture and fiestas, featuring food, clothing, song, and dance have a salutary influence, making them joyful and happy with each other. When Agapito pretends to have Felipe arrested for not repaying the debt, Margarita offers him everything she has, and says she will stay by his side, jail or no jail. Felipe then reveals that he is Don Felipe, the owner of the ranch. It is a surprise, but a happy one, and the Escobars look forward to a very happy future.

## THE STORY

*SNOBBISH ESCOBARS* The daughter of a once-grand family, now bankrupt, who are rather desperately in search of a rich husband. Publicly displaying elitist ennui, but privately terrified about their impecunious future, the Escobar family sits at a table in a private room in an upscale restaurant that features “revues” of culture and regional music. Paterfamilias Palemón Escobar talks to his wife, Doña Cornelia and his daughter, Margarita, about the prospects for marriage in the restaurant, among the patrons. Margarita knows she must marry well in order to save the family and its finances. Consequently, she looks for money and convenience and not for love.



**FELIPA** Don Felipe Del Rio, a young man who has just inherited an extensive hacienda from his father, travels from the southern state of Chiapas to Mexico City to find a wife, and also to buy seeds and equipment. He travels with his right-hand man, Agapito Cuerda, who helps him scout out possibilities. They decide to go to a restaurant known for its cuisine as well as its dance and musical reviews. *Agapito spies a prospect:* Agapito Cuerda, the ranch foreman, goes into action for the cause. He talks to a business associate of Don Felipe, who points out the Escobar family



**FELIPE FALLS IN LOVE** Felipe is in love. Margarita is practical. She wants to meet Felipe during the day, but has to be quite careful to not reveal their true condition. They begin to meet, to the point that there is a daily assignation after the piano lesson. Margarita does not want Felipe to suspect the true, dire straits of the Escobar family which is, in essence, broke and homeless.



**WEDDING** A quick wedding, and the Escobars are in "tall cotton." Their sense of entitlement and privilege restored, the extravagant snobs racking up enormous bills. Margarita marries Don Felipe Del Rio of Hacienda La Esperanza, in the southern state of Chiapas. Hard to imagine, but Margarita actually has no intention of ever living on the ranch



**BILLS** *Agapito: This must stop, Don Felipe! Your singing didn't bewitch her and make you love you – it was your money.*" Holding a tall stack of bills of frivolous expenditures by the Escobar family, Felipe listens to Agapito with concern, particularly when he tells him that his father would have been horrified to learn what was happening with the funds for the ranch. Margarita refuses to leave her life in Mexico City and live in the remote state of Chiapas, where Don Felipe owns a ranch, La Esperanza. He has put his foot down about the extremely wasteful spending of the Escobar family, which is all billed directly to him.



*GOING BACK TO HACIENDA* Felipe implores Margarita to accompany him to Chiapas to the Hacienda La Esperanza, but Margarita refuses to go. She stays behind with her family. What they come to find out is that Don Felipe has refused to pay for the family's excessive spending. With nowhere else to go and no funds for rent, food, or frivolity, the Escobar family heads to Chiapas. They look like ragamuffins as they travel on horseback the final miles to the ranch. Their appearance is quite comical, and even as they limp and moan, they maintain their snobbery. Palemón is so saddle-sore that he can not even sit down in a chair.



*Role reversals* Agapito pretends to be the owner of the hacienda. Don Felipe is his foreman who has spent the seed and equipment money for the ranch on Margarita's foolish, wastrel family. So, when they arrive, they are shocked to find that Don Felipe is not the owner of the ranch. Instead it is Agapito Cuerda, whom they thought was the foreman. Felipe is the foreman, they learn. "Those who don't work, don't eat!" and, "You have to work off Foreman Felipe's debt!" The Escobar family is nonplussed. "Don" Agapito has proposed to Pita so she now thinks she's the fiancée of the owner of the hacienda. Don Palemón is now "Brunildo" and she shouts and browbeats the Escobars, making them repeat their work many times.



**BACK TO NORMAL ROLES** At this point, they call off the farce and tell everyone who the owner really is. Margarita embraces Felipe after learning the truth, and that he is actually the owner of La Hacienda La Esperanza and that the entire farce was a kind of “tit for tat” since it was the farce that the Escobar family played and conned him.



## THEMES

**Duplicity:** Although Palemón Escobar, the paterfamilias of the Escobar line, presents himself as a quintessential specimen of a noble family reaching back to Spain, in reality he is a rascally scoundrel who believes he and his family are entitled to a life of luxury and privilege. They pass themselves off as aristocratic in order to trick a rich (and naïve) man into marrying a daughter, and thus parasitically attaching themselves to him. The Escobars go to great lengths to enact a farce that even involves squatting in an empty mansion to pretend they are what they are not. Thus, when Agapito suggests that Don Felipe and he enact a similar farce at La Hacienda La Esperanza, the goal is to find out if Margarita married him for his money, or if she actually holds any real affection. The answer at first is fairly clear, as she is only interested in her material well-being and lifestyle. However, when actually confronted with the idea that Felipe may have to go to jail for stealing from his employer, Margarita shows that she was, in fact, bewitched by Don Felipe’s lovely serenades and the marimba music, and she expresses true love.

**Social Class:** *Al Son de la Marimba* derives much of its humor by poking fun at the Mexican elites who are snobbish to the extreme and proud of their long line of relatives that extend back to Spain and a connection with colonial times. In fact, when the haughty, yet broke and bedraggled Escobars find themselves on the Hacienda, they are informed that the “patron” of the hacienda (the owner) maintains total control over everyone, “as in colonial times.” In theory, the Escobars would have been a part of that world, and the fact that they are now assuming the role of “peon” and even wearing the clothing that one would wear makes the reversal of social class privilege all the more satisfying. At the time of the film, the Mexican elites were in the process of losing many of the previous privileges as land reform was implemented and “ejidos” formed by the people of a certain state or municipality took ownership of the great “latifundios” or estates.

**Mexican Identity:** While there are differences due to social class and ethnic identity, and the Escobars of European descent look down on those of indigenous blood, there is the awareness that all are Mexican, and that there is tremendous pride in all the traditions of Mexico that keep its history alive. For example, the dresses worn by the women at the fiesta are hand-embroidered with traditional designs, and the dances themselves incorporate indigenous and European

influences to forge a culture that is uniquely Mexican. While regional identities and customs vary – the Escobars even have difficulty understanding the idiomatic or local terms used in Chiapas, they eventually embrace the regional differences, and strengthen their connection to the uniting identity. In this case, one’s identity is what allows individuals and families to survive, because it allows them to work together in harmony and with mutual respect.

**The music of Chiapas and folkloric dances:** The structure of the music of Chiapas, with its energy, humor, flirtatious spirit, is optimistic and cheerful. It is in stark contrast with the music of other parts of Mexico, namely Jalisco, where churros sing with mariachi bands, and the rancheras feature loud bittersweet weeping, the agonized “grito” of thwarted love, themes of longing, loss, and heartache. There is more of a sense of play in the musical tradition of Chiapas, not only in the dances, in which the dancers tell a story and role-play, but also in the “bombas” or rhymed “roasts.” The “bombas” emphasize one’s humanity and bring people together through shared laughter, while the Jalisco cowboy (charro) expresses values such as honor, revenge, and self-abnegation. Further, it is important to note that the serenades sung by Felipe do have a bewitching effect on Margarita, just as he predicted with the first song, which he claimed at the time would cause her to fall hopelessly in love with him.

**Fish Out of Water.** As opposed to a tale of a person who goes from urban settings “into the wild” where a heart of darkness triggers jealousy, madness and self-destructive machismo, as in *Canaima* or even *El Ultimo Mexicano (The Last Mexican)*, in the case of *Al Son de la Marimba*, the shock of change is purifying as it peels away layers of foolish pride. One can sense what will happen by the title of the movie, which has an interesting double meaning in Spanish which is hard to capture in an English translation, since “son” literally means “sound” but also in southern Mexico refers to certain traditional songs that are a blend of European and indigenous rhythms and musical instruments. So, *Al Son de la Marimba* can mean “To the sound of the marimba” or it can also mean “The Music of the Marimba” or even “Marimba Dance Music.” At any rate, what is most redemptive about the experience of going into the southernmost state of Mexico, Chiapas, is the opportunity to immerse oneself in a cultural that blends colonial and indigenous. The sense of unity and community are strong, and the musical forms as well as the dances, have humor at the core, as opposed to the “charro” of Jalisco, where valor, honor, and machismo often translate into violence and Madonna / tramp dichotomy with respect to women. In *Al Son de la Marimba*, Bustillo Oro brings together two of his most successful farce elements: the fish out of the water, and the “comeuppance” tale where elitist scoundrels are exposed for what they are.

**Pride.** The Escobar family members are proud of their aristocratic antecedents and their “blue blood,” and epitomize the sense of entitlement that many of the descendants of the original Spanish families that formed a part of the colonial apparatus. But, with revolution and land reform still fresh in the consciousness of the Mexican people, the spectacle of a pompous family revealed as delusional, amoral rascally con artists was particularly satisfying. Also satisfying was the ultimate victory of a quick-witted man of the people, the foreman and right-hand man, and the humble and honorable owner of the Hacienda La Esperanza (Hope Ranch).

## CHARACTERS

Don Palemón Escobar	Very proud but broke patriarch of the elite Escobar family
Don Felipe del Río	Somewhat naïve owner of a hacienda in Chiapas, longing for a wife
Margarita Escobar	Lovely and idealistic older daughter, selected to save the family
Agapito Cuerda	Ranch foreman and right-hand man for Don Felipe
Doña Cornelia Escobar	Palemón’s wife, often ridiculously vain
Pita	Quick-witted “maid of all trades” who is, coincidentally, from Chiapas
Sofía Escobar	Margarita’s younger sister, who immediately falls in love
Luis Escobar	Margarita’s younger brother
José María	Agapito’s son

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Palemón Escobar:** Palemón Escobar is a rascal and a con man whose snobbish and elitist values are a holdover of colonialism and demonstrate the moral bankruptcy of the upper classes. He prioritizes his appearance, which is everything to him, and wants to signal with his elegant dress, haughty manner, and often ridiculously lofty language, that he is far from the “gentuza” or “riff-raff.” The truth is, though, he and the others of the Escobar family are worse than riff-raff, they are toxic parasites (albeit comically portrayed).

*Proud:* Palemón is very proud of his lineage, which he traces back many generations to presumably lofty forebears. There is no evidence, except for his own testimony. It makes no difference, though. In the Mexico he inhabits, the people are casting off the yokes of subjugation as new access to resources (land, capital, and innovation) are making upward mobility a reality. Palemón has lost touch and needs to be grounded and authentic.

*Scheming:* The Escobars spend their last pesos of credit to make an appearance designed to attract a rich suitor for Margarita or Sofía. Margarita is dressed in an elegant satin evening dress, and Sofía glitters with jewels. Palemón instructs his wife, Doña Cornelia, to sparkle and shine as well with jewels and badinage. The plan works. Don Felipe is bewitched by Margarita’s charm and even as he claims his song will bewitch her, actually the reverse is true, and his own singing further casts him under her spell. He sees what he wants to see, and the fact he only has a few weeks in the city before he has to return to his remote ranch in Chiapas, where his father has just died, makes his longing for a paradisiacal microcosm all the more poignant.

*Lazy / Entitled:* Like any good parasite, Palemón is lazy. He prefers to guzzle the lifeblood of others than to stir up his own blood and to sweat. When confronted with the idea of working, he is horrified. He prefers the notion of “caballero” or “gentleman” where one lives on the proceeds of rents or historically, “la quinta” (the tax automatically placed on all financial activity). When compelled to work in order to eat, Palemón starts to find that life at the Hacienda La Esperanza is fulfilling in ways he never expected. Despite the fact that he is inept with horses (although he claims his family are “people of the horse” which is to say “caballeros // horsemen // gentlemen”), and is thrown more than once, he loves grooming them and working with them. In such a role, Palemón becomes more authentic as a relatable, decent human being.

## QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. One of the most satisfying aspects of *Al Son de la Marimba* is the fact that the final remaining vestiges of old aristocracy are revealed to be morally and spiritually bankrupt. Stripped of their titles and positions, they now seem silly at best, and parasitical con artists at worst. Please find three examples of the values of the Escobars that are exposed for their essential turpitude.
2. Authenticity by means of connections to regional Mexican popular art, song, and customs is the secret to regaining one’s humanity. Find two examples in the film where cultural traditions are used to crack the veneers of egotism and to unite the people.
3. Hacienda La Esperanza literally means Hope Ranch, or Ranch of Hope. Describe the difference between life on the ranch and life in the urban center of Mexico City. What are the differences in daily activities? How do they relate to either maintaining a superficial appearance, or providing the necessary elements for physical and emotional survival?
4. Describe the dance scenes in *Al Son de la Marimba*. How does the first one, which takes place in Mexico City, differ from the ones that take place on the Hacienda La Esperanza in Chiapas? How does the first, which features Mayan dancers, establish a sense of “otherness” of Chiapas, and how does Margarita respond? How do the dances during the patron saint day festival establish a sense of unity?



5. Describe the “bombas” in the festival on the patron saint day. What is their structure in terms of rhyme and rhythm? How do they act as a “roast” of someone who is in the community? What makes them humorous, and how does the tradition of launching “response bombas” work in terms of communication?