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FYS Roadside America

FYS Research Project: Lowriders and their cultural impact in Los Angeles, California and
Española, New Mexico

ORIGINS OF LOWRIDERS

In the 1930s, young Mexican-Americans in southern California began to create the first generation of hot rods. At the time, these hot rods were intended to make cheap, fast cars for street racing. Due to a lack of funds, the Mexican-American youth took junkyard parts to add to older cars to make them fast enough to compete with the newer, more expensive, American cars. While the main focus at this time was speed, many would use their customizations in an artistic way as well, displaying their creativity and personality on their cars.

It didn't take long before the focus of customizing cars broadened from only young kids racing. As it became a staple of Mexican-American culture in southern California, mostly the Los Angeles area, more and more Chicanos embraced the "Low and Slow" cruisers. The term "Lowrider" wouldn't be used until the late 1950s, but the concept was the same.

Los Angeles politicians and police attempted to outlaw lowriders in 1959. However this led to evolutions in lowriders, namely the incorporation of hydraulics in their cars. Since the law passed made it illegal to have any part of the car below the rim base, the LA Chicanos added

hydraulics that could raise the car from the now-illegal lowrider level, to well above the legal limit.

LOWRIDERS IN CALIFORNIA

Lowriders became a staple of Mexican American culture in Southwest California, namely Los Angeles, by the 1960s. Their cultural impact stayed prominent throughout the 20th century. In that time, Los Angeles African American car enthusiasts began to develop lowriders of their own. This led to lowrider culture being adopted by Los Angeles African American culture, as well as into Los Angeles Hip Hop culture.

Famous Los Angeles rappers can be seen using lowriders in music videos in the '90s, as well as music almost exclusively about lowriders. "Nuthin' but a G Thang" by Dr. Dre (feat. Snoop Dogg), "Let Me Ride" by Dr. Dre, "Low Rider" by War, "Lowrider" by Cypress Hill, "Be Thankful for What You Got" by William de Vaughn, "Rocket 88" by Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats, and "Cruisin'" by Smokey Robinson are some of the songs inspired by lowriders in Los Angeles.

One main feature of Los Angeles' African American lowriders was the use of hydraulics to make the lowriders "dance." Timing the hydraulics to the beat of their music, and bouncing down the Los Angeles roads would become a major part of Hip Hop culture.

LOWRIDERS IN NEW MEXICO

Lowriders didn't just stay in Los Angeles. Another prominent area lowriders became popular was in Española, New Mexico, as well as the smaller nearby city of Chimayo. Española is a small semi-urban about 20 miles north of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Española's large Hispanic population contributed to their adoption of lowrider culture, as a form of regional ethnic culture and identity. (Bright 586)

In areas like Española and Chimayo, as well as Santa Fe, it was common for lowrider contests to be held. These "contests" were more like art shows, with the most aesthetic lowrider taking home the prize. Cultural aspects being portrayed also held some importance in these shows.

One of the most popular lowriders is known as "Dave's Dream" (pictured below) Dave's Dream was originally created by David Jaramillo. He started his work in 1970, and Dave's Dream won many awards. However, it had to be finished by family members and friends after David was killed in a car accident. It now lives in the National Museum of American History.



Conclusion

The lowrider culture, although starting from the same thing, became very different based on location. In Los Angeles, lowriders became a staple of Hip Hop and Gangster Rap in African American Culture. Lowriders in LA were less concerned with the artistic elements of the car's exterior, and more with the slow cruising and hydraulic bouncing to their music. In Española, New Mexico, lowriders were treated more like a canvas, ready for an artist to express themselves, as well as their culture and heritage, on their cars. Throughout all of this, the "low and slow" mentality was always present.

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I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.

/s/ Eric Hunter