Born in Nogales (Estado de Sonora, Mexico) and raised in the US, Rafael Navarro is an illustrator and independent comic book creator, as well as storyboard artist for TV animated shows, such as Daytime Emmy award-winning Tutenstein (PorchLight Entertainment, 2003–2008), Rugrats (Nickelodeon, 1991–2004), lucha libre-themed ¡Mucha Lucha! (Warner Bros., 2002–2005), and many more. In 1996, his creation Sonambulo won the renowned self-publishing grant Xeric Foundation Award, paving a path to delve further into its eponymous protagonist’s adventures. Aside from numerous participations and comic work through the years, it is worth mentioning his collaboration with Mike Wellman, which led to the creation of the sci-fi western miniseries Guns A’Blazin’ (2013–2018), a time-travel inspired epic spanning 6 issues so far.

Navarro’s work as a self-publishing, independent comic book artist stems from his own lifelong passion for comics; while freelancing in both the comic book and the animation industries, the artist felt the need to express his own creative sensibility. Thus, he focused his work on trying to give shape to an innovative character, articulating a peculiar genre intersecting various subgenres and filling—or rather, creating—a space he felt missing in the panorama of the comic book industry back then. The result is a highly original comic packed with elements belonging to the Mexican American cultural heritage, blended with unexpected tropes distinctive of the film noir, oneiric representations, and jazz music. Despite being easily readable and entertaining, Sonambulo presents a complex layering of meanings and heterogenous imaginaries belonging to Navarro’s personal cultural baggage; effectively channeled through his work on Sonambulo, his distinctive blend of Mexican American heritage
and multimodal cultural background breaks with traditional Chicano paradigms and provides an original take on transnational identity.

Figure 1 Sonambulo art, provided by the author
Sonambulo is an ongoing comic book series started in 1996 with the 3-issue Sleep of the Just narrative arc, to which several storylines followed through the years. The eponymous protagonist used to be a successful luchador during the apogee of Mexican lucha libre (the flashbacks set in his past date up to 1959); when he refused to abide by the local mob’s will, he was beaten up and left for dead. He was instead thrown into a deep sleep that lasted for decades and has left him with the power to read anyone’s dreams, as well as the inability to actually ever sleep again. In the present, he works as a private detective, engaging in cases and adventures that usually involve supernatural elements and encounters with mythic entities. The visual elements blended by Navarro are diverse, from pin up ladies to lucha iconography, all brought together by a noir mood and Sonambulo’s own distinctive ethos.

Anna Marta Mariní: The publication of Sonambulo’s adventures has been ongoing since 1996; he even seemed to die in 2006 only to revive a few years later. What has been the artist’s quest intrinsic to Sonambulo, and has it changed through the years? What has been the aim of this comic series and what have you put in it of yourself?

Rafael Navarro: The intrinsic and continuing theme to Sonambulo to me has always been to make a difference, to stand against adversity, even if you don’t stand a chance to win. Like detectives of the past, Sonambulo reflects those that make an effort for those who cannot, and like the gumshoes of old, he doesn’t always win, and has to learn to live with it. Courage comes in different ways. It’s not about always having the balls. It’s about being scared to death, knowing the consequences but still saddling up anyways. And as life proceeds well into your winter years, and world weariness sets in like an unwanted relative, the biggest struggle is maintaining the courage to continue. To live. As a professional artist of 30 odd years or so, in various industries including comics both independent and mainstream, illustration, as well as animation, there are times I feel I can relate. As for evolution and what has changed through time, I wish I can say it is dealing with loss, both professional and personal. But like the past… it never goes away, you just learn to live with it.

The film noir inspiration is evident since the first issue of the series, in which the stark black and white visuals are paired with a grim, rainy urbanscape rendered by means of vertiginous angles and irregular panels. The mannerism is vaguely remindful of other noir comics—Bernet’s Torpedo 1936 or Frank Miller’s Sin City might come to mind at first—and yet, Navarro delivers his own take on it; the angular panels and overlapping fragments of action allow a smooth transition between the storyline and the dream narration.
AMM: Let’s talk about film noir. What are the elements of the genre that you think are fundamental for *Sonambulo* and why is that so?

RN: Noir to me, in regard to Sonambulo has and always will be the essence of mood. Ambience always plays an important factor in all my work and Sonambulo is no exception. Whether it comes from German Expressionism, Mexican cinema of the golden age as well as early Fellini, shadows and light with subtle hints of detail, all in glorious black and white is how I love my stories to be. Then there are the great cartoonists that I adore that still inspire my brush pen such as Kirby, Toth, Eisner, Robbins, Frazetta and Steranko. Like all traditional nuances of the noir genre, there is a type of darkness, a foreboding sense of doom with a streak of pessimism thrown in for good measure, but in my work, there is also an array of hope, perhaps reflecting my own personal view of the world, that tends to keep the darkness at bay. By nature, I’m a pretty cheerful sort, but if you put me in a situation that requires me to be tough and uncompromising, and especially if there’s someone I care about involved, you bet your bottom dollar I’ll come out swinging...

Starting with *Sleep of the Just*, the presence of classic horror tropes has been increasingly pivotal in the development of Sonambulo’s action. It is fundamental to note that, in most cases, the supernatural, horrific turn of events is related with Mexican and Mexican American folklore, myths and superstitions.
AMM: What about the horror and supernatural components? Some of them are strictly related with Mexican heritage, some blend in with the noir mood, some hint at real life events related with sects, and all of that often intertwines with the dream dimension. In *Sonambulo* the reader finds lucha libre, noir tropes, the presence of the borderlands both conceptually and materially... why exploiting the horror as well? Does it somehow facilitate the transposition of the dream element?

RN: Horror and Supernatural elements within the annals of *Sonambulo*... at first, it was just a happy little adage to what I thought was a fun little idea of a masked Mexican wrestler with the uncanny abilities to read people’s dreams. But originally, I was just going to intend for him to be a traditional gumshoe/ skip tracer with a penchant not to mention an advantage to look within someone’s intentions because of his gifts, but as the story progressed, it was only natural to delve into the unknown terrors that hide in the darkness as well as the darker recesses of the mind. To me, that was a new kind of noir. Without a doubt, Mexican culture has certainly played a major factor as well. “Write about what you know” has always been my modus operandi and extracting from childhood fears and angsts not mention my Catholic upbringing have been most useful for building the universe our dear lucha detective lives in. Even real life has played into the world building of *Sonambulo*. I remembered the horrid tales of why we would find traces of what looked like blood on the neighborhood sidewalks in grade school with friends, and of course if wasn’t...
El Cucuy, Don Coco, La Mano Peluda or even LA LLORONA\(^1\) herself, there were the real life rumors of satanic cults that resided in the Whittier hills. Hence as to where the "Cult of Eugene" came from. Cultural fears and horrors are potent enough, and so are the ones we face in real life. Sonambulo seems to walk in both these worlds with ease, not necessarily untainted but certainly with an understanding that they do exist and they must be dealt with. He’s a paladin, our last resort to protect us all from all the terrors of the unknown, as well as the borderland of the subconscious. I exploit this all because after all these years, it’s still fun and fascinating!

Lucha libre is a pervasive, as well as fundamental, theme in the articulation of the character and the development of action. Confrontations that lead to dynamic lucha-like fights are disseminated throughout the comic books, reprising moves and angles common in the representation of lucha matches. Clearly, the ethos intrinsic to classic lucha libre archetypes marked the gestation of Salomon “Sonambulo” Lopez as an ex

\(^1\) La Llorona is a ghostly creature whose presence is widespread in Latin American folklore and whose origins are rooted in pre-Hispanic cosmogonies, in particular in the Mesoamerican region. The most popular, contemporary version of the legends describes the entity as the soul of a woman who drowned her own children and is bound to roam on earth, weeping and possibly kidnapping—or at least frightening—children to replace hers. The opening story of Sonamulo’s Strange Tales (2000, 1–10) is dedicated to La Llorona.
luchador who still wears his mask. As most legendary luchadores have done, Sonambulo seems to never break out of character, to the point the readers wonder if what they see is the embodiment of the hero he wants to be. There are sequences—in particular related with nostalgia—in which the man behind the mask seem to reveal himself; nonetheless, Sonambulo usually acts according to a well-defined—although implicit—set of values.

**AMM:** You said that Sonambulo is a paladin. Despite drawing on the noir genre for many aspects related to ambiance, when it comes to the development of the hero the noir paradigms are subdued and do not follow the archetypic description of a film noir detective protagonist. Sonambulo seems to abide by his own code of conduct. He beats up criminals but he doesn’t mix with them, he gets entangled in dangerous situations but he doesn’t contrive schemes himself, etcetera. To an extent, I would say that he seems to stick to a lucha ethos, remindful of El Santo’s filmic stints. Sonambulo is ready to intervene kicking ass to help people he cares for and even when he kicks ass for money, in the end, he decides on doing it for the right reasons. So, what is lucha to you? Does Sonambulo ever falter, is there dilemma?

**RN:** Lucha Libre... and what it means to me and to Sonambulo as well. Some say professional wrestling is like a surreal ballet or even a big silly theatre of the absurd, soap opera for boys. Some even have the audacity to claim it to be all fake. But truthfully, lucha libre—in regard to Sonambulo and to myself—is a way of life. It is a metaphor for the struggle of life itself, good versus evil with rules to follow, and to break if need be as well to eventually triumph over all adversities that stand in your way to victory. I’ve always loved the mythos of the enmascarado the most. The anonymity was always a great strength. Not just to protect yourself and those you loved, but it also raised the possibility that even Santo or Blue Demon could be anyone... they could be your dad, uncle or even that quiet introvert reading books peacefully in the library. One never knew what kind of lion was hidden behind that mask! And with that kind of perspective, I can hardly ever remember a moment where the hero or heroine in the annals of lucha libre has ever faltered. Yes, they fail, and they even lose their masks in the ring, but never do they falter or have a moral quandary of where they stand. Even rudos have the tendency to become técnicos if their heart sees a moment of clarity. There is always hope. Well, in the ideal sense of it all!

Aside from his wrestling skills, Sonambulo is characterized by the uncanny ability to read people’s dreams, just by getting close or touching them. Dream sequences are inserted in the main narration and bring forth surrealist elements and representations of people’s fears. If most of the dream sequence usually seems unrelated to the
storyline, Sonambulo finds in it details useful to carry on his investigative work. Not all dream-like sequences though are “other”; the protagonist himself is often involved in oneiric fights with supernatural entities, or he battles with memories and nostalgic flashbacks haunting him from the past.

Figure 5 Sonambulo art, provided by the author (enlarge image)

AMM: Due to the protagonist’s ability to read dreams—but also to his own subconscious and his relationship with his own dreams—the oneiric dimension in Sonambulo often blends with reality. Where does your interest in dreams and their representation comes from?

RN: To me, dreams have always been the product of the subconscious. Symbols of abstract thought or even roadmaps to the hidden meaning of one’s inner most secrets. They are inspired by everything and nothing all once, coming to you without warning. They just take up residence in your head rent free until you decide
what to do with them. Whatever the reason, they do hold important meaning to me and to Sonambulo. For our lucha detective, they are what he uses to extract answers to the riddles his prey hide... for yours truly, they are an endless array of possibilities of what could be. Reality and dreams are pretty much the opposite sides of the same coin. One is a reflection of the reality they wished to control, whilst the other is the escape. But to determine which is which, only the author of the dream can truly answer that. From this author’s perspective, one cannot exist without the other. As to where they come from, who knows? As an anecdote, I offer what Harlan Ellison once told me when asked where his ideas come from. “From a little curio shop in Perth Amboy, New Jersey for 5 bucks a pop!”
AMM: Music seems to be a common thread and a recurrent intertextual element. Throughout the comic there is Sonambulo’s own passion for music, music venues, dancing, lyrics underlining moods and so on... it seems to be a fundamental diegetic element both in the comic and in your creative process. What about it?

RN: It is safe to say my creative process evolves around music. And yes, I can think and create with ease in complete silence, but there’s something about music that helps my mind breathe life into my ideas...It nurtures them, creating a rhythm to move to, sometimes even revealing directions and even a final conclusion to it all. It’s as if life itself requires a soundtrack and depending on where you’re at in life, the composer or song written for that moment should always match perfectly. Growing up with musicians in my family, music has always been important factor of my life and will most likely continue to do so. Sonambulo is a celebration of the things that I oh so love. He is a hard-boiled private eye, an old school wrestler, perhaps even a bit outdated and old fashioned. He is Mexico, but so much more. He loves music. He loves to dance. He goes to where all the hip and happening nightspots are at because he constantly feels the pulse of his own living heart in the rhythm and soul of sound. When I hear Sonambulo’s theme in my mind’s eye, there will always be mambo drums, an alto sax solo, a stinging jazzy vibe of an age gone by that only he appreciates because he was there when it was happening and it lets him know he still lives somewhere in the universe, fighting the good fight, thwarting all nightmares. All one needs to do is tell him your dreams.

SUGGESTED READING PLAYLIST

As music represents both a common thread in the series and a fundamental element in the artist’s production, we provide a short playlist to accompany the reading of the comic, courtesy of Rafael Navarro himself.

- All of the Charlie Parker collaborations with Machito. Francisco Raúl Gutiérrez Grillo (1909–1984), artistically known as Machito, was a Cuban musician fundamental in the definition and articulation of Afro-Cuban jazz. The track Mango Mangue (recorded in 1949) is pretty much Sonambulo’s main theme song, as well as the Afro-Cuban Jazz Suite (1950).

- Any mambo music from the 50s. Choice songs would be Anabacoa by Perez Prado* and Bo Mambo sung by Yma Sumac... even Sophia Loren also played an influence with Mambo Bacan.
  * “Anabacoa” actually appears in Sleep of the Just (2001, 26)

- Any Eydie Gorme y Trio Los Panchos. Piel Canela, Mala Noche*, and Noche de Ronda come to mind as personal favorites.
“Mala Noche” appears in *Sleep of the Just* (2001, 40) as shown in fig.6, whereas “Piel Canela” appears in *Ghost of a Chance* (2002, 20–21).

- The Viscounts’ version of *Harlem Nocturne* (recorded in 1959)
- The soundtrack to *Touch of Evil* (composed by Henry Mancini, 1958)
  * Directed by Orson Welles, *Touch of Evil* is often considered as the last film produced in the classic noir genre, marking the year 1959 as its chronological boundary. Furthermore, it can also be considered a borderland movie, as the action takes place in a border town and on both sides of the US–Mexico border, a setting that is pivotal in the development of characters and overlapping storylines, as well as the grim social context.

- Santo & Johnny’s *Sleep Walk* (1959): my dad influenced me there. When I was creating my character and I was trying to name him, his original name was going to be the Sleepwalker indeed, after one of my (and dad’s) favorite instrumentals. Then he suggested that I could call him that but in Spanish, because when I bought the single as a teen, the label said “Santo & Johnny Sleep Walk (SONAMBULO)”… and so he was born.
  * It is worth mentioning that also Duke Ellington’s “Solitude” (composed in 1934 and become one of Billie Holiday’s signature songs after its recording in 1952) appears in *Sleep of the Just* (2001, 105).

Figure 7 Sonambulo upcoming comic book, provided by the author
BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES


Official website [https://rafaelnavarro.carbonmade.com/](https://rafaelnavarro.carbonmade.com/).