



## WHAT'S NEW UNDER TONATIUH<sup>1</sup>?

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center  
August, 2013



My mother would occasionally remind me that: “There’s nothing new under the sun.” I think she said it to keep it real when I thought I had come up with some cockamamie idea that I thought was genius. When I became a parent and the kids would do the same, as children tend to do, I found myself thinking and saying the same thing. It took me awhile to understand that childlike non-conformism is natural and, potentially, the seed for future innovative thinking and practice, and, as such, that it should be nurtured.

The Smithsonian Institution is hardly a child—it is 167 years old. As the Nation’s premiere cultural and scientific institution, it has nurtured countless scholars, fostered groundbreaking research, produced a small warehouse of music recordings, presented thousands of performers and lecturers, and showcased millions of objects and documents from its massive and diverse collections. The number of online beneficiaries is probably incalculable. And, yet, despite its age and legacy of impact and service, it now finds itself at a critical juncture in its development, prodded to come up with something new under its own sunburst logo.

From my perspective as an “insider,” I don’t think that the Institution has been driven by the need to invent. The Smithsonian did not invent the museum, the record or CD, or award competitions. However, driven by rapidly developing technologies, shifting demographics and changing cultural participation patterns, the Institution is looking for innovative and even ingenious ways to do its work.

The Smithsonian Ingenuity Awards will celebrate its second year in 2013. Organized by the *Smithsonian Magazine*, the awards recognize ingenious ways of working in science, technology, art and society, focused on individuals who are at the cutting edge with new approaches to their work.

For the inaugural program, jazz vocalist and bassist Esperanza Spalding was regaled in the performing arts category. According to Merriam-Webster, ingenuity is: “a skill or cleverness

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ollin Tonatiuh* is the Sun God within the Aztec pantheon.

in devising or combining.” I’ve seen Ms. Spalding in concert and have a couple of her CDs. I’m a fan. There is no doubt that she is an electric, multi-dimensional performer. Ingenious? As defined, yes.

Michael Caruso is the dynamic Editor in Chief of the *Smithsonian Magazine*, who is breathing fresh energy into the Smithsonian’s chief publishing business. As a colleague, Michael is a blessing. When he contacted me recently to ask me for Latino candidates for this year’s award program, I was only too happy to offer up some ideas.

Going to one of the areas I know best, I recommended La Santa Cecilia, a notable Los Angeles-based new fusion group that moves effortlessly between a range of genres; in their case, *Nueva Trova* (Latin American protest), *Corrido* (folk ballad), and *Son Cubano*, among others. Their musicianship is impeccable, the lead vocalist’s voice is both powerful and celestial, and their allegiance to root music is solid. They are ingenious in the way they fuse and execute among time-honored musical traditions and add unique twists, not unlike Esperanza Spalding. And, like Spalding, they are not the only young, standout performers doing this kind of clever fusion work.

What I find particularly compelling about La Santa Cecilia is their commitment to addressing important social issues of the day. Their recent release, [\*ICE-El Hielo\*](#), tells the haunting tale of the bifurcated everyday lives of undocumented Latino service workers and a Latino Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer, and their eventful and tragic intersection. The group recently played at DC’s large immigration reform rally on April 10<sup>th</sup>. When I hear them, notions of Joan Báez, Mercedes Sosa and Inti-Illimani come to mind, performers of an earlier period whose work help defined “protest” music.

Michael Caruso greeted my recommendation with some skepticism, but we met, and I think he may be viewing La Santa Cecilia through a different lens. I have no idea how the group will fare in the process of selecting this year’s Ingenuity Awards, but if things are changing under the Smithsonian’s trademark sunburst logo, perhaps we can begin with some adjustment in hue.