



# Decoding 'Despacito': An Oral History of Latin Music (Interview with author Leila Cobo, VP at Billboard)

## Episode 121

### Summary:

Leila Cobo es la autora del libro Decoding 'Despacito' y vicepresidenta y líder de la industria latina en Billboard. Ella comparte una mirada entre bastidores de algunos de los mayores éxitos latinos de los últimos cincuenta años, incluyendo sus historias favoritas de artistas como Selena, Willie Colón, Juan Luis Guerra y Shakira. En su libro ofrece detalles nunca escuchados de cómo se concibieron las canciones más influyentes de la música latina - contadas por los artistas, ejecutivos y productores que las crearon. En nuestra conversación, Leila habla de los orígenes de la música salsa y también comparte su consejo sobre cómo obtener fluidez en otro idioma basado en su experiencia aprendiendo inglés, francés e italiano.

Leila Cobo is the author of the book Decoding 'Despacito' and vice president and Latin industry lead at Billboard. She shares a behind-the-scenes look at some of the biggest Latin hits of the past fifty years, including her favorite stories from artists like Selena, Willie Colón, Juan Luis Guerra, and Shakira. Her book gives never before heard details of how the most influential songs in Latin music were conceived - told by the artists, executives, and producers who created them. In our conversation, Leila talks about the origins of salsa music and also shares her advice on how to get fluent in another language based on her experience learning English, French, and Italian.

Time	Speaker	Transcript
00:00 – 00:05	Tamara	Hola Leila, gracias por estar aquí, thank you so much for joining me on Learn Spanish Con Salsa podcast  <a href="#">Hi Leila, thanks for being here, thank you so much for joining me on Learn Spanish con Salsa Podcast</a>
00:06 – 00:10	Leila	Hi, thank you for having me. I'm very excited, I love your concept.
00:11 – 00:44	Tamara	Yes, and I have to tell you I actually found out about your book from one of the members of my community because they just found it,

		and they say you have to get this book! and I went to check it out and I was like; Oh! I was not disappointed. When I saw the titles, I was intrigued, and for me since music is one of the things that really helps me learn Spanish and get immersed in the culture, begin to travel and dance, it was really interesting for me to hear some of the stories behind some of my favorites song, and actually I have my copy right here <i>en Español</i> .
00:45 – 00:48	Leila	And I have it <i>en Inglés</i> .
00:49 – 00:54	Tamara	It's also a little about what is important for you to publish the book in both Spanish and English?
00:55 – 01:34	Leila	Because we want it... and I say we because it was not just me it was my publisher too and my agent that was really integral and getting the book done. But it was always about taking the music not just to the Latin fan but beyond, it was... we wanted everybody who could be a casual fan of Latin music or maybe not even a fan of Latin music, to be intrigued and to then read it and say: Oh my god, I didn't know this! I didn't know this was like part of us, so to speak... so it was very important that the book be accessible to everybody, not just the Latin fans.
01:35 – 02:03	Tamara	Yes, we were talking a little bit before we started recording here that you actually have an audiobook too in Spanish and English and I think that is a great tool for learning, so It is actually something I recommend if you are trying to improve your listening comprehension, your vocabulary. Having that audiobook and then having you know like the hard copy and sort of reading along while you listen it's perfect, so I love that you did that and you'd also narrated your audiobook as well, so I think that's gonna be great for those that are leaning Spanish as well.
02:04 – 02:20	Leila	Yeah, I had never done that, I'd never narrated a book and when they ask me to do it, I say sure, and then once you go to do it... well first of all I didn't realize that it takes three to four days to read one of these things.
02:20 – 02:20	Tamara	Wow!

02:21 – 03:18	Leila	<p>Because your voice gives out, among other things, and your energy flags, so I had that. Okay, I'll just sit down and read it and one take and then when I first got the schedule that it was Ok from 9 to 5, I said grate and then... When do we do the second book? and they're like: No, that's day one of the first book.</p> <p>So, it was a challenge and one of the things you learn by doing that is that a lot of words that you often use, and you're right, you don't know how to pronounce, or at least in my case since I'm not a native English speaker I didn't. So, it was really very interesting, and you sat down with the director and... Because it was COVID she was somewhere else, but she would stop me, and she would say: No! and then she would correct my pronunciation. It was very fascinating to do it, so hopefully people who are learning either language actually could benefit from it.</p>
03:19 – 04:12	Tamara	<p>Yeah, I think that's such a great value to provide that with the book. I always love to get the audiobook, because I'm always on the run and I like listening to podcasts I have a podcast, so I love audio as well, so that really helps me as well because I think when we're reading in another language like you mention there were some words in English that you didn't know how to pronounce. I'm sure it's the same thing for people that are learning Spanish right there reading the hard copy or if they think they know how to pronounce it but when they hear you, they say: oh! That's how it's really pronounced, so I think that's just a really great addition to the book itself besides all of the amazing stories which I want to get into it. So, can you talk a little bit about how you chose the songs for this book? because I know that you were talking a lot about those songs that really crossed over and became a huge hit and really put Latin music on the map in different periods of time, so how did you come up with the with the songs for the book?</p>
04:13 – 06:29	Leila	<p>I wanted songs that had really moved the Nido and I didn't want to go... I went back 50 years which is a lot, but when we first started to build the book, we discussed going back even further, you know like the "Perez Prado" songs or old "Boleros", and I didn't want to do that because I wanted people... The book is an oral history so it's narrated... I have an intro for those who haven't read it, it's an introduction, each chapter has an introduction to the song that explains the importance of the song in kind of popular culture, but then the narration is done by the players of each song and I mean, the artist, the composer, the producer, people, and it ranges from like some chapters have 2 people and some chapters have 8 people,</p>

		<p>it really runs the gamut, but it's in there... it's there a narrative, so it's all these different voices telling the story and I wanted them to be alive, I didn't want a third person narration, they only chapter where I did that was with Selena with "Amor Prohibido" because obviously she killed when she was only 23 years old, but otherwise everybody else it's in their voice.</p> <p>So that set the time frame, and from there on, first we had like the massive you know "Macarena" "Livin la Vida Loca" Enrique Iglesias "Bailando, Despacito" of course, and then we started to look at those songs that I felt very strongly had really kind of marked before and after, like without this song we wouldn't have had this, or this song created this, and that's how I started to build the book. Some of the songs are in English you know like Julio Iglesias "To All the Girls I've Loved Before" which is a chapter I love. There's three of those there's "Conga" also by Miami Sound Machine and Gloria Stefan, and then "Smooth" by Santana and those three songs were all really groundbreaking in their own way, either by chart position or... "Smooth" won all the Grammys at the Grammy Awards that year. Each one has a little story.</p>
06:30 – 07:24	Tamara	<p>Yeah, I love that how you set it up like... it's almost like you go into this journey with each story and really learn what went into the song, how the artist came up with it from the composer's, how they came with the melody, it really is fascinating to hear that process of all that it takes to put together you know like a 3-minute... you know to five-minute song depend on the genre, so it really is fascinating I love how you break it down, and then have it towed in the voices of those artists and musicians, so we really get a sense of what they were feeling behind the songs and if it really matches up with... you how the music makes us feel, because we all have our own personal and emotional connection when we hear this music and it becomes a part of our Lives. I've found that really fascinating.</p> <p>I do wanna ask you though, since you know so many people in the industry and I'm pretty sure someone called you and said: Leila why didn't you include my song in your book? Did you have anybody that felt like they were left out over their songs? That maybe you thought about putting them in but maybe you kind of changed your mind later.</p>
07:24 – 08:17	Leila	<p>They haven't called me but they told me when I see them, there is like: Oh and why isn't my song here, and I feel terrible about that I</p>

		<p>have to say, because I feel guilty because the people that have asked me... like their songs in a way should be there, but it reached a point where I had to cut the songs, you know, I had to say okay no more, no more songs this is it, and so we really went to the essentials. We did like... There isn't a song by Mana who I love, there isn't a song by Juanes, there isn't a song by... well some of the new artists I don't have their songs because I have made... The cutting point was 2017 with "Mi gente" that was it, and then at the very end we had Rosalia's "Malamente", but like I don't have Ozuna who's a big favorite of mine or Bad Bunny so if I were to do it...</p>
08:17 – 08:20	Tamara	Maluma, Romeo Santos.
08:19 – 08:33	Leila	Maluma, who else? Romeo Santos, I wanted to put and he wasn't available for the interview so I said well fine then no, and he is his own composer so if I didn't have him I would have a problem.
08:34 – 08:36	Tamara	Yeah, it didn't have a story, right?
08:37 – 09:33	Leila	<p>Yeah but... I mean they had a point, I had more songs. I originally had a list of like 40 songs and then we at one point decided 20 songs, it's going to be 20 and that's it and that's tough, so I really... I had to be very Draconian with it, so I have to choose okay this one or this one... And it's not a reflection on the song so, it's not that, it's not, it's... because some songs were not huge like "Los Tigres del Norte, Contrabando y Traicion" that wasn't a huge song but I left it because I felt there was a song that really open the door to all the "Narcocorrido" genre, as a musical genre and as a TV genre and as a film genre, so I think that song had a lot to do. So, there were different reasons for including the songs that might not seem obvious but that go beyond just popularity.</p>
09:33 – 09:43	Tamara	Ok, that's good to know because it's not just like oh all the songs that hit number one for like 10 weeks or something like the billboard criteria, you actually were intentional about the songs that you chose to put in the book.
09:44 – 10:36	Leila	<p>Yeah, and for example "El gran Varón" by Willie Colon that song wasn't Willie's biggest hit ever, but I thought it was so important that that song talks about being gay from a male point of view at a time when no one was talking about that, I mean that that was a topic that wasn't being touch with a ten-foot pole and for Omar Alfano, who is a fabulous song writer, to write the song and then for</p>

		Willie Colon who is... you know he plays the trombone... I can't imagine anybody more "Macho" sounding and looking than Willie Colon, to record it I think was a huge statement and very eye-opening, kind of like: Oh, oh, wow, you can really say anything you want in a song, the song is good.
10:36 – 12:11	Tamara	That was one of the songs that surprised me the most, one of the stories because, I have to tell you, when I first heard this song it wasn't when it first came out so I wasn't aware of like all the controversy about it, so I thought that about it when I started it and it was one of the songs I know I've known I've danced it before and I was like: Wait, is that what this song is about? I never really looked into it and to hear that story, and the rich history, and how it relates to the Forefront engaged like there was so much to that that it made me go back and reevaluate and it really look into it, I'm after I heard sort of the artist tell the story, and the composer, and the fact that there was a real guy, right? Like this has been based on but we don't know the identity of this person, it is so interesting. So, I felt like... you know I'm always telling people... you know, you got to know the music and a lot of people who dance Salsa don't speak Spanish right? Some of them just like connect with the Rhythm and they start to get the feeling, but they don't know what the song is about and I'm always telling people: You got to learn, like the song... is not in your book but it's "Rebellion" by Joe Arroyo, is like one of his songs that when I first found out the lyrics I was like: What? This is about a slave rebellion in Cartagena Colombia, and it is a Dance song, it's not like this song, you sit and think about it. So, it's just funny to me that there was a song that missed my radar, like wow this is so fascinating, that there was so much controversy about that topic when it first came out, so I really did appreciate that one. But I wanna ask you this since you sort of been in this for a while you know this, you've been around the music, was there any story in particular that surprised you that you weren't expecting to hear or something that you thought was a little bit interesting behind one of the songs that you picked?
12:11 – 13:01	Leila	Well, they all had something that I hadn't heard. The story I knew best was Despacito because it had just happened, and I had reported it.... kind of to death, but aside from that I had never sat down with them to talk so specifically about a song. So, there was something in every story that was very surprising that I had no idea, like in "Conga". "Conga" is a cool example because it's a song that's so well-known, I've interviewed Gloria so many times, but this was the first time I really sat down with her to talk just about this

		very specific song, and she went into great detail about how they recorded it, how they recorded the effects of the song, how they recorded the percussion, they sample James Brown... They sample James Brown? like... that bloomed my mind.
13:01 – 13:02	Tamara	Yes, mine too.
13:02 – 14:13	Leila	Yeah, right? Like all these years of hearing that song I had no idea, I was like really really? Like I went back and omg the do... like I didn't know this Smooth... even Smooth which I had also done an oral history of Smooth for billboard when I spoke with Itaal Shur who co-wrote the song with Rob Thomas, and he told me that song originally was about like two people meeting in a... Like a little clandestine meeting, in a motel, and they changed that whole story and made it... It's kind of like the basic structure but they entirely changed lyrics, and how Rob Thomas came in and wrote these songs about his Spanish Harlem Mona Lisa who was his girlfriend at the time, you know, who was half Puerto Rican, I think. Each story had a little nugget of information that was... that was really lovely, I mean, Julio Iglesias talking about how he flew to Texas to record with Willie Nelson, he had never met Willie Nelson, and like he sees this country guy with the braids, and he was like: This is the guy... Who are you?
14:13 – 14:16	Tamara	And he said he didn't speak any English either, right?
14:16– 15:16	Leila	He didn't speak any English. They all have something really kind of beautiful, Selena's dad talking about how the story that was the inspiration for the song was actually the real story of his grandmother and her ill-fated love, so they all have like a little bit of cool background in them... Of how they came to be... And they get very specific as you saw, they really do, and Shakira in Whenever Wherever there's a part that I just love because I can just see this in my head, that Tommy Mottola says that she walked into his office carrying one of those legal yellow pads and he says he would sit down, and give notes, and take notes, I've never liked had an artist like that and I can just see Shakira doing that. So, every story had something... They got very personal.
15:16– 15:27	Tamara	Was it hard to get any of them to open up about the songs or were any of their memories a little sketchy because I know some of the songs are maybe from 20-30 years ago or was it quite easy were they willing to sort of tell these stories and share this information?

15:28– 16:04	Leila	They were willing to tell them, but they had to be prompted because a lot of them have forgotten, and then when I started speaking with Shakira I said okay so tell me how you wrote the song and so she told me like in a minute, and then I said okay now let's go back like Where were you exactly? Where was the studio? What were you talking about? and she kept saying, which is what a lot of them kept saying: Oh my god it was so long ago! but I remember... I remember... They remember, I don't think they had thought about these things in a long time, but then they remember, and they get excited talking about it, it's their song.
16:04– 16:34	Tamara	Yeah, it is interesting to me how some of the songs that became really popular we're necessarily the best songs, like I love history about Macarena and how they're like: This is ridiculous! and like... if it wasn't for the date that is all, that probably really wouldn't have worked, right? It was like such an interesting story to me to hear about that whole thing, because the lyrics of the song are pretty basic, it's not like this is a classic, right? like you're not going to pull this up like your top 40 songs of all time, but it works, right? because of this dance that they came up with and it became an international hit.
16:35– 17:19	Leila	I love that story too and all the layers of that story, because first it's them Los del Rio talking how they wrote this song, you know, in a party in Caracas and it was kind of just for fun: Hey Macarena, you know, not thinking much, and it kind of becomes a little hit in Spain, and then they remixed it, and then they remix it again with the Bayside Boys here in Miami and Carlos Yarza saying how every week they would get a call from the promoter and the promoter would be: Oh! The song is now in the top 100, Oh! now it's in the top 50 and Carlos Yarza who had written the remix kept saying: I can't believe it, the silly song, like how is this even happening?
17:20– 17:59	Tamara	Yeah, that was... That was one of my favorite stories, there are so many good stories in the book, and I really love the description of Latin music as " <i>Arroz y Frijoles con hamburguesa</i> ". I loved that because it's like this mix of cultures... yeah, is it fair to say that most of the song that became really big hits were really like a fusion of different genres, like mixing modern with classic instead of the more traditional Latin songs that maybe, you know, somebody who really loves Latin that would be their favorite but these songs that really



		crossed over or most of them like a fusion between like American culture and Latin culture?
17:59– 19:25	Leila	I think all of them were a fusion in some way and I think that's part of the beauty of the book and the beauty of the songs, and I didn't realize that when I went in, I didn't choose the song like that. I chose just, you know, the songs I thought were the best, the most influential, the most impactful, and then in telling the stories I realized how much fusion there was in each of them, and I love that you picked up on that because that's been a sticking point with me especially as I was writing the book and so many people post on Twitter, which is like, I don't even know what the objective is, but they always put like: Oh! no so this person isn't Latin, like shame on them, or this person is Spanish, or this person doesn't do this, or this is the wrong gender, and no one was thinking this when they did these songs, like Shakira wasn't thinking: Oh! Tim Mitchell is from Detroit so I shouldn't record with him. Like no, she was thinking this is my writing partner who I write great songs with, so let's work together, and Gloria and Emilio we're doing... I mean that was like a whole mishmash of cultures, what they were doing, even Enrique Iglesias was doing like his pop in Miami then it connected with Gente de Zona in Cuba. Every song is like a huge fusion, a huge fusion, it's like the best of everything.
19:25– 21:02	Tamara	Yeah, I think that's part of what makes some successful because I do, you know, you talked about the Twitter sort of audience out there, and I think it's really interesting that people who really love music tend to get very dogmatic about, I think, they're very much like: No, this is what true Bachata or true salsa, whatever, and don't like some of that, they consider crossover almost bad, I mean like... I relate to that because I like rough as a hip hop hit, right? and I was like: Oh! I love hip hop, and then when it started like crossing over I kind of had this tension to where I felt like: oh, is that real hip hop? like it's so popular... Yeah, like it was my personal thing, and then it became... then it's like Eminem and I'm like... I like this, but this is weird, like this guy from Detroit he's not from the Bronx, like what is this? So, I think it is interesting that that tension is there, but also how some of that fusion is what makes it relatable like you talked about Selena's story and how she was born in the US, but she had the sort of bicultural, bilingual style that... People can relate to... that were also born in the US that were Latino 2nd 3rd Generation who hadn't had that connection before. So, I think that's what interesting part of through all of the stories and all of the songs, that it would just happens to be when the artist is experimenting and

		<p>pushing those styles and really trying to mix things up that that's when they come upon something really great, so I think that is a huge part of it.</p> <p>And I want to ask you a question because you are a music expert and I have to ask you this because this is Learn Spanish con Salsa. There's a lot of controversy about where Salsa comes from, right? like is it from Puerto Rico, is it from Colombia, is it from Cuba. I always say it was from Nueva York, right? like it's... That's where it is, it's a mix of different Latin music.</p>
21:02– 21:03	Leila	I always say that.
16:04– 21:14	Tamara	Yeah, so what would... what the story behind like the genre in it, you know, because Salsa itself is an invention, it's not like this thing that exists, you know, like it has its roots in any one country.
21:15 – 23:27	Leila	<p>No, it has all these rhythms I mean from Cuba predominantly, but also for Puerto Rico, and then it really came together or at least this is the accepted narrative, and it's the narrative that I've used myself. In fact, Johnny Pacheco died a couple of months ago and I wrote the obit for billboard and in the obit, I said he was the person who... one of the people who originally coined the term Salsa, to refer to that music that was a mixture of Puerto Rican beats and Cuban beats, but also kind of like the jazz beats, you know the trumpets, the brass from New York City, and then you have this big mix, and if you listen to Colombian salsa it's different from Cuban Salsa, it's different from Puerto Rican salsa, each country kind of like puts its little bit of the Rhythm, but I always say that it came together in New York and I think that's pretty accepted, I mean in Cuba they were doing song, obviously, and I think we can obviously agree that if there had been no "Son Cubano" there would be no Salsa as we know, that's what I think. But I think the sounds are completely different. The book has a chapter on Carlos Vives, right? who is known for his "Vallenato" which is not purest "Vallenato", and that chapter which is "La tierra del Olvido" which I put in there, not his biggest hit but it is... I had called them actually about another song, no because I wanted to include him because I thought like you opened up "Vallenato" to the world and then he said: No you should do "La Tierra del Olvido" because this song really was the blueprint for what came afterwards, and it was great because even though, it was all Colombian musicians, he wasn't doing an international fusion, everybody in that song talks about their style of music, so</p>

		"Mayté" says, so you know, I came from the coast and I brought that sensibility, then Egidio had the accordion and he had that sensibility, and then the music director was this guy from Bogota that did Rock, and they put all of that together and that's what came out, so even then you have a fusion.
23:27 – 23:53	Tamara	Right, and I think it also speaks just how the Spanish language itself is different in each country, right? Because people say Spanish is Spanish... Yeah, but if you go to Colombia and then you go to Cuba, and then Dominican Republic, it is like... Is it the same language? So, I think that the cultural part is so important to understand, you know, not just about the artist and the people behind them but also sort of those differences that really give the flavor to the music, so very interesting stories.
23:57 – 24:41	Leila	And you know what? there is one last thing with the book, there is one song, Shakira Whenever Wherever, and that song was translated by Gloria Estefan and it's a great translation, it's a really great translation, and so if any of you guys are fans of Shakira and that song, I suggest you put the two version side-by-side because I think it's one of the best translations I've ever seen of a song, well you have to adapt the word so they fit the music in the other language, so they never be exact, but it works really well. So, I think that's a good little teaching trick so they're too and it's fun. Okay, how did she say lucky to know my breasts are small and humble in Spanish? And she makes it work.
24:41 – 25:19	Tamara	Yes, translation is an art and I think people assume just because, you know, someone speaks two languages that they can be like a translator or interpreter, you have people say like: Oh well, you know, I know they speak English we speak French and Spanish Like can you translate this for me? And there is surprise when a person would say no I can't because it's not always that easy, just because you have like these two different track, and there are words that you know in Spanish or English or another language, but when someone ask you to sort of connect those dots, it's like wait hold on I should know this but for some reason those connections aren't there, right? So, I think translation is an art, I think people take it for granted or just assume that everyone can do it.
25:19 – 25:21	Leila	Absolutely, I totally agree.

25:21 – 25:46	Tamara	<p><i>I hope everyone gets the book, but before I let you go... Quiero saber un poquito de ti, quiero preguntarles un poquito en español porque este es un Podcast para estudiantes de español y quiero saber un poquito de la historia de la mujer tras el libro, entonces Leila cuéntanos un poquito de ti, ¿de dónde eres? ¿Y aparte de ser un autor a qué te dedicas?</i></p> <p><i>I hope everyone gets the book, but before I let you go... I want to know a little bit about you, I want to ask them a little bit in Spanish because this is a Podcast for Spanish students and I want to know a little bit about the history of the woman behind the book, so Leila tells a little bit about yourself, where are you from? And besides being an author, what else do you do?</i></p>
25:46 – 25:51	Leila	<p>Bueno yo te quiero preguntar a ti ¿dónde aprendiste español?</p> <p><i>Well, I want to ask you, where did you learn Spanish?</i></p>
25:51 – 26:09	Tamara	<p>En Estados Unidos, hablando por internet, con la música, principalmente con la música latina, cantando... No puedo cantar la verdad, pero... en la ducha si, en la ducha si cantó, escuchó la música, también bailo Salsa, entonces sí.</p> <p><i>In the United States, talking on the internet, with music, mainly with Latin music, singing... I can't really sing but... In the shower, in the shower... Yes, I sing, I listen to music, I also dance Salsa, so yes.</i></p>
26:15 – 26:14	Leila	<p>Porque hablas muy bien, estoy muy impresionada, muy buen acento.</p> <p><i>Because you speak very well, I'm very impressed, with a very good accent.</i></p>
26:15 – 26:15	Tamara	<p>Gracias.</p> <p><i>Thank you.</i></p>
26:16 – 26:22	Leila	<p>Pero yo soy colombiana donde se habla el mejor español del mundo o por lo menos eso dicen.</p> <p><i>But I am Colombian, where the best Spanish in the world is spoken, or at least that's what they say.</i></p>

26:23 – 26:23	Tamara	<p>He oído eso.</p> <p><i>I've heard that.</i></p>
26:26 – 27:38	Leila	<p>Y soy de Cali, que es la capital de la Salsa... Wow, cómo me eché de flores hoy, pero si soy... Soy colombiana, soy de Cali, tocó piano, soy una familia muy musical, pero también somos muy amantes de la salsa y de la música cubana en mi casa. Estudié música y trabajo en Billboard hace 20 años cubriendo la música latina, entonces, siempre he querido mezclar de alguna manera la música con el periodismo que son mis dos grandes pasiones y he escrito... Este es el tercer libro ¿el tercero?... Si, este es el tercer libro de música que escribo, pero es el más lindo. Tengo un libro que es como una guía para la gente que quiere ser artista, después hice... fui <i>ghostwriter</i> de un <i>memory</i> con Ednita Nazario que se llama vida y este es mi tercer libro de música, también tengo dos novelas que son muy musicales, pero este es mi tercer libro y cubro... manejó todo lo que es la música latina para Billboard, entonces, todo el día estoy rodeada de música y rodeada de letras y canciones y eso es lo que me apasiona.</p> <p><i>And I'm from Cali, which is the capital of Salsa... Wow, how I flattered myself today, but I am... I'm Colombian, I'm from Cali, I play piano, I'm from a very musical family, but we are also very fond of salsa and Cuban music in my house. I studied music and I have been working at Billboard for 20 years covering Latin music, so I have always wanted to somehow mix music with journalism, which are my two great passions and I have written... This is the third book, the third? Yes, this is the third music book I've written, but it's the most beautiful. I have a book that is like a guide for people who want to be artists, then I did... I was a ghostwriter of a memory with Ednita Nazario called Vida and this is my third music book. I also have two novels that are very musical, but this is my third book and I cover... I handle everything that is Latin music for Billboard, then, all day long I am surrounded by music and surrounded by lyrics and songs and that is what I am passionate about.</i></p>
27:39 – 27:41	Tamara	<p>Si es como un sueño para mí creo...</p> <p><i>Yes, it's like a dream for me I think...</i></p>
27:41 – 28:33	Leila	<p>Eso es lo que te... y ¿sabes qué? Quiero volver al libro porque para tus estudiantes hay un capítulo que... Bueno, todos los capítulos me</p>

		<p>sorprendieron, pero el de Juan Luis Guerra de Burbujas de amor, yo no sé si ustedes saben que él se inspiró en las... en los poemas de Neruda para hacer la letra de esa canción, cosa que yo no sabía, pero tampoco me sorprendió ¿no? Porque así es Juan Luis, pero es bonito porque hay referencias muy directas en la canción a obras de Neruda, entonces es una canción linda para descubrir cómo <i>Little nuggets like</i> ¡ah! esto es de tal poema.</p> <p><i>That's what you... and you know what? I want to go back to the book because for your students there is a chapter that... Well, all the chapters surprised me, but the one about Juan Luis Guerra in Burbujas de amor, I don't know if you know that he was inspired by the... by Neruda's poems to write the lyrics of that song, which I didn't know but it didn't surprise me either, did it? because that's Juan Luis, but it's nice because there are very direct references in the song to Neruda's works, so it's a nice song to discover how Little nuggets like ah! This is from such a poem.</i></p>
28:22 – 28:33	Tamara	<p>La sorpresa para mí de esa historia fue la influencia de los Beatles, porque él dice que los Beatles tocan bachata y para mí fue como ¿Qué?</p> <p><i>The surprise for me in that story was the Beatles influence, because he says that the Beatles play bachata and for me it was like What?</i></p>
28:34 – 28:48	Leila	<p>Y fuiste a oír la canción ¿verdad? <i>Till there was, is a cover.</i> El apenas me contó colgué el teléfono, porque hicimos la entrevista por teléfono y fui y busqué la canción y dije ajá tiene razón.</p> <p><i>And you went to hear the song, didn't you? Till there was, is a cover. As soon as he told me I hung up the phone, because we did the interview over the phone and I went and looked up the song and I said aha he's right.</i></p>
28:48 – 29:01	Tamara	<p>Eso fue gracioso para mí. Entonces, ¿cómo fue el proceso que tú aprendiste inglés? porque eres de Colombia, entonces, ¿aprendiste en la escuela cuando eras niña o después como adulto?</p> <p><i>That was funny to me. So, how was the process that you learned English, because you are from Colombia, so did you learn in school as a child or later as an adult?</i></p>

29:01 – 29:27	Leila	<p>Aprendí en la escuela de niña, fui a un colegio americano en Cali y todas las clases eran en inglés excepto la clase de español. Entonces, era si... <i>It was an American School</i>, entonces, todos aprendimos inglés y todos hablábamos inglés y todos somos muy americanizados a pesar de ser muy colombianos.</p> <p><i>I learned in school as a child, I went to an American school in Cali and all the classes were in English except for the Spanish class. So, it was if... It was an American School, so we all learned English, and we all spoke English and we are all very Americanized even though we are very Colombian.</i></p>
29:27 – 29:31	Tamara	<p>Si, entonces una mezcla de culturas de toda tu vida ¿no?</p> <p><i>Yes, so a mix of cultures from all your life, right?</i></p>
2:31 – 30:34	Leila	<p>Sí... sí y me encanta y crecí oyendo mucha música obviamente en español porque vivía en Colombia, pero también mucha música en inglés, entonces, como Juan Luis muy amante de los Beatles. Estaba pensando ahora mientras hablábamos que cuando yo era chiquita, y todavía no había internet ni lyrics online ni nada de esas cosas, y a nosotros en Colombia no llegaban los discos los Vinyls, nos llegaba la versión colombiana, o sea, no llegaban con la letra ni nada; entonces, uno se sentaba y creo que todos en Latinoamérica hemos tenido esta experiencia, que poníamos la música y nos sentábamos a tratar de descifrar qué era lo que estaban diciendo, entonces unos estaba oía las canciones y las escribía y las escribía y las escribía; y muchos años después, ya de grande, oigo las canciones ya tengo las letras enfrente y digo "<i>Oh my god, I learned the wrong lyric like this is not what they were saying at all</i>".</p> <p><i>Yes... yes, and I love it and I grew up listening to a lot of music obviously in Spanish because I lived in Colombia, but also a lot of music in English, so, like Juan Luis, I'm very fond of the Beatles. I was thinking now while we were talking that when I was a little girl, and there was still no internet or online lyrics or anything like that, and we in Colombia didn't get the Vinyls albums, we got the Colombian version, that is, they didn't come with lyrics or anything; So, one sat down and I think that all of us in Latin America have had this experience, we played the music and we sat down to try to decipher what they were saying, then some of us heard the songs and wrote them and wrote them and wrote them and wrote them; and many years later, when I grew up, I hear the songs and I have</i></p>

		<i>the lyrics in front of me and I say "Oh my god, I learned the wrong lyric like this is not what they were saying at all".</i>
30:34 – 31:02	Tamara	<p>Hay un meme así con un gato diciendo que: Cuando descubrí que... ¡Ay! ¿Esa es la letra de verdad de esa canción? Es una sorpresa porque estaba escuchando, pero no sabemos el idioma, entonces estamos cantando lo que, lo que escuchamos ¿no? Pero a veces no es no es correcto; pero también eso me pasa en inglés con algunas canciones como Michael Jackson es como que: ¿Qué está diciendo?</p> <p><i>There's a meme like that with a cat saying that: When I found out that... hey, that's the actual lyrics of that song? It's a surprise because I was listening, but we don't know the language, so we are singing what we hear, right? but sometimes it's not correct; but also, that happens to me in English with some songs like Michael Jackson, it's like: What is he saying?</i></p>
31:02 – 31:17	Leila	<p>Y después uno oye y dice: ¡ahh! <i>I get it.</i> Hay muchas anécdotas así de uno cuando se da cuenta de lo que de verdad están diciendo, pero digo... <i>It Works both ways, ¿no?</i></p> <p><i>And then you hear it and you say: ahh! I get it. There's a lot of anecdotes like that when you realize what they're really saying, but I mean... It works both ways, doesn't it?</i></p>
31:17– 31:26	Tamara	<p>Y yo sé que esta es una pregunta bien difícil de responder, pero voy a preguntarte de todas formas, ¿Tienes una canción favorita?</p> <p><i>And I know this is a very difficult question to answer, but I'm going to ask you anyway, do you have a favorite song?</i></p>
31:27 – 31:28	Leila	<p>¿Del libro?</p> <p><i>From the book?</i></p>
31:28 – 31:32	Tamara	<p>No, en tu vida, de todo, no necesariamente en el libro.</p> <p><i>No, in your life, everything, not necessarily in the book.</i></p>
31:32 – 32:06	Leila	<p>¡Ay, ¿mi vida? De todo... tengo muchas canciones favoritas. Tengo... a ver, las canciones que tengo en mi playlist ahora, tengo un playlist que se llama Just to Listen, y ahí pongo como que las canciones que me encanta, y obviamente tengo canciones de mi esposo que se llama Arthur Hanlon y es pianista, entonces ahora...</p>



		<p>jah! ahora tiene hallelujah con Eva Luna Montaner y esa está muy linda, <i>that's a great song</i>, tengo Sunday Candy ¿has oído esa canción?</p> <p><i>Oh, my life? Everything... I have a lot of favorite songs. I have... let's see, the songs that I have in my playlist now, I have a playlist called Just to Listen, and there I put the songs that I love, and obviously I have songs by my husband, his name is Arthur Hanlon, and he is a pianist, so now... ah! Now he has Hallelujah with Eva Luna Montaner and that is very nice, that's a great song, I have Sunday Candy, have you heard that song?</i></p>
32:06 – 32:08	Tamara	<p>No, no, nunca.</p> <p><i>No, Never.</i></p>
32:08 – 32:16	Leila	<p>It's a great song, tengo Cali Pachanguero del grupo Niche.</p> <p><i>It's a great song, I have Cali Pachanguero from the group Niche.</i></p>
32:17 – 32:18	Tamara	<p>Ah, sí, un clásico.</p> <p><i>Oh yes, a classic.</i></p>
32:18 – 32:28	Leila	<p>No está en el libro, pero es de mis canciones favoritas. Tengo... <i>She used to love a lot de Johnny Cash. So, there 's no rhyme or reason, really?</i></p> <p><i>It's not in the book, but it's one of my favorite songs. I have... She used to love a lot of Johnny Cash. So, there's no rhyme or reason, really?</i></p>
32:28 – 32:30	Tamara	<p>Tienes una mezcla de todo.</p> <p><i>You have a mix of everything</i></p>

32:30 – 32:40	Leila	<p>Tengo Summertime en la versión de Louis Armstrong y Ella Fitzgerald, <i>and then I have before he cheats by Carrie Underwood, so what can I tell you?</i></p> <p><i>I have Summertime by Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald version, and then before he cheats by Carrie Underwood, so what can I tell you?</i></p>
32:42 – 32:43	Tamara	A little thing about everything.
32:43 – 32:52	Tamara	<p>Y ¿Cuándo te mudaste a los Estados Unidos?</p> <p><i>And when did you move to the United States?</i></p>
32:52 – 31:56	Leila	<p>Me mudé cuando tenía 19 años para ir a la universidad para ir a Manhattan School of Music en New York.</p> <p><i>I moved when I was 19 years old to go to college to go to Manhattan School of Music in New York.</i></p>
32:58 – 33:24	Tamara	<p>Entonces, ¿fue difícil para ti hablar inglés con personas de Nueva York? porque yo sé que ellos tienen un acento distinto, no y también cuando está aprendiendo un idioma no necesariamente hablas el idioma, entonces fue difícil para ti al principio mudarse a Nueva York para hablar con la gente allí que fue diferente aprendiendo el idioma en Colombia?</p> <p><i>So, was it difficult for you to speak English with people from New York, because I know they have a different accent, no and also when you are learning a language you don't necessarily speak the language, so was it difficult for you at first moving to New York to speak with people there that were different learning the language in Colombia?</i></p>
33:26 – 34:09	Leila	<p>No, fíjate que no, porque como en el colegio era un colegio americano y los profesores casi todos eran de Estados Unidos, entonces el oído lo tenía muy acostumbrado. Lo que siempre me cuesta trabajo es cuando hablo con gente inglesa o de Escocia o de Irlanda. Yo siempre digo que cuando voy... Cuando me siento a ver una película, especialmente una película escocesa o irlandesa, me toma como 20 minutos empezar a entender lo que están diciendo. Pero no, en Nueva York no, no, la verdad que no. Además, ir a Nueva York era como que el sueño de mi vida, <i>so I was like so</i></p>

		<p><i>excited to be there, no importaba en que me hablaran, I was gonna make that work.</i></p> <p><i>No, of course not, because at school it was an American school and the teachers were almost all from the United States, so my ear was very accustomed to it. What I always have a hard time with is when I talk to English people or people from Scotland or Ireland. I always say that when I go... when I sit down to watch a movie, especially a Scottish or Irish movie, it takes me like 20 minutes to start to understand what they're saying. But no, not in New York, no, not really. Besides, going to New York was like the dream of my life, so I was so excited to be there, no matter what they were talking to me in, I was gonna make that work.</i></p>
34:09 – 34:29	Tamara	<p>Sí, sí entiendo. Entonces, ¿tienes algún truco o consejo que puedas darles a los estudiantes de español? Que están pensando: ¡Ay! yo nunca voy a llegar a la fluidez, ¿Tienes algún tip o algo así para ellos?</p> <p><i>Yes, yes, I do. So, do you have any tips or advice that you can give to Spanish students? Who are thinking: Oh, I'm never going to reach fluency, do you have any tips or anything like that for them?</i></p>
34:29 – 35:19	Leila	<p>Yo creo que... bueno, primero lo tienen que hablar, es la única manera porque solamente oyendo no vas a no vas a aprender, nunca. Por más que entiendas... Una cosa es entender otra cosa es hablar ¿no? Pero creo que hoy en día teniendo tantos <i>Streaming Services</i>, teniendo Netflix y Amazon que tienen tantas películas que son en otros idiomas y que son en español y que son buenas, porque hay unas series en español que son maravillosas, yo creo que eso es lo mejor que puede haber pasado. Yo siempre veo las series en el idioma original; entonces, creo que eso sí es un gran <i>aid</i>, ver las series, tener los <i>captions</i> para poder seguir, yo así practicaría. Eso es lo que estoy haciendo yo, por lo menos, con el francés que lo hablo muy mal. Pero sí, estoy tratando de mejorarlo.</p> <p><i>I think that... Well, first they have to speak it, it's the only way because only by hearing you are not going to learn, never. No matter how much you understand... It's one thing to understand, it's another thing to speak, isn't it? But I think that nowadays, having so many Streaming Services, having Netflix and Amazon that have so many movies in other languages and that are in Spanish and that are good, because there are some series in Spanish that are wonderful, I think that is the best thing that could have happened. I always watch the series in the original language; so, I think that is a</i></p>

		<i>great aid, to watch the series, to have the captions to be able to follow, I would practice that way. That's what I'm doing, at least with French, which I speak very poorly. But I am trying to improve it.</i>
35:22 – 35:24	Tamara	Sí, sí. ¡Ah! ¿Entonces estás aprendiendo francés también?  <i>Yes, yes. Ah! So, you're learning French too?</i>
35:24 – 35:36	Leila	Sí, pero sabes que, yo creo que tus consejos deben ser mejores que los míos porque tu dicción en español es muy buena, y es muy difícil tener la dicción en español.  <i>Yeah, but you know what, I think your advice must be better than mine because your diction in Spanish is very good, and it's very difficult to have diction in Spanish.</i>
35:36 – 35:55	Tamara	Es muy difícil para mí porque a veces es como... la gente me dice que: Ay Tamara, tú tienes un acento caribeño algo así, pero para mí yo solo trato de hablar ¿no? No tengo... No pienso en tener algún acento u otro sólo quiero hablar, pero creo que es porque aprendí con la música ¿no?  <i>It's very difficult for me because sometimes it's like... people tell me that: Oh Tamara, you have a Caribbean accent, something like that, but for me I just try to speak right? I don't have... I don't think about having an accent, I just want to speak, but I think it's because I learned through music, right?</i>
35:56 – 36:26	Leila	Pero es una gran manera de aprender, porque el español tiene las vocales más cerradas, tiene las consonantes más duras, esa es la gran diferencia con el inglés y tiene la R, L, Tre... Tre... la R y la RR que son difíciles, pero esas son cuestiones mecánicas ¿sabes? y son cuestiones que si uno las practica, practica, te acostumbras y puedes hacer el <i>switch</i> de un idioma al otro.  <i>But it's a great way to learn, because Spanish has the most closed vowels, it has the hardest consonants, that's the big difference with English and it has the R, L, Tre... Tre... the R and the RR which are difficult, but those are mechanical issues, you know? And there are issues that if you practice them, practice, you get used to them and you can make the switch from one language to the other.</i>

36:27 – 36:42	Tamara	<p>Y para mí sí, creo que también es mejor si hablas porque si sólo estás escuchando no vas a llegar a la fluidez solamente escuchando, sí es importante entender, pero tienes que hablar, entonces tienes razón.</p> <p><i>And for me, yes, I think it's also better if you speak because if you're just listening, you're not going to get to fluency just listening, yes, it's important to understand, but you have to speak, so you're right.</i></p>
36:43 – 37:25	Leila	<p>Sí, ¿y sabes qué es importante, que creo que la gente se olvida? Que a nosotros los latinos nos encanta cuando nos hablan en español, o por lo menos a mí, a mí me encanta cuando me hablan en español, y me encanta cuando estoy en un país latino y viene alguien de afuera a dar un concierto y hace el esfuerzo por hablar en español, así sea: Buenas noches, Bogotá... entonces, uno dice: Ay qué maravilla, están hablando español. Eso, yo creo que para nosotros es muy gratificante, que la gente haga el intento, así esté mal. Yo prefiero que me hablen mal, pero estén tratando, a que no traten para nada.</p> <p><i>Yeah, and you know what's important that I think people forget? That we Latinos love it when they speak to us in Spanish, or at least I do, I love it when they speak to me in Spanish, and I love it when I am in a Latin country and someone from abroad comes to give a concert and makes the effort to speak in Spanish, even if it is: Good evening, Bogota... then, you say: Oh, how wonderful, they are speaking Spanish. That, I think, is very gratifying for us, that people make the attempt, even if it is bad. I prefer that they speak badly to me, but they are trying, then not trying at all.</i></p>
37:25 – 37:45	Tamara	<p>Sí, sí, yo creo que también es importante porque el idioma llega al alma ¿no? No es como... Ah, tú tienes que hablar inglés ¿no? No; es, como yo estoy en tu país y yo voy a tratar, si no es perfecto está bien, pero yo voy a intentar hacerlo entonces sí.</p> <p><i>Yes, yes, I think it is also important because language touches the soul, doesn't it? It is not like... ah, you have to speak English, right? no, no, no, no; it is, like I am in your country and I am going to try, if it is not perfect it is okay, but I am going to try to do it then yes.</i></p>
37:45 – 38:04	Leila	<p>Sí, ¿y sabes? Es para cualquier país. Yo también cuando viajo y no conozco el idioma bien, trato, lo hablo mal, pero por lo menos, mi italiano que es mi idioma soñado lo hablo pésimamente mal, pero</p>

		<p>ahí como que lo chapoteo, mal hablado; y prefiero eso a no hacer el intento</p> <p><i>Yes, and you know? It is for any country. I also when I travel and I don't know the language well, I try, I speak it badly, but at least, my Italian, which is my dream language, I speak it very badly, but there I speak it badly, badly spoken; and I prefer that to not making the attempt.</i></p>
38:04 – 38:40	Tamara	<p>Sí, sí, yo creo que eso es importante también. Entonces, gracias Leila, thank you so much for your time today for sharing some of these amazing stories about all the music that we all love, right? some stories that we probably didn't know before and that would really help us connect more with Latin music and with the artist that created all of this amazing music that we listen to. Gracias Leila por compartir la historia tras tu libro con nosotros hoy.</p> <p><i>Yes, yes, I think that's important too. So, thank you Leila, thank you so much for your time today for sharing some of these amazing stories about all the music that we all love, right? some stories that we probably didn't know before and that would really help us connect more with Latin music and with the artist that created all of this amazing music that we listen to. Thanks, Leila, for sharing the story behind your book with us today.</i></p>
38:40 – 38:46	Leila	<p>Gracias, gracias a ti en español, La Fórmula Despacito en Español, Decoding Despacito, pero <i>get the audiobook</i> porque así lo pueden oír.</p> <p><i>Thank you in Spanish, La Fórmula Despacito en Español, Decoding Despacito, but get the audio book so you can listen to it.</i></p>
38:47 – 38:56	Tamara	<p>Yes, definitely get the audiobook, I definitely recommend it. I have it and I love it and I love listening to you tell all these stories as well, so <i>gracias por todo</i>.</p> <p><i>Yes, definitely get the audiobook, I definitely recommend it. I have it and I love it and I love listening to you tell all these stories as well, so thank you for everything.</i></p>
38:56 – 38:57	Leila	<p>Thank you so much, this has been a pleasure.</p>

38:58 – 39:00	Tamara	<p>I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Leila Cobo. If you want to get your copy of her book, go to <a href="https://www.learnspanishconsalsa.com/decodingdespacito">learnspanishconsalsa.com/decodingdespacito</a>. The book is available in both English and Spanish, and the audiobooks are also available which will really help with your listening comprehension and vocabulary as you learn about the stories behind some of the most popular Latin songs from the past several decades. If you use the link on our show notes page, you'll be able to download the audiobook for free from Audible Latino.</p> <p>We also have a link to our Spotify playlist of all the songs featured in the book Decoding Despacito, and the Beatles song that Juan Luis Guerra said sounds a lot like bachata.</p> <p>So, to access the playlist, go to our show notes page: <a href="https://www.learnspanishconsalsa.com/decodingdespacito">learnspanishconsalsa.com/decodingdespacito</a></p> <p>As always, I hope something you heard today has helped you go one step closer from Spanish beginner to bilingual</p>
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**Show Notes:** <https://www.learnspanishconsalsa.com/121>

#### Links and Resources

- [Purchase Book Decoding Despacito \(English\)](#)
- [Purchase Book La Fórmula Despacito \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Playlist of all the AMAZING songs featured in Decoding Despacito](#)

#### Guest Information

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