

# 50 Years Later, 'Feliz Navidad' Still Delivers On Its Bilingual Message

December 14, 2020

3:31 AM ET Heard on [Morning Edition](#)

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José Feliciano's bilingual hit, "Feliz Navidad," celebrates its 50th Christmas this year.

*Rebecca Sapp/Getty Images for The Recording Academy*

It's been 50 years since [José Feliciano](#) came up with the seasonal earworm "[Feliz Navidad](#)." The song is just two phrases of holiday cheer, in Spanish and in English, repeated over and over for three minutes.

"Musically, it's simplistic, but that doesn't take away from the charm of the song at all," says musician [Bobby Sanabria](#), co-director of the [Bronx Music Heritage Center](#). "'Feliz Navidad's one of those kind of songs that, like 'Happy Birthday,' it's very, very iconic. And anybody can sing it."

Now, on the anniversary of a song that became a bilingual landmark, Feliciano is celebrating with a new recording, a new children's book and a livestreamed concert on Dec. 20. For the new version of "Feliz Navidad," he sang with 30 of his friends, including Lin-Manuel Miranda, Jason Mraz, Gloria Gaynor and Linda Viero Caballero, better known as La India.

"It was an honor and privilege to sing for José," La India says from her home in Puerto Rico. "He's just an amazing improviser. Everyone has always been so proud of José, 'cause he never abandoned the Latin culture."

Feliciano remembers writing "Feliz Navidad" at RCA's in Los Angeles in 1970: "We didn't want to put out a schmaltzy Christmas album. So we decided to do it differently."

He sang bilingually, played the guitar and also the cuatro, a 10-stringed instrument his uncle taught him back in Puerto Rico.

"There had been other Christmas songs that were bilingual," he recalls. "For example, there was a song by Hugo Rios, 'Mamacita, Donde Esta Santa Claus?' But 'Feliz Navidad' was an entity unto itself. It was expressing the joy that I felt on Christmas and the fact that I felt very lonely. I missed my family, I missed Christmas carols with them. I missed the whole Christmas scene."

Stuck in an L.A. studio, Feliciano says he pined for his 11 brothers and their entire extended family, thousands of miles away. They had always celebrated Noche Buena, Christmas Eve, eating pasteles and lechon, and drinking rum. They went caroling in parrandas. Of course, he didn't sing about any of this explicitly in "Feliz Navidad." But he says that's the feeling behind the song.

Feliciano was born in Lares, Puerto Rico, 75 years ago. He was just 3 when he started playing the ukulele. After his family moved to New York, he learned to play classical guitar, inspired by Andres Segovia. By 15, he was playing in coffee houses and folk music clubs in Greenwich Village. That's where a record executive spotted him.

Feliciano says RCA didn't want to sign him at first "because they didn't know what to do with me." So he went to Argentina, where he added jazz and R&B to boleros, ballads he performed at the Mar del Plata Festival. When he got back to New York, he heard back from RCA — "saying hey, you gotta go back to Argentina, you're hotter than a pistol over there."

RCA recorded several albums of his boleros, including "Poquita Fe" and "Usted." Then, in 1968, the label released his version of "California Dreamin' " by The Mamas and the Papas, in which he played his flamenco guitar and improvised en Español. "That was spontaneous," he says. "I didn't plan to sing in Spanish, but I thought, you know, this feels really good. Let me let me do this."

On the flip side of that single was Feliciano's version of the Doors' "Light My Fire," which became his biggest hit. Feliciano says he had wanted to record that song for Motown. "Dick Clark asked me, he said, 'Why did you want to be on Motown Records? That's a Black label,'" Feliciano recalls. "Well, the way I saw life, I never realized that people saw colors differently. I was never prejudice[d]. And that's one thing I appreciated about being blind."

That same year, 1968, Feliciano won the Grammy for best new artist, and he performed the national anthem at the World Series. As always, he sang it his way, with a touch of R&B and soul. But many in the stands booed.

"He played it more negro, more Black. Back then, people were not ready," musician Carlos Santana says in the new documentary *Jose Feliciano: Behind This Guitar*.

"It was a different time in America," producer Rudy Perez says in the film. "There was a lot of ignorance — 'This Puerto Rican Latino has messed with our national anthem.' He's thinking, 250 million people hate me."

Feliciano told NPR his stylized interpretation cost him. "I had to leave America and play in other countries because I wasn't getting any radio play after I did 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'" But for fellow Nuyoricans — New York Puerto Ricans, like Bobby Sanabria — Feliciano was a hero.

"Now everybody sings it that way, with some soul," Sanabria says. "That was a brave thing he did. Not only was he Puertorriqueño, not only was he young, not only was he hip, but he was anti-establishment."

Feliciano went on to record many more albums, as well as the theme song for the 1970s sitcom *Chico and the Man*. The singer now lives in Connecticut, and says he was thrilled when Quentin Tarantino used his version of "California Dreamin' " on the soundtrack of his Oscar-winning film *Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood* last year. But more than anything, Feliciano can't get over the fact that the simple Christmas song he wrote half a century ago has endured.

"You bet your sweet bippy," he says. "I'm still surprised."

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