Lucha Libre for Beginners:
A Lesson in Three Falls

Primera Caida - the History of Mexican Wrestling

Two masked men took Mexico by storm in 1936. One was the mysterious jungle superhero called "The Phantom," courtesy of visionary comic strip creator Lee Faulk. The other was "El Enmascarado Maravilla" - The Masked Marvel - stand-out star of fight promoter Salvador Lutteroth's new venture to bring professional wrestling to Mexico. Lutteroth set the ground work for the unique hybrid of grappling, morality theatre, and costumed acrobatics that has come to be known as "lucha libre" (his EMLL promotion is the oldest federation in wrestling, and to this day employs the most performers of any office worldwide).

Lucha libre (literally translated as "free war" or "open-style fighting") developed much like it's American and European counterparts, growing in the 40's and exploding in popularity in the 50's with the advent of television. The Mexican brand of wrestling, though, was much more dramatic and expressive, full of innovative holds and acrobatic flying moves unseen anywhere else. Despite the potent skill and popularity of "luchadores" such as Tarzan Lopez, Cavernario "Caveman" Galindo, Murcielago "Bat" Velasquez, Rito Romero, Gory Gurerro, and Ray Mendoza, the standouts and true icons of Mexico's unique wrestling became the MASKED MEN.

"Enmascarados" were few at first, but riding the popularity of the Phantom and other masked fictional characters, these REAL LIFE superheroes and villains quickly caught the imagination of all of Mexico. Their masks were simple but expressive – the silver of El Santo, El Medico Asesino's white surgical outfit, Blue Demon and Black Shadow's dark sinister hoods, Espanto's bold Spanish cross defining his European nobility, and El Espectro's menacing ghost mask complete with wild hair and graphic teeth.

Late in the 1950's, masked wrestlers invaded the comics and the movies. Publishers and studios used grapplers as crimefighting heroes, monster slayers, spies, astronauts, you name it. Any adventure genre: from westerns to musicals to gory horror could have a masked wrestler injected into it. For the filmmakers, luchadores were a terrific package deal - they were already famous, they had their own costumes, they could do their own fights and stunts, and every time they got into a wrestling ring it was like free publicity for their movies. El Santo was the king of both comic page (his book sold upwards of 1.5 million copies PER WEEK at its height) and silver screen (featured in over 40 films). Blue Demon ran a close second to Santo in popularity and film success, and the two stars even teamed up from time to time with an up and coming young masked man named: "*Mil Mascaras*."

Mil Mascaras - the Man of 1,000 Masks - was the heir-apparent to the lucha libre throne as older stars from the first wave of enmascarados retired. He was very muscular, could fly like a bird, and had the most spectacular costuming yet seen in the ring. Mil's true importance to lucha, however, was as an ambassador to foreign lands. He toured Japan in the late 60's, becoming the first outsider to ever gain heroic status in that country's very insular wrestling market - so revered, he was given the title "Kamen Kizoku" or "Masked Noble." Mil then spent a large part of the 1970's touring every corner of the globe and wrestling on every continent, including long stints in the United States. Mil's spectacular attire and dynamic ring style made him a top attraction on five continents. Images of his various masks adorned the covers of magazines for a decade, making him the most recognizable wrestler in the world next to Andre the Giant.

Mil Mascaras' success caused an explosion in the population of masked wrestlers, and this is when the mask came to absolutely dominate lucha libre. The formerly simple and utilitarian piece of athletic gear now became a canvas for artistic expression as mask artisans produced hundreds of intricate and exotic designs. Masks were based on wildlife, mythological creatures, world cultures, signs of the zodiac, scientific concepts, heavenly bodies, ancient family crests and myriad other inspirations.

The 80's saw dozens of lucha promotions spring up all over the country to house all these new masked wrestlers, making Mexico's wrestling the most populous in the world. Famous names from the 50's and 60's lived on in second generation wrestlers adopting their father's masks - The Son of Santo, Blue Demon Jr., and many more filled their father's shoes (and masks!) to build family legacies that may live on forever.

In the early 90's, controversial promoter Antonio Pena created the AAA federation, which used MTV style television, loud music and garish costuming to create a new version of lucha for the younger audience. Despite open hostility from lucha traditionalists, AAA became hugely successful. Mask and costume ideas were borrowed from Japan and the U.S., with luchadores now resembling giant cartoon robots, video game characters and even copyrighted properties such as Batman and the Ninja Turtles.

AAA's demise came at the hands of wealthy American promotions, who usurped its best talent for use in the United States. In a span of four years, America's WCW and WWF stole a generation of ring stars from Mexico, and coaxed them with overwhelming financial offers to leave their traditions behind and unmask. Most of these wrestlers were then all but forgotten by those same promotions, who inevitably favor their own homegrown stars. As we enter the next century, we will see how much of an impact the late 90's wave of exploitation will have had on lucha libre.

Segunda Caida - The Uniquity of Lucha Libre

Seeing live lucha libre is like nothing else in the world. Your adventure begins outside the arena, where street vendors sell souvenir masks and toys of your favorite ring stars. Inside the venue it is hot and steamy, and there is an overwhelming aroma of batter-dipped deep fried snacks. The crowd is comprised of every age group, with whole families from grandmother to youngest toddler taking up entire rows of seats. Everyone in the family has their own favorite; Dad loves the old school bad guys, grandma loves the noble heroes, daughters scream for the Latino sex symbols and the young kids wear the masks of their idols. This is one of the most endearing things about seeing lucha - the kids in masks. You look around the crowd and there are hundreds and hundreds of children fumbling with masks too big for their heads, watching the matches with both eyes peering through the mouth opening. Whereas at American wrestling shows and most rock concerts anywhere in the world, you buy a souvenir t-shirt of your favorites, in Mexico, you buy a cheap version of his or her mask and wear it to show your support!

Inside the ring is a morality play. The good guys, or "technicos" come from one locker room and embrace the fans on the way to the ring. They are in fabulous capes or bullfighting vests or Mariachi jackets and sombreros. The bad guys, or "rudos" come to the ring with loud obnoxious music and scantily clad slutty girlfriends on their arms (these women inevitably interfere in the matches and often lose parts of their clothing). They spit on the crowds and incite such rage in the audience they are often pelted with garbage, pesos or even jalepeno peppers. The ring introductions take a long time, sometimes 10 or 15 minutes just to build up the tension in the crowd. Matches often feature six or ten wrestlers at a time, and the contests are two out of three falls (or "Caidas") to make for a more epic struggle. Usually, the technicos win the first fall with a combination of teamwork and spectacular athletic moves, but the rudos retaliate in the second with brawling and rule breaking. It takes a heroic rally in the final fall for good to finally conquer evil. All this time, the crowds are chanting and clapping, screaming and crying, and people are always blowing these loud plastic horns for sale in the arena. It is a cacophony of sounds, a symphony of sights, and even smells...

No in-ring drama, though, can compare to the "mascara contra mascara" match. Wrestlers put their masks on the line, the loser unmasking himself in front of the live crowd. It is the final option, the last measure you can take in a feud with a rival. For the luchador, the mask is akin to a nation's battle flag, a knight's coat of arms or a family crest. It is a famous trademark, bringing the wearer fame and fortune. It is a career and a second self. Now, the wrestler puts that very second self at stake just to get one last shot at his most hated enemy. If he wins, his opponent's mask becomes a souvenir, much like a scalp. This is the kind of high drama for which lucha libre is famous!

Tercera Caida - Lucha's Modern Worldwide Appeal

Many of us were first exposed to Mexican masked wrestlers through their B-movies of the 60's and 70's. Some of these films were purchased by American film distributors, dubbed, and run in drive-in theatres or on late night TV. Similar happened in Spain, France, Turkey and Italy (El Santo is also known as "Samson" in the States, "Maskedman" and "Superman" in France and Canada, and "Argos" in southern Europe). The 90's saw an explosion in the trade of these often forgotten films on underground video.

The 1990's was also a time when Mexican wrestlers invaded the U.S., bringing their high-flying acrobatics to American TV's every week. American lucha fandom hit an all time high when stars like Rey Misterio Jr. and Psicosis crossed the border. Other stars made waves in Japan as well, and Japanese wrestlers like Jyushin Lyger and the Great Sasuke adopted Mexican costuming and ring styles for themselves. Japan is currently caught up in a wave of masked nostalgia, particularly inspired by Mil Mascaras and a wrestling cartoon adventure show called "Tiger Mask." The late 90's was a time when young wrestlers from all three major markets broke the international barriers, creating the most dynamic era of wrestling ever seen, and inspiring a whole new market of followers.

The first part of the 21st century sees lucha libre celebrate its seventh decade of tradition. It's original promotion, now titled CMLL, is still the power in Mexico City and Spanish-language TV. Huge lucha cards have out-drawn even the WWE in California and Texas, and two lucha-inspired Saturday morning kids shows have served as gateways for mainstream America to perhaps discover this 'next big thing.'

However, fans of the Mexican masked wrestler idiom don't have to be wrestling fans at all. What I call "Lucha kitsch" - masked wrestler imagery showing up in places it normally would not - long established in Southern California, is catching on nationwide. It is common to see masks and vintage Mexican movie posters for sale everywhere from hip urban boutiques to sports collectibles shows to eBay. Art galleries house avant garde photographers whose models wear lucha hoods, while bars are decorated with luchador oil paintings on black velvet. Instrumental surf bands and punk rockers wear masks on stage. Fashion designers take souvenir hoods, sew up the eye holes and zipper the bottoms to make purses and backpacks. Often without knowing anything of Mexican wrestling or the related b-movies, people are embracing the IMAGES of enmascarados.

It is a testament to the universal appeal of the mask itself.