

Tejano Music: An American Original

By Tim Wilton

Visits to my parents' house, especially on weekends during the summer, would inevitably include sitting in their shaded front yard and playing with the dogs while listening to the Tejano music emanating from the backyard of the neighbors across the street. And it was always a pretty cool respite from the music world I usually inhabited, despite the fact that I was not familiar with the artists that they were playing, or really even the music. I just knew that it had a lot of energy--fun energy--and having lived in Texas for a pretty good while, I also knew that Tejano music's fan base is perhaps the most loyal of all music genres in the Americas.

Tejano music--*musica Tejana*--is by definition a blend of various forms of folk and popular music, both traditional and contemporary, which originated in South Texas and is grounded in the musical heritage of northern Mexico, which in turn was influenced by the music styles of turn-of-the-century European immigrants, most notably Germans and Czechs, from both sides of the Rio Grande.

The Origin of Tejano Music

The indigenous music of northern Mexico, *musica Nortena*, had been flourishing as an integral part of Spanish and Mexican culture since the mid-1700s. However, it was during the period following the 1848 Treaty of Hidalgo and the establishment of the Rio Grande as an international border, that two cultures--two identities--were born. There was the Mexican culture of South Texas (Tejano) and the

Mexican culture found in northern Mexico (Norteno). And on both sides of the Rio Grande were the newly arrived immigrant settlers that would play a key role in the evolution of Tejano music.

In the 1850's, Europeans from Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic migrated to Texas and Mexico and brought with them their unique style of music and dance, including the waltz, polka and schottische. Industry, especially brewing in Monterrey, was partly developed by German immigrants. And by the late-1800s, German-made accordions were aggressively marketed to the masses. However, it was the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) that forced many of these European settlers to flee north of the Rio Grande and into South Texas.

At the turn of the 20th century, the occasional traveling musician or troupe provided entertainment for Tejanos. Equipped with simple instruments such as the guitar, flute and drums, these *musicos* would play the songs that were popular of that time, songs that were passed down from generation to generation. And as these musicians traveled through the settlements and towns that were made up of mostly Germans, Poles and Czechs, their *norteno* style of music blended with the imported accordion-heavy continental European style of music. Tejano folk musicians quickly adopted the accordion at the turn of the 20th century, and it became a popular instrument for musicians on both sides of the Rio Grande. Thus, *musica Tejana* really is an American invention, South Texas-born and bred.

***Musica Tejana* Grows Up**

The family of legendary singer Lydia Mendoza, who is universally recognized as “The Queen of Tejano Music,” was among the many troupes that eked out a living touring the rural communities of South Texas during the 1920's. Later, Lydia went on to become one of the first musicians to record Spanish music, first for San Antonio-based Okeh Records and later (in 1934), for the RCA Victor-owned

raza label, Bluebird. Memorable songs such as *Mal hombre* (Evil Man) and *Pero hay qué triste* (But, Oh, How Sad) are but part of a celebrated career that spanned more than sixty years and 50 albums.

The most notable contributor to the accordion's role in early Tejano music is Narciso Martinez (1911-1992), who mastered the two-button row accordion beginning in the 1930s. Martinez then formed a band with Santiago Almeida, a twelve-string bass guitar (*banjo sexto*) player, and together they created a new musical style that became popular with the working class, *conjunto*. With the accordion, drum and the banjo sexto providing the foundation for a new sound, Tejanos now had a musical style they could call their very own.

In the 1940s, artists like Valerio Longoria introduced lyrics to conjunto music, which made it even more accessible to Tejanos. And later on, in the 1950's, Isidiro Lopez replaced the somewhat formal (some called it “flowery”) lyrical style of Longoria’s love ballads with what can be called “Tex-Mex” lyrics.

However, it was Little Joe y la Familia (initially known as Little Joe and the Latinairs) and others in the ‘60s that introduced a blend of the traditional *musica norteno* and with the prevailing sounds of the day—country, rock and R&B. By adding the electric guitar, synthesizer and brass section (which it relied heavily on for its sound) to the already familiar accordion, *banjo sexto*, bass and drums that made up the *conjunto* sound, Little Joe y la Familia helped usher in a new type of Tejano, *orquesta*.

By the ‘90s, the familiar *orquesta* style pioneered by Little Joe, Esteban “Steve” Jordan, The Hometown Boys, and others began to morph into a new sound that basically replaced the brass section with electronic keyboards (which imitated the sounds of trumpets and saxophones). This modern sound, *Tejano grupo*, was championed by Houston-based super group La Mafia. La Mafia combined a pop-styled beat with the Mexican-style *cumbia* and went on to become the first Tejano artist to sell over a

million albums, as well as tour stadium-size venues across the U.S. and Mexico. Other artists such as Mazz, La Sombra, and Emilio Navaira followed with enormous success.

Perhaps the most popular of all of these "new" Tejano artists was Corpus Christi-born and raised Selena Quintanilla. She became the most bankable Tejano artist and was a major crossover star until her premature death at the hands of the former president of her fan club. Upon her death, Selena's entire music catalog became best-sellers and her short life had become a music legend that at times borders on myth.

Y la Venda jugó encendido....and the band played on

Tejano music is an American invention that was born in Texas. Be it any one of its three major categories—*conjunto*, *orquesta*, or *grupo* (modern)—Tejano music as a whole is a music genre that is vital to the unique identity of Texas and its musical past. The roots of Tejano music are as widespread and diverse as the traditions, cultures and people that nurtured them to life. Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr. noted in his essay, *Musica Tejana: Nuestra Musica*, in the Center for Texas Music History's *Journal of Texas Music History* (Vol.1, No. 1), "No one can say for sure what the future holds for *musica Tejana*.....This music, in other words, will continue to be culturally significant to the Tejano population.....because it is, in essence, an indigenous creation."

More information on Tejano music can be found online, at your local library, and in publications such as the *Journal of Texas Music History*, available at Texas State University's Center for Texas Music History, or by subscription.