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Musica Tejana: More Than Conjuntos and Orquestas

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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INTRODUCTION

Manuel Pena has argued that musica tejana is comprised of two major musical ensembles and their styles, the conjunto and the orquesta.[1] These are not the only ones in the community. Others have formed and become dominant at different historical periods in the 20th century. The only ensemble that has survived during this century, however, has been the conjunto.

CONJUNTO: TRADITIONAL AND PROGRESSIVE

The conjunto originated on both sides of the border and began as a two-person outfit in the 1920s, one played the accordion and the other played a string instrument. Its repertoire, initially, was quite broad and included a host of traditional dances and songs popular throughout

Mexico. The conjunto expanded to four persons and four instruments in the post-WWII period. Two distinct styles also emerged during the period after the 1940s- the norteño and the Tejano. By the late 1950s, the conjunto was comprised of the accordion, the bajo sexto, the bass guitar, and the drums.

From mid-century until 1973, there was no significant change in its instrumentation. This changed in the latter year when Roberto Pulido y Los Clasicos added two saxophones, i.e., los pitos (the horns), to the ensemble and created what later would be known as the progressive conjunto. This type of conjunto however was not very popular until 1990 when Emilio added a synthesizer. His addition of the synthesizer initiated a new phase of popularity with the "modernized" progressive conjunto ensemble.

The increased popularity of Emilio led to the resurgence of the traditional conjunto but with some minor changes in its instrumentation and repertoire. Both types of conjunto styles, the norteño and the Tejano, were revived. Three Tejano conjuntos- Los Palominos, Jaime y Los Chamacos, and the Hometown Boys- led the revival in the first part of the 1990s. Michael Salgado, Intocable, and Limite initiated the second and more popular wave of conjunto music during the latter part of the decade. These groups, unlike the first three played in the norteño style. Most of the new conjunto groups were different in two distinct ways from those of the past. First, they increased the number of instruments in the traditional conjunto ensemble. Tejano groups generally added the keyboards, whereas norteño conjuntos incorporated a percussive instrument such as a conga or timbales. These new instruments, in most cases, were only used for special types of songs, usually cumbias.[2] Second, Tejano and norteño conjuntos changed the traditional core of this music and increased the percentage of cumbias and baladas in their repertoire.

Although the conjunto's popularity fluctuated during the decades—it was extremely high in the years from the 1920s to the 1960s, quite low in the 1970s and 1980s, and on the increase in the 1990s—- the

ensemble has not faded from public view. Since its emergence in the Tejano community, the conjunto has been and, continues to be, an integral and dynamic aspect of the community's cultural life.

THE VOCAL TRADITION

In addition to the traditional and progressive conjunto, there have been at least four other ensembles with different degrees of popularity over the years-the vocal tradition of the solistas and the duets, the orquestas, the grupos, and the Chicano country bands. The vocal singing tradition, unlike the others, was sit-down music. Those who recorded in this tradition, for the most part, did not play dance music.

The vocal tradition was comprised of one, two, or on occasion, three singers who were backed up initially by a string instrument and then an accordion. The vast majority of vocal singers sang corridos, canciones mejicanas, and a host of other songs. During the 1920s and 1930s, all the vocalists, with one minor exception, were males. Lydia Mendoza was the exception. In the post-World War II era, females became an important force in this type of ensemble and set the template for the emergence and growth of the orquestas and conjuntos in the state. Other changes in addition to the increased role of women were made to the vocal singing tradition during the post-World War II era. Solistas and duets went beyond the traditional guitar accompaniment and were now accompanied in most cases by a conjunto or an orquesta. In a few cases, a mariachi ensemble was used as a backup. The vocal tradition was the most popular form of music in the Tejano community prior to World War II. During the 1950s, it declined in popularity because of its incorporation into instrumental dance music. Although a few individuals continued singing as solistas or in duets, vocal singing disappeared as a viable musical tradition after the 1950s. The repertoire of these vocalists continued to be varied but stayed within the realm of baladas and rancheras Tejanas.

The ensemble most in competition with conjuntos after the Second World War was the orquesta. In the early part of the 20th century, three types of orquestas existed—the orquestas tipicas, the orquestas de cuerda, and the orquestas de pitos (bandas). The first two were extremely popular. Bandas, on the other hand, were tolerated but not embraced. Orquestas tipicas were usually larger than orquestas de cuerda. The former used a large number of folk and/or classical string instruments such as mandolins, tololoches, harps, guitars, violins, cellos, and contrabass. Some of them also used flutes, oboes, and perhaps a cornet or two. They also performed a remarkable variety of dance music for all social classes and for all occasions. Paso dobles, danzas, one-steps, waltzes, mazurkas, huapangos, polkas, and schottishes were among the most popular dances that they performed.[3] The latter performed similar types of songs and dances but they usually although not always contained fewer instruments.

The orquestas tipicas and de cuerda eventually declined in popularity and were replaced by la orquesta moderna. Unlike the pre-World War II orquestas, the modern ones had new instruments and a changed repertoire. Many of the string instruments such as violins, mandolins, and Hawaiian guitars were replaced by wind-based ones especially saxophones, trumpets, and trombones. Orquesta musicians also added new dance tunes such as cha-cha-chas, danzones, boleros, and fox trots. In the mid-1960s, the new generation of Tejano musicians modified the instrumentation and repertoire of what now was the older orquesta ensemble. They streamlined the brass section of these older orquestas and added the organ. They also eliminated most of the Latin American and Caribbean dance tunes but added cumbias as well as new American tunes to the musical mix. The result was the creation of a new sound that came to be known as la Onda Chicana. Despite its increased popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, the orquesta, as a viable musical tradition, disappeared by the early 1980s because of changing musical tastes and other factors. It was replaced by the grupo.

The grupo Tejano emerged in the early 1960s and increased in popularity during the following decade. This type of musical group emphasized the sounds of the keyboard. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the organ was the primary instrument used to make this music. By the latter part of the decade, the synthesizer assumed this central role. These groups also changed the musical repertoire. They played less rancheras and more cumbias, baladas, and country tunes. They also played the new American tunes popular at that time such as funk, soul, disco, rock, rap, and pop. The keyboard-driven grupos competed with the orquestas and other non-Tejano musical styles for dominance in the 1970s and won out during the 1980s. They became so popular that they effectively wiped out all the orquestas. In the early 1990s progressive conjuntos such as Emilio y Rio Band and La Tropa F increased in popularity and competed with grupos for fans. The primary response of grupos was to selectively add the accordion. Progressive conjuntos in turn also adjusted their music by using the synthesizer more extensively in their music. By the latter part of the 1990s, grupos and progressive conjuntos sounded very much alike. Few could distinguish between the grupo sounds of Mazz, La Mafia, or Jennifer y Los Jetz and the progressive conjunto music of Emilio, Elida y Avante, and Bobby Pulido. Whether grupos and progressive conjuntos survive as distinct ensembles into the next millennium depends on many factors including the emergence of new groups with a different instrumental mix and with fresh approaches to playing musica Tejana. By the end of 1999, no such groups were on the horizon.[4] In early 2000, however, a new group emerged on the Tejano music scene and won several major awards at the TMA, including Most Promising Band, Album of the Year (Group) ["Amor, Familia y Respeto"], Showband del Ano (Showband of the year), and Tejano Crossover Song (Azucar).[5] This group, known as the Kumbia Kings, was the creation of A. B. Quintanilla, Selena's brother. Unlike other Tejano groups, it did not play rancheras. Its repertoire was comprised of cumbias, ballads, oldies (mostly rhythm and blues), and hip-hop style dance music. The Kumbia Kings was modeled after both

American hip-hop and "boy bands" and utilized three and four-part harmonies in their songs.[6] Only time will tell whether the Kumbia Kings is the wave of the future of musica Tejana or only a passing fad.[7]

CHICANO COUNTRY BANDS

The final ensemble was the Chicano country band, a development unique to musica Tejana in general and border music in particular. Chicano country bands had at least three general characteristics. First, they were small and depended on two important instruments for their sound— a violin and a steel guitar. Second, the vast majority of vocalists sang with a country twang. Third, these bands played traditional country music and traditional Mexican music but in their own style. For the most part, they "Mexicanized" traditional country music and "countrified" traditional Mexican songs such as "Los Laureles" or "Las Margaritas." The former was done by singing the lyrics in Spanish or bilingually, the latter by playing Mexican tunes with these instruments and by singing them with a country twang.

Little is known about the Chicano country bands or where they originated. Although the earliest recording of country music by a Tejano artist[8] is in 1949, the country twang and the use of the violin and steel guitar in these songs probably originated sometime in the 1950s or 1960s along the lower Rio Grande Valley. These types of group probably became popular in the following two decades.[9] In the 1970s, Country Roland and several others had a significant impact on Tejano groups. Among those most impacted by Chicano country bands were Rudy Tee Gonzales y Sus Reno Bops, Snowball & Co., Roberto Pulido y Los Clasicos, and Mazz.[10]

TRADITIONAL YET MODERN

In addition to being comprised of several distinct musical aggregations or ensembles musica Tejana also had other essential elements. Of primary importance was that it was traditional yet "modern." First, musica Tejana was and continues to be rooted in Mexican musical traditions. In the

early part of the 20th century, it was based on the diverse musical dance steps popular in Mexico- polkas, schotises, mazurkas, redovas, valses, one-steps, two-steps, huapangos and others. In the post-World War II period, the musical repertoire narrowed significantly so that it was limited mostly to the polka and the ranchera tejana, that is, the polka with lyrics. Although Tejano groups played additional tunes such as baladas, huapangos, and valses, the majority of them emphasized music with a polka beat. In the 1980s and 1990s, the repertoire again was modified to include more cumbias, baladas, and country tunes.[11] Despite its expansion, the musical repertoire of the 1990s was still less diverse than the one in the early decades of the 20th century.[12]

The songs played by Tejano groups likewise were rooted in Mexican musical traditions. The primary ones in the repertoire were canciones tipicas and canciones romanticas. On occasion, Tejano groups would record corridos. For the most part, however, Mexican groups appealing to a Mexican immigrant audience, not Tejano artists, recorded corridos.

Second, although rooted in Mexican tradition musica Tejana received constant influences from the United States. Throughout the decades, for instance, African American musical styles such as jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, rap, and hip-hop provided some of the rhythms that Tejano musicians selectively incorporated into this music. Mainstream forms of American music including big band tunes, rock, country, dance, disco, and pop also influenced musica Tejana. In some cases, Tejano musicians incorporated the instrumentation used by American groups. This is true, for instance, of the wind-based and brass instruments used by the big bands in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s or of organs and rhythm guitars used by rock groups during the 1960s. In most cases, Tejano groups did not imitate the styles popular in the United States, as did Mexican origin musicians in other parts of the country.[13] Instead they recorded "jazz-influenced" rancheras, "rock-driven" baladas, "big band-style" polkas, or "pop" cumbias. In those specific cases where English musical forms were recorded, e.g., fox trots or rock 'n' roll, the lyrics usually were in Spanish. Musica Tejana thus remained rooted in tradition but consistently modernized over the years.

Musica Tejana also was influenced by other musical cultures from Latin America and the Caribbean. Tejano musicians selectively adopted some of the particular dance forms and song types popular in these Spanish-speaking countries. In the post-World War II era, for instance, Tejano musicians, especially those involved with the orquestas, added canciones romanticas from Mexico and Caribbean tunes such as mambos, cha-cha-chas, danzones, and boleros to the musical repertoire. In the post-1960 period, many of them added cumbias. In the last decade, tejanos have begun to record the international sounds of mariachi music, musica romantica, and rock en español.

One final note pertaining to this music. It continued to be rooted in another Mexican tradition, the Spanish language. Some of the songs reflected the bilingual tradition of the Mexican origin population living in the United States but most of them were sung in Spanish.

MUSICA TEJANA AND TEJANO LIFE

Finally, musica Tejana was a particular form of border music developed by Tejanos for Tejanos. Because it was an indigenous creation, this music reflected the complexity of Tejano life. More specifically, it expressed and reflected the historical experiences, internal differences, and ethnic identity of the Mexican origin population residing in Texas. Through its forms and lyrics, it reflected the community's social subordination and its internal diversification. Musical ensembles, for instance, reflected the emerging social differentiation of the Tejano community. The orquestas and grupos reflected the rise of the Tejano middle class whereas the conjunto and the progressive conjunto reflected a working class aesthetic. Vocal music, on the other hand, expressed the social subordination of the Mexican origin population in Texas, the economic upheavals experienced by Mejicanos, the inter-ethnic conflict between Anglos and Mexicans, and the patriarchal foundation of Tejano culture. [14]

More importantly, this music affirmed and reinforced the distinct identity of the Mexican origin population born or raised in Texas and

compelled to live out the contradictions of being an ethnic American. Musica Tejana, in this case, was an act of cultural affirmation by the Tejano population. Through this music the community expressed its own aspirations, feelings and sentiments about being "mejicano" in a society that consistently denied them their language, culture, and dignity.[15] In other words, this music expressed the distinctive manner in which this particular ethnic group adjusted itself to living in a particular region of the United States and on the border of several different cultural fronts— the Tejano and the Anglo, the American and the Mexican, and, more recently, the national and the international. Although the geographical boundaries have changed in the last dozen years, musica Tejana continues to be border music for a border people.

CONCLUSION

Musica Tejana then was more than simply corridos and conjuntos. It was and continues to be comprised of several musical ensembles with distinct reportorial and stylistic features. Musica Tejana also is a diverse and complex set of musical forms and styles that has changed over time. For most of the 20th century it experienced significant changes and went from a regional music style to an international one. It also underwent several musical transformations as noted above. Despite these changes, musica Tejana remained rooted in Mexican culture and in the Spanish language. In other words, it remained culturally meaningful to Tejanos. The music, as Pena has noted elsewhere, retained "its capacity to communicate deeply felt aesthetic and other social meanings.[16] Throughout the entire century Tejanos of all ages and from different parts of the state and country strongly identified with the various forms of musica Tejana because it reflected their ideals, sentiments, and desires. It was and continues to be, as Los Garcia Brothers, one of the rising conjuntos of the 21st century, put it recently, "nuestra musica (our music)".[17]

Footnotes

[1] Manuel Pena, Musica Tejana (College Station: Texas A&M University, 1999), p. XI.

[2] Albert Zamora y Talento, a conjunto from Corpus Christi, for example, added a keyboard in the mid-1990s. This keyboard however is only used for a limited number of songs. For a brief history of this group see Guadalupe San Miguel, "Albert Zamora y Talento: Leading the Pack," *Tejano Times*, September 10-24, 1997, p. 4.

[3] For a brief overview of these early orquestas see Mexican American Border Music, Vol. 4: Orquestas Tipicas: The First Recordings, 1926-1938, Arhoolie, CD7017, 1996, and *Mexican American Border Music, Volume 5: Orquestas de Cuerdas: The End of a Tradition*, 1926-1938, Arhoolie, CD4984, 1996.

[4] One type of ensemble that has not been tried in the contemporary period is a guitar-driven group. These types of groups are becoming increasingly popular as indicated by the emergence of "rock en espanol." However, none of these recent groups, including Chris Perez, former guitar player from Selena y Los Dinos, are playing musica tejana. For an example of one group that occasionally used the guitar as a lead instrument in rancheras during the early 1980s see La Movida, *Es Amor*, Hacienda Classics, SC206-4, 1997. Ricky Smith was the lead guitarist for this group. La Movida disbanded sometime during the mid or late 1980s. In the late 1990s, it re-grouped but without Ricky Smith.

[5] Vanessa A. Conner and J. Carlos Silva, "Tejano Music Awards Shines Over the Lone Star State, " !*Que Onda! Houston*, Martes 14 de Marzo del 2000, 14.

[6] "Boy bands" were generally comprised of four or five young males who sang various types of pop and rhythm and blues songs in three or four-part harmonies. One of the original "boy bands" was the Philadelphia-based quartet Boys II Men. For a brief history of this group and a review of their 2000 CD see Jake McKim, "Boys II Men's latest effort reaffirms group's talent," *The Daily Cougar* (University of Houston), October 23, 2000, 9.

[7] "Kumbia Kings: New Dimensions with No Limits in the Latin Scene," Tejano Times, September 1998, 1; "Los Kumbia Kings, "Down with the Kings," *Tejano Times*, September 1998, 5.

[8] In this year, Johnny Herrera, from Corpus Christi, recorded the country music standard "Jealous Heart" in English and in Spanish for the Melco label. Two years later, he recorded the same song as "Corazon Celoso" for Decca Records. Herrera's recording was done with saxophones, trumpets, and the accordion, not the traditional violin and steel guitar of the later Chicano country groups. Joe Nick Patoski, *Selena: Como La Flor* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 23.

[9] For a sampling of this music see the following LPs: Country Roland, Las Margaritas, Falcon, ARVLP-1057, 1979; Country Roland Band, Rancho Grande, Falcon, ARVLP-1052, 1978; Country Mingo, *The Outlaw*, Falcon, FLP-5041, 1980; The Texas Country Band, *Valle de Palmas*, Falcon, ARVLP-1065, 1980; Country Roland, Jr. *Mucho Macho*, Falcon, ARVLP-1064, 1980; *Various Artists, The Best of Chicano Country, Vol. 2*, Falcon, ARVLP-1075, 1982.

[10] For a sampling of the country music recorded by these artists see Rudy Tee Gonzales y Sus Reno Bops, *Country*, Teardrop, TD-2030, (ca. 1972); Snowball & Co., *Snowball & Co.*, Fireball, FLP-1001, n.d. (see especially "Just Because," a Chicano country ballad); Roberto Pulido, in Various Artists, *The Best of Chicano Country*, Vol. 2, Falcon, ARVLP-1075, 1982; and Mazz, *Perfect 10*, Cara, CA-10B, 1977. Mazz recorded three country songs in their first album in 1977, "Algo Bonito," (Something Pretty) "El, (He)" and "Laura Ya No Vive Aqui" (Laura Doesn't Live Here Anymore). Unlike other Tejano artists, Mazz abandoned the use of the steel guitar and violin and played these songs using the synthesizer and rhythm guitar as its primary instruments.

[11] Two-steps are usually associated with American country music but they have been an integral part of musica tejana since the early decades of the 20th century. For further elaboration see chapters two, four, and five of Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr.'s *Tejano Proud: Tex-Mex Music in the Twentieth Century*.

[12] Although the repertoire expanded during the 1990s, the number of rancheras declined. In late 1999 and early 2000, at least two popular groups, Jennifer y Los Jetz and Los Kumbia Kings, recorded a CD without any rancheras in them. It is too early yet to see if this is a trend or only a coincidence. See Jennifer y Los Jetz, *Besame y Abrasame*, EMI Latin, 2000 and Los Kumbia Kings, *Amor, Familia, y Respeto*, EMI Latin, 1999.

[13] See David Reyes and Tom Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano rock n Roll from Southern California* (Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1998) and Steven Loza, *Barrio Rhythm: Mexican American Music in Los Angeles* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

[14] For further elaboration of how musica tejana reflected the community's social subordination and its social differentiation see Pena, 1999, especially chapters 1 and 2.

[15] Thaddeus Herrick, "Go Tejano," *Houston Chronicle*, February 9, 1995, p. 1C.

[16] Pena, 1999, p. 11.

[17] Los Garcia Brothers, *Cuatro Paredes*, ZAZ Records, 1998 (liner notes).