

Jan 1st, 11:00 AM - 11:00 AM

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Jose R. Reyna, "Tejano Music as an Expression of Cultural Nationalism" (January 1, 1975). *National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Annual Conference*. Paper 12.

<http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/naccs/1975/Proceedings/12>

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TEJANO MUSIC AS AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM

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In previous papers, I have discussed the historical development of Tejano music from the nineteenth century to the present, pointing out that there have evolved two types of groups.¹ The oldest of these groups, the "conjunto," consisting of the accordion as a lead instrument, with the guitar, bass and drums providing the rhythm, reached maturity in the late 1940's and early 1950's. The other type of combination--the "banda" or "orquesta"--began in the 1940's as an imitation of the Anglo swing band, but by the 1950's they had developed their own sound, which they maintain today. These two types of groups--the "conjunto" and the band--have evolved as distinctly Chicano/Tejano types of combos even though they may perform U.S. or Mexican tunes as well as Chicano tunes with regard to lyrics.

The purpose of this paper is to point out that Tejano music has long served as a strong source of identity and pride for the Tejano, and that it was survived, indeed flourished, for this reason. In other words, the musical features which characterize the styles as Tejano music, i.e., instrumentation and orchestration, have significance beyond the mere aesthetic value.

It is common knowledge that modern nations use all of the formal institutions of society--political, economic, schooling, mass media of communication--to promote all of the aspects of their culture as well as to nurture nascent forms and to foment autoctonous creative expression. Chicanos, not having a nation in the political sense, which would then provide access to all

of the other institutions, have had to forge a culture in an unauspicious way to say the least. Chicano music in Texas has certainly developed in this manner to a great extent. That is, it emerged and developed as an integral--and distinctive--part of Chicano culture, not due to the beneficence or magnanimity of the Anglo, but due rather to oversight. Corky Gonzáles says, in his epic poem, "I Am Joaquín":

"They frowned upon our way of life
and took what they could use.
Our Art
Our Literature
Our Music, they ignored
so they left the real things of value . . . ,"²

In Texas it is not "mariachi music" but conjunto and big band music that are "the heart and soul of the people of the earth."³

Even though we have been denied access to most institutions, and the right to exercise our culture in most instances, for decades now Chicanos have used one instrument of communication--radio--to disseminate, promote and foment one aspect of our culture--our music. It must be pointed out again that it has been a difficult struggle. Radio stations have had a tendency to hire Mexican-born and Mexican-educated announcers, primarily because our language is considered unacceptable for broadcasting. As a result of this practice, the programming has been Mexican oriented--i.e., Spanish language stations broadcast principally Mexican music, played by Mexican groups (mariachi, tríos, Mexican orchestras and bands). When conjunto music was played, it was "norteno" rather than Tejano, a practice still common among the Mexican-born announcers, as if our conjuntos were also unfit for broadcasting.

In spite of the adversity, Tejano music was developing in the "cantinas," "plataformas" and "salones de baile" throughout South Texas. In order to preserve and transmit this tradition, Chicanos themselves undertook the task of establishing recording companies, among them Ideal, Falcón, Bego, Zarape, Buena Suerte and, more recently, Unicos and Freddie and others.

In the last 10 to 15 years radio stations in the region have had to adapt to the reality of Tejano music and there has been a marked increase in programming of Chicano music. In fact, many are playing Tejano music almost exclusively--in Kingsville, Falfurrias, Alice, Mathis, Pearsall, Harlingen, Corpus Christi, San Antonio, San Marcos and other cities--and some have even "condescended" to hire Chicanos as announcers and programmers.⁴

In short, Tejano music has come into its own, and this has been due to the Chicano's own efforts in promoting this aspect of his culture. It should be noted in passing that this conscious and successful effort to promote our culture predates the efforts of our institutional Chicano Movement, although,

as we shall see later, the musician is doing his part within the current Movement also.

It is also important to note that the influence of Tejano music is presently being felt outside of Chicano culture, and it is only fitting that México should be the greatest beneficiary of Chicano "cultural imperialism." Tejano influence in México has come in large part due to the fact that Tejano music is broadcast (by "Radio Free Aztlán") all along the Texas-México border creating, perhaps inadvertently at first, a following on the Mexican side which is having a clearly perceptible influence in that country.

The influence of Tejano music in México has manifested itself in several ways. For example, although I have not made a detailed study of Mexican "norteño" music to compare it with conjuntos Tejanos, I do know that Mexican conjuntos that succeed in the U.S., such as Los Bravos del Norte, come closer to the conjunto Tejano sound than the typical conjunto norteño does. While this could simply mean that those conjuntos are adapting in order to succeed financially (which they are) by catering to Tejanos, it is necessary to understand that their success in the U.S. has catapulted them into even greater success in México, not only in recording but also in movies. This must be attributed to the status of the conjuntos Tejanos, for not until the Tejanos--musicians, recording companies, promoters, etc.--gave greater impetus to the conjunto did Mexicans begin to use the accordion and the bajo sexto within the mariachi, the most prestigious Mexican music group. Before that time, the conjunto was relegated to an inferior status in Mexican popular music and would not have been considered worthy of being combined with the mariachi.

Concurrently with the importation of contemporary Tejano music, we have also seen the importation of Tejano musicians by México. Several top accordionists, such as Oskar Hernández, have recorded with mariachis from México. But these are a select few; if it were not for the fact that Tejano groups command very high prices, we would have seen a veritable flood of Tejano groups into México. Those groups that have toured México--Freddie Martínez and Joe Bravo, for example--have had tremendous receptions everywhere they have played, so much so that one of Freddie's albums is entitled "El Embajador Tejano." In the absence of economic opportunities for Tejano groups in México, several Chicano band leaders--Carlos Guzmán, Freddie Martínez and Sunny Ozuna--have been enticed individually to México by the film industries.⁵

The Tejano big bands present a peculiar situation with regard to Tejano influence in México because while the conjunto norteño and the conjunto Tejano are not identical, there are similarities that can lead the uninitiated to believe that they are identical. In the case of the band, however, there is nothing like the Tejano band in Mexican tradition, although I have heard imitations (which we also find in Nuevo México and

California). Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that this tradition could be reproduced in México in the near future, primarily because of the financial considerations. The cost of equipment required by these bands--amps, speakers, organs, P.A. systems--as well as transportation--buses, vans, station wagons, trailers--are prohibitive in the first place. All of these things are necessary in order for a big band to succeed.

Secondly, Mexican musicians have neither the kind nor the quality of musical training that Chicanos--who constitute the backbone of music of every type and at every level throughout South Texas--have, and which has led to the development of our Tejano music tradition. The closest thing to a Tejano big band in México are bands such as La Sonora Santanera, but any comparison would be gratuitous.

It should be obvious, then, that the Tejano has emphasized this aspect of Chicano culture--the music--and that he has endeavored--successfully, I might add--to foment, cultivate, even export his music.

There is a need to emphasize the fact that the pride in, and emphasis upon, Tejano music, which has always been present in Texas, is also consciously being coordinated by the musicians themselves with the larger and more recent Movement in a number of ways. First, the names of groups have reflected Chicanismo: Little Joe and the Latinaires changed their name to *La Familia* in recognition of that aspect of our culture and possibly as a rejection of the "Latin" label. While the Latin Breed uses the term "Latin" they also use Breed (i.e., "raza" in Spanish). Other groups are *La Raza de Houston*, *La Herencia*, *The Mexican Revolution*, *La Patria*, *La Onda Chicana*, *Los Chicanos*, *La Connexión (sic) Mexicana*, and *Tortilla Factory*.

It is obvious that they are consciously promoting Chicanismo and their involvement in the Movement goes beyond the mere name, which could otherwise be interpreted as opportunism. For example, all of the top groups--big bands and conjuntos--have played countless benefits for the Raza Unida Campus Club at Texas A & I and for many Raza Unida rallies and other functions throughout the region. (They also give you the Raza hand-shake.)

Finally, they have also made use of our music tradition in another, more direct way, to promote Chicanismo so that one can accurately state that the spirit of the Movement has influenced lyrical expression at the popular level, especially in tunes such as "Soy Chicano," "Yo Soy Chicano," "Chicanita," and "Chicano from Mercedes," all of which are worthy lyrical compositions, yet different from typical Movimiento songs.

Thus, in conclusion, we can say briefly that Tejano music has been developing for many years as a distinct instrumental type, that Chicanos have been aware of this and that they have consciously and conscientiously endeavored to promote this feature of the culture through recording, broadcasting and, more recently, by expanding the market to other parts of the United

States and México. It is, in short, the best example of Chicano cultural nationalism.

NOTES

1. José R. Reyna, "The Development of Chicano Music in Texas," a paper presented before the Texas Folklore Society, April 1973; "Chicano Sounds in Texas," a paper presented before the American Folklore Society, November 1973. For a review of a paper read at the University of Texas in October 1971, see Alma Canales, "Música Chicana," *Magazín*, I (December 1971), pp. 14-15; see also, "Festival of American Folklore," *Chicano Times*, IV, No. 48 (July 19-Aug. 2, 1974), 16 and 15.

2. Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzáles, *I Am Joaquín* (1967), p. 17.

3. *Ibid.*

4. They have also "discovered" a great deal of "hidden talent" in Chicano announcers and musicians as well as a lucrative commercial resource.

5. A recent Mexican film, "La Muerte de Pancho Villa," included appearances by Freddie Martínez and Sunny Ozuna.