



On a packed night at the Pan-America, patrons of various ages enjoy live music played by Mexican and Mexican American bands.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

# Desde Conjunto to Chingo Bling: Mexican American Music and Musicians in Houston

By Natalie Garza

Feet start tapping and people are drawn to the dance floor by the upbeat polka sound of the accordion and the *bajo sexto* keeping rhythm. Men wearing tailored suits lead women in strappy sandals or black heels as the mid-calf hemlines of their dresses flow with every spin. In the midst of the music, crowds are heard chatting at their tables seamlessly transitioning between English and Spanish, and as if part of the ambient sound, the clanking of beer bottles carried by thirsty patrons fills the air. In 1930s Houston, Mexican Americans enjoyed this vibrant atmosphere on any given weekend. Over the last nine decades, the Mexican

American music scene in Houston has benefitted from locally grown talent that meets the cultural and entertainment needs of its community by integrating a variety of musical stylings and genres.

The 1930s witnessed a boom of Mexican American musicians in Houston dominated by two forms of music, the *conjunto* and *orquesta Tejana*. This regionally grown music became known collectively as *música Tejana*, defined by historian Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. as all the musical forms and styles listened to by Tejanos since the nineteenth century, rather than a single genre.<sup>1</sup> One of the most recog-

nizable identifiers of the conjunto is the use of the bajo sexto and accordion. The conjunto was connected with working-class Mexican Americans and comprised of musical styles such as the *corrido* and *canción ranchera* associated with an agrarian past. Upwardly mobile and middle-class Mexicans listened to orquesta music, characterized by big band instrumentation and a broader range of Latin American music like salsas, mambo, and boleros as well as Americanized music of the swing and fox trot. As Mexican Americans became consumers of popular American music, they began to create and perform new styles that connected new generations to a Mexican cultural past.

Early groups that catered to a Mexican American audience consisted of all-male brass bands such as those formed by the Magnolia Park Benito Juárez Society, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, and the band of Antonio Bañuelos. For the most part, men dominated Mexican American musical entertainment, but Lydia Mendoza emerged as one of the few exceptions. As a solo artist, she introduced themes specific to a woman's experience. For example, in Mendoza's signature song "Mal Hombre," she sings about a treacherous man, in contrast to most rancheras of love loss, which relate the story of a woman who betrays her man.<sup>2</sup>

Lydia Mendoza was born on May 21, 1916, in the Houston Heights where her parents settled after fleeing the Mexican Revolution. She became known as *La Alondra de la Frontera* (the Meadowlark of the Border) and *La Cancionera de los Pobres* (The Songstress of the Poor) because she sang in the style popular with the working class, including corridos, rancheras, waltzes, boleros, and polkas. Like many other Houston area Mexican American musicians, Lydia



*Alonzo y Sus Rancheros featured Ventura Alonzo playing the accordion and her husband Frank playing the guitar.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Mendoza grew up in a musical household with both parents playing guitar and singing. She began playing the guitar at age seven alongside her brothers and sisters who all played different instruments. The family traveled and performed in a band called Cuarteto Carta Blanca. While performing in San Antonio in 1933, Mendoza gained recognition from a radio announcer, leading to her recording two solo albums.

Mendoza married Juan Alvarado on March 3, 1935, and after taking a hiatus from music to raise her three daughters, she returned to touring and recording in 1947 and gained a new generation of fans. Mendoza sang at President Jimmy Carter's inauguration in 1977 and became the first Texan to receive a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship in 1982. In 1999, she received the National Medal of Arts at a ceremony at the White House.<sup>3</sup> Lydia Mendoza died on December 20, 2007, and remains a source of pride in Mexican American musical culture in Houston.

The dynamic Houston big band scene that emerged in the 1930s remained relevant into the 1970s. Albino Torres led one of the earliest of these bands, the Magnolia Park Orquesta. Other acts that appeared in the 1930s included Johnny Velásquez and the Rancheros, Johnny Martínez and his Orquesta, Joe Varela and the Orquesta Tejana, and Roy Salas and the Rhythm Kings. While conjunto and orquesta groups might be associated with the working and middle classes respectively, these bands understood that above all Mexican American audiences wanted to dance and catered to that demand.

The popular style of Frank and Ventura Alonzo made them a big draw in several Houston night clubs and other Texas cities including Fort Worth, Austin, and Kingsville. Frank Alonzo was born in San Antonio on January 28, 1908, and moved to Houston's Magnolia Park in 1927. In the late 1920s, Frank met Ventura Martinez who was born on December 30, 1905, in Matamoros, Mexico. Her family moved to the United States in 1910, and in 1917, Ventura moved to Houston, eventually settling in Magnolia Park. Frank and Ventura married in 1931 and began playing music together in 1935. Frank was a self-taught musician on the guitar while Ventura received lessons at the age of nine and played the accordion as an adult.

They formed the group Alonzo y Sus Rancheros that evolved into a five-person orchestra. In one of their early



*The dance floor at the Pan-America saw a lot of traffic with men dressed in their finest suits and women sporting the day's latest fashion.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

performances at the Immaculate Heart of Mary church bazaar, Ventura sang publically for the first time, becoming the lead vocalist for the group. Alonzo y Sus Rancheros played boleros, cumbias, waltzes, and mambos, but were mostly known for their rancheras. Frank and Ventura retired from music in 1969, after which he played for senior citizens in Denver Harbor every Friday at the Centro Alegre community center and she taught crafts and occasionally played the piano at Ripley House.<sup>4</sup>

Another musical family was that of Eloy Pérez, born on December 2, 1923. Eloy grew up working on a farm in Bastrop, Texas, where he and his brothers learned to play music on their own. The family moved to Rosenberg in 1937 and then to Houston in 1944. Eloy had played music throughout and after World War II formed a group called Eloy Pérez and the Latinaires, later changed to Eloy Pérez y Sus Latinos. The new name reflected the political climate of the 1960s Chicano movement and expressed ethnic pride. Eloy Pérez toured his group across Texas and the Southwest, influencing an entire generation of Mexican American musicians. One of the region's top three Latin big band groups through the early 1960s, at its height, Pérez's orchestra featured nine or more musicians and a vocalist, including older brothers Felipe, Sixto, and Locaido. The family's next generation continued the musical tradition with Sixto's son Ernesto (Neto) Pérez forming his own popular band.<sup>5</sup>

The Ricky Diaz Orchestra emerged in the 1960s and catered to the middle class but also played popular dance music, which Mexican Americans enjoyed. Enrique Alberto Diaz (Ricky) was born in 1931 in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas. The son of a bandleader and music professor, Diaz began playing the piano at the age of eight. After graduating high school, Diaz moved to San Antonio to play music, which led to a three-year stint playing with Beto Villa, a Tejano musician who skillfully mixed conjunto and orquesta in his musical stylings. Shep Fields's Orchestra recruited Diaz around 1954, and he traveled across the United States with them before settling in Houston where the orchestra regularly played at the Shamrock Hotel. Even



*In the early 1950s, Ricky Diaz (top left) played with the Beto Villa orquesta, one of the earliest Tejano orquestas to play conjuntos as well as ballads.*

Photo courtesy of Ricky Diaz.

as an accomplished musician, Diaz continued to build his repertoire, taking lessons from a concert pianist after moving to Houston and developing a love for classical music. While playing with Shep Fields in the mid-1950s, Diaz began playing with and composing arrangements for Roberto Compean, house bandleader at the Houston Club. Diaz met and married Roberto's sister, Belen in 1957. He says, "from there on

*Playing at the Houston Club in 1957, from left: Roberto Compean, Betty Cole, Carlos Compean, Maynard Gable, Ricky Diaz (on accordion), Freddy Compean, Joe Garza, and Jose Compean (far right). The Compeans were a well-known musical family in Houston, and Ricky became part of the family when he married Belen. Roberto, Carlos, and Freddy are Ricky's brothers-in-law, and Jose was Ricky's father-in-law.*

Photo courtesy of Ricky Diaz.





Here mariachis play at *La Terraza*, a popular night club owned by the Alonzos in the 1950s where several Mexican American bands entertained.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

we became a musical family and ever since then I've been working in the music business."<sup>6</sup>

In 1963, Diaz formed his own fifteen-piece band, and five years later, the family moved to Los Angeles where Belen sang vocals. Ricky gained some notoriety in the larger California music market but opted to return to Houston because he believed it offered better stability for his family. Throughout his career, Diaz played for such celebrities as Judy Garland, Bob Hope, The Platters, Frank Sinatra, and for Presidents John F. Kennedy, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. A talented musician and composer, Diaz continues to play events in the Houston region.

During this era of big band music, Houston's Mexican Americans created a variety of cultural spaces for entertainment. Houston area musicians played at church festivals, weddings, community benefits, hotels, ballrooms, and dance halls. The Pan-America Ballroom served as an important music and social venue for the Mexican American community during the 1960s and 1970s. Former Magnolia Park resident Juan Torres explains, "I used to go a lot to the Pan-America...It was located on Main Street. The older people went on Fridays and Saturdays for the dances, then the younger people went on Sunday afternoon for the matinee. It was mostly eighteen or nineteen [year olds] that went there." The teen matinee drew Mexican American youth from Magnolia Park, Northside, Sixth Ward, and Second Ward. Torres recalls, "We were from different parts of town...the ones from Magnolia stuck together and the ones from Northside stuck together." Crowds at the Pan-America overflowed the 2,500 capacity limit for big shows on the weekends. The building that once housed the Pan-America lies vacant, but many Mexican Americans have memories of this important cultural space.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to having a band, some musicians opened up their own club or ballroom. Two examples of this include *La Terraza Nite Club* and *The Stardust Ballroom*. Torres remembers, "besides the tortilleria, [my dad] was part owner of *La Terraza Nite Club* on McCarty. His partners

were Frank Alonzo, who had the band Frank Alonzo y Sus Rancheros, and Chema, my cousin Jose Maria Lombano, was also a partner and they had it for five years." *La Terraza* opened in 1956 and featured such musicians as Eloy Pérez, Flaco Jimenez, Los Aguilares, and Henry Zimmerle. Formerly the *Fulton Theater*, *The Stardust Ballroom* opened in 1969. Juan Torres talks about *The Stardust* that was owned by Neto Pérez, who had a Tejano band, "I met my wife at the *Stardust*. She kind of liked the way I dance so she tripped me [to get my attention]."<sup>8</sup>

Some of the other well-known venues included the *American Legion Hall* on 75th Street, *Union Hall* on Houston Avenue, *The Acapulco* on Washington Avenue, *El Tropical* on Main Street, *The Log Cabin* on Old Galveston Road, *Salon Juarez* on Navigation, *The Azteca Theater* on Congress Street, *The Palladium* on South Main, *The Blossom Heath*, and *The Starlight* on Market Street.

Going out to a dance, regardless of location, was an event. As Torres recalls, "We dressed real nice; me and my guys we went to Duke's Tailors downtown and bought tailor made pants and shirts. Everybody, even the girls were dressed to kill. We dressed up real good."<sup>9</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, some Mexican American musicians began incorporating a broader range of popular American music. *La Mafia*, founded in the 1980s by Oscar De La Rosa and Armando Lichtenberger Jr. from North Houston, introduced a new style to música Tejana characterized by a synthesizer and keyboard. Recognized for their willingness to blend rock, folk, reggae, and pop with traditional Latin music, *La Mafia* is innovative among Tejano groups, touring regionally, nationwide, and throughout Mexico and Latin America. They won two Grammys and two Latin Grammys and received nine additional nominations.<sup>10</sup>

Singing both in English and Spanish, Norma Zenteno was another local performer known for her musical fusion of Latin, jazz, rock, and pop. According to her website, Zenteno received her first electric guitar at the age



Tejano music group and Grammy winner *La Mafia* originated in Houston. Photo courtesy of Miller Outdoor Theatre.

of eleven from her father, trumpet player and local band leader, Roberto Zenteno. Roberto was from Monterrey, Nuevo León, and arrived in Houston in the mid-1950s with his wife Elsa. He lost his arm in an accident when he was younger, but learned to play the trumpet and later started the Roberto Zenteno Band performing in nightclubs such as Ram's Club, Castille Club, Club Latino, Rio Posada at Allen's Landing, Las Haciendas Los Morales, and Sambucca Jazz Café.<sup>11</sup> It was at this last venue where I was first introduced to the music of Norma Zenteno. Norma and her band regularly played at Sambucca's on Thursday nights with great music, energy, and dancing. Having just moved to Houston from the East Coast, it was exciting to experience a Latin music scene that included a mix of the music I grew up with in San Antonio and the salsa music I had grown to love. Sadly, on February 22, 2013, Norma Zenteno died of complications from breast cancer at the age of sixty.

In 1990, sisters Melinda Hernandez and Patricia Lynn Hernandez who grew up in a musical family in Magnolia Park formed the group Sister Sister. Melinda gained experience in the music industry after traveling with the legendary Tejano singer Little Joe from 1983 to 1986, as the only female vocalist. During this time she began writing and composing her own music. The band's Facebook page describes its music as indie, Latin, and pop fusion, and its style has been compared to that of Linda Ronstadt. In 2000, the band grew after recruiting Nancy "Thibideaux" Saenz, from North Houston, along with brothers and uncles to create the group Sister Sister y los Mistfers. The group's first CD, titled *Little bit of Texas, Little bit of Mexico*, was nominated for a Grammy. Melinda said she started learning music at Edison Junior High, mentored by Charles Rodríguez, the brother of Judge Armando Rodríguez. "Most of the [local] musicians, or many of the musicians that are playing now were taught by my brother," Judge Rodríguez recalls.<sup>12</sup>

Another popular local group, Los Skarnales formed in the 1990s. Founded originally as punk band Desorden by Felipe Galvan and Jose Rodríguez, the band performs a mixture of ska, reggae, rockabilly, swing, mambo, cumbia, and danzones. Los Skarnales gained a following in Mexico and the United States, and play locally at Fitzgerald's and Free Press Summer Festival.

Like Mexican American youth of the past who listened to swing, rock-and-roll, disco, and pop, today's Mexican American youth have also adopted the mainstream popular culture, and in Houston that means hip hop. The música Tejana of the past still remains relevant with many young Mexican Americans. Assistant professor of Mexican American Studies, and native Houstonian, Marco Antonio Cervantes wrote, "When I step out and drive into my mixed Black and Chicana/o 'Mail Route' neighborhood, I hear Tejano, banda, norteño and the slowed down, syncopated rhythms of chopped and screwed rap music blasting from car systems."<sup>13</sup> One of the most skilled rappers representing this amalgamated culture and sound is Houstonian Chingo Bling.

Born Pablo Herrera to Mexican parents who migrated to Houston from Valle Hermoso, Tamaulipas, Chingo Bling's music, style, and message is a mix of Black and Chicano Houston street culture. Bling attended a private high school in New Jersey and later majored in business administration marketing at Trinity University in San Antonio where he originated his Chingo Bling stage persona as a disc jockey for the student radio station. His rap songs are in English and Spanish often in the same line, and his presentation ranges between parody and political. As expressed in the song "Brown and Proud," Chingo Bling raps, "Even though I do the funny shit, don't get it twisted, all my songs got a message, so don't miss it." Bling's fashion is also a mix of cultural forms, wearing a black cowboy hat and ostrich skin boots paying homage to norteño/ranchero/Tejano style but also sports baggy calf-length shorts or baggy jeans, a Nike swoosh on his ostrich boots, a blinged out cowboy boot necklace, and a grill.<sup>14</sup> In the song "Ostrich Boots," Bling raps, "R.I.P. Selena, DJ Screw in the same ride," indicating that for Mexican American youth two regionally-grown musical forms hold equal importance: música Tejana and Houston rap.

Other Houston Chicano rappers include South Park Mexican, Grimm, Baby Bash, Juan Gotti, and Lucky Luciano. Many of these rappers record and perform screwed music, a slowed tempo sound with dropped pitch, which originated in Houston with African American artist, DJ Screw. While their style is screwed, these rappers make local references recognizable to the Mexican American community, and utilize culturally relevant language and themes in their songs.

From the conjunto and orquesta music of the 1930s and the Tejano and fusion music of the 1980s and 1990s to the hip hop music of today, Mexican Americans in Houston have contributed greatly to the music culture and continue to evolve the Mexican American sound.

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