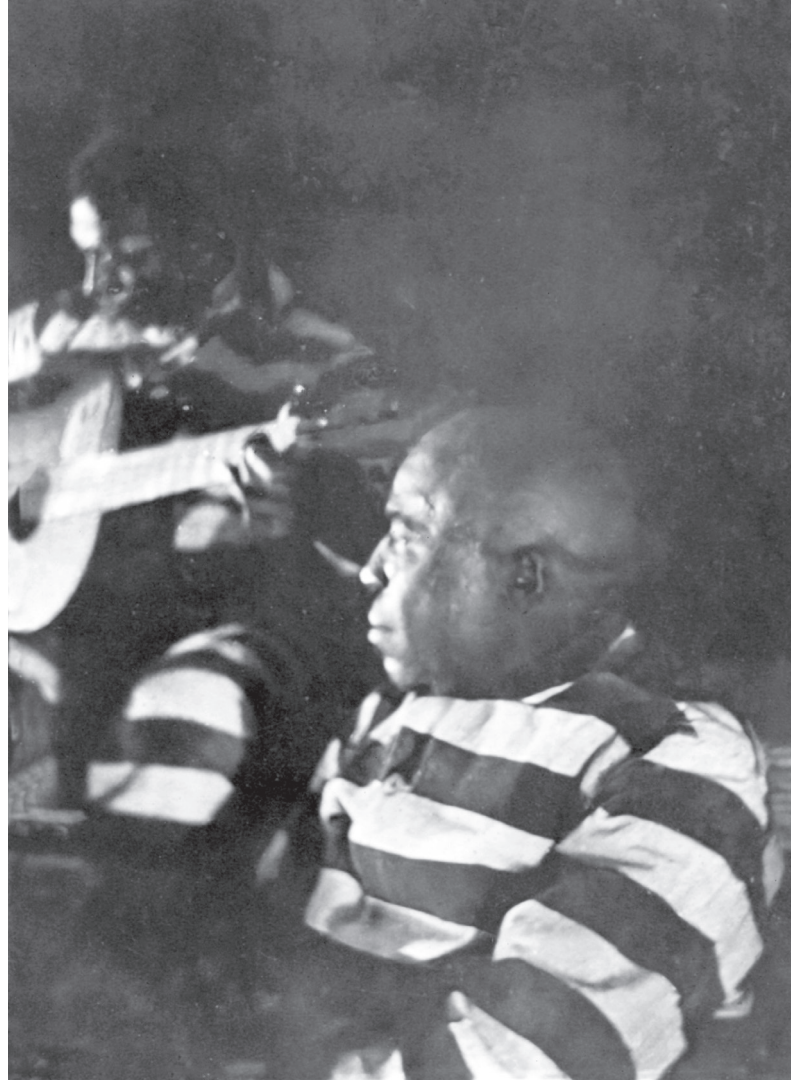


# Musical Migrations: The Sonic Traditions of Houston Brought and Shaped by Migrants in the Early Twentieth Century

By Emily Harris

*Traveling the South to record American music, John and Avery Lomax captured this 1934 photograph of two unidentified convicts, one of whom is playing the guitar and possibly folk and blues musician Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter. Having spent time at the Central State Prison Farm in Sugar Land, Lead Belly later recorded his version of “Midnight Special” referring to the abuse of white law enforcement in Houston.*

Photo courtesy of the Lomax Collection, Library of Congress, Lot 7414-B, no. N69.



The soul of Houston has been shaped by the journeys of its people. One of the most ethnically diverse large cities in the United States, Houston reflects a mosaic of experiences from people all over the world.<sup>1</sup> The path to this distinction began at the onset of the twentieth century, as the migrations of three key ethnic groups transformed the character of Houston: black Texans, Creoles of color, and ethnic Mexicans. This movement of peoples changed the city’s culture as much as its demographics, as individuals brought their histories, traditions, and identities with them.

Musical styles are intrinsically linked to the passage of such qualities from ancestral lands to new environments. The sounds accompanying migrants and then recreated in Houston became sonic markers of space and, with time, produced uniquely local styles reflective of a blended cultural scene. The foundation for Houston’s musical legacy was built upon the traditional regional styles brought by migrants of the early twentieth century, as identified by historian Tyina Steptoe: blues from black East Texans, la-la from Louisiana Creoles of color, and the variety of sounds from the Rio Grande Valley created by ethnic Mexicans, such as *corrido*, *ranchera*, and *conjunto*. Once in Houston, the interaction with urban space, Jim Crow society, and ethnic diversity impacted the composition and performance of these regional sounds. Such artistic responses illustrate

promotions of collectivity among migrant communities. The emerging presence of regional musical styles in Houston demonstrates migrants’ active efforts to preserve their sense of heritage, community, and identity in the place they came to call home.<sup>2</sup>

## Black East Texans and the Blues

The sound of blues music is inherently tied to the black experience in the rural Southeast. Landowners in the antebellum South pushed westward to protect the institution of slavery, and this produced an enslaved black population in Texas forced to work on cotton and sugar plantations. African Americans strove to recreate their cultural practices in the counties of eastern Texas, utilizing their limited agency in a profound way. Work songs with themes of lamentable suffering, as well as resilience and deliverance, not only provided individual release but also forged a sense of community for the enslaved in Texas, which derived from their shared experiences of bondage.<sup>3</sup>

The blues has its roots in such work songs. As an art form, the blues had allowed rural black southerners to articulate a “collective sensibility in the face of constant attacks by the plantation bloc and its allies.” Steptoe cites writer Ralph Ellison, who identifies songs containing the “blues impulse” being structured around a three-step process: “identifying a



*A country bluesman, Blind Lemon Jefferson became a successful recording artist for Paramount Records and is considered the father of Texas blues.*

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

source of pain, expressing that painful experience in a 'near-tragic, near-comic' voice, and finding affirmation of one's existence in the process." Acoustic guitar patterns, AAB-patterned verses, and guttural moans defined East Texas blues. Generations of black musicians who were born free sought to separate their sound from the banjos and fiddles of their parents or grandparents, and instead utilized guitars to achieve a more emotional range to confront the realities of post-Reconstruction freedom. Furthermore, the prevalence of vocalization over enunciation of the lyrics reflects the deep expression of black suffering without allowing the hardship to triumph.<sup>4</sup>

Songs by musician Blind Lemon Jefferson embody the distinct Texas blues sound. Born in Couchman, Texas, in 1893, Jefferson became one of the foremost country blues musicians during the pre-Depression era, epitomizing the bluesman whose lifestyle and songs were filled with despondent imagery. Some of his songs describe the poverty and injustices confronted by black people in the Jim Crow South. One such song, "Prison Cell Blues," speaks to the criminal justice system. Picking a melody on the guitar, Jefferson wails lyrics that protest the corrupt imprisonment of black people like himself. Other songs such as "Bad Luck Blues" reveal his own struggle to earn a living as an uneducated, blind musician:

*I wanna go home and I ain't got sufficient clothes  
Doggone my bad luck soul  
Wanna go home and I ain't got sufficient clothes  
I mean sufficient, talkin' 'bout clothes.  
Well, I wanna go home, but I ain't got sufficient clothes.*<sup>5</sup>

Jefferson plays a somber melody while moaning the bitter lyrics that symbolize his longing for security in the face of hardship. Country blues musicians like Jefferson with their faithful guitars traveled around countryside towns and big cities playing for events that catered to working-class audiences.<sup>6</sup> This developed a network of musicians and audiences eager to perform and hear Texas blues as it permeated rural landscapes and urban centers.

After the Civil War and the reading of General Order No. 3 proclaiming "all slaves are free" on Juneteenth, June 19, 1865, formerly enslaved people began to settle in Houston and establish the first free black communities. Migrating from the plantations in the Sugar Bowl located in Wharton, Fort Bend, Brazoria, and Matagorda Counties southwest of Houston, or other rural areas of East Texas, freedmen and women were drawn to Houston for new labor and educational opportunities, making the transition from a rural to urban environment.<sup>7</sup> Beginning about 1915, Houston also experienced an influx of African Americans from the South during the Great Migration, being one of the few places in the region that experienced appealing industrial growth. The blues style traveled along these migration routes and was established among areas of settlement.

African Americans migrating to Houston settled throughout the city and established communities, most notably in Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards.<sup>8</sup> These communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century developed a highly autonomous spirit and cultural identity in response to the discrimination imposed by Jim Crow Houston. In these neighborhoods, black musicians produced new sounds that reflected the preservation of rural traditions and history with new urban identities.

Like Blind Lemon Jefferson, musician Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins brought the rural blues sound to urban cities, this time in Houston. In fact, Jefferson was the primary influence on a young Lightnin' Hopkins and his musical trajectory after Hopkins had the chance to play guitar with Jefferson. Travelling around East Texas from his birthplace



*Even with the abolition of slavery in 1865, many African Americans remained coercively tied to rural lives as sharecroppers in the early twentieth century, lacking social or economic mobility in the South.*

Photo by Dorothea Lange, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

of Centerville, Hopkins first visited Houston in the late 1930s and permanently settled there in the 1940s, encouraged by the receptive and paying audiences. He recalled his early days as such: "I [was] stuck around there for a while ... playing up and down Dowling Street there. After that I began to get around and I began to ride the buses for free. The bus driver'd stop and pick me up anywhere he'd see me with that guitar." Credited by music historian Alan Govenar





Lightnin' Hopkins was a fixture of the Houston music scene on street corners and in nightclubs. Through his recordings, he became known nationwide for his unique blues sound.

Photo courtesy of 33stradle, Wikimedia Commons.

as “embodying the blues’ transition from rural East Texas to Houston,” Hopkins became a fixture performing at that very intersection of Dowling and Holman streets in Third Ward, which came to be known as Lightnin’s Corner.<sup>9</sup>

### Creoles of Color and La-la

Similar to the blues, la-la music also developed as a rural tradition, but by Creoles of color in southwest Louisiana. La-la music refers to the country dance parties where the music was performed, as well as to the style itself. Creoles of color began migrating to Houston as early as 1922 in search of labor opportunities. Recruited as workers for the Southern Pacific railroad, Creoles of color settled in Fifth Ward to live close to their jobs, as the railroad line ran right through the neighborhood. A greater surge of migration occurred in the aftermath of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927.<sup>10</sup> Displaced from their homes and livelihood in southwestern Louisiana, Creoles of color made the journey to Texas, setting their sights on Houston. Migrants settled in Fifth Ward near other French-speaking Louisianians, forming the area named Frenchtown.

Creoles of color established new sonic distinctions in Houston, as the sounds of la-la emanated from Frenchtown. La-la music was traditionally played with an accordion and washboard accompaniment and sung in a French *patois* or vernacular. Apart from being sung differently linguistically,

the use of the accordion also distinguished Creole musical influence from the sound of the blues, as the European instrument was popularized and associated in America with Afro-Creole culture in Louisiana. La-la music was also composed in more upbeat meters than the blues, making it danceable to the waltz and two step, dances of the European tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Louisiana musician Amédé Ardoïn became one of the most popular accordion players of the 1930s and one of the first Creoles of color to record music, bringing the la-la sound to the greater public. In his song “Amédé Two Step,” Ardoïn begins with a lively tune on the accordion. The melody diminishes into the background as he wails the first verse, and the tune resumes with its driving rhythm, following this pattern to the end of the song. Ardoïn’s songs were clearly meant for dancing, but that did not mean la-la was strictly carefree. Lyrics about agricultural labor and subsistence became important themes in la-la songs. The Creole French expression, *les haricots sont pas salés*, “the beans aren’t salty,” referencing hard economic times, was a popular line in la-la songs, expressing the reality of a rural, working-class lifestyle. As more Creoles of color migrated to Houston by the end of the 1920s, the journey to Texas became a popular theme of local songs and regional folklore. Song lyrics told of people leaving their home and loved ones behind to make a new life for themselves.<sup>12</sup> Such songs reflected the bittersweet reality of migration: leaving behind the familiar with hopes for the new.

As a migrant group, Creoles of color brought la-la music to their new urban environment, an integral part of fostering a sense of community and preserving their ethnic and cultural heritage. The house parties, as part of the social and cultural fabric for rural, working-class Louisianians, soon became part of the fabric of Houston’s Frenchtown. Weekend parties drew neighbors from house to house to sing, dance, unwind after the workweek, and celebrate their shared



Victims of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 stand on the banks of the floodwaters near a country general store. Floodwater caused many evacuees to migrate to the Houston area.

Photo courtesy of Jimmy Smith, Flickr.



The only known photograph of Amédé Ardoin (circa 1912), it was used to construct a life-size statue of him for the St. Landry Parish Visitor Center near Opelousas, Louisiana.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



culture, of which la-la was an essential part. Migrant Creole musicians also found economic opportunities in Houston performing at the parties. In that sense, la-la was the thread that knit the Frenchtown Creole community together, sonically defining its people and locale in Houston from the broader Fifth Ward area.<sup>13</sup>

### Ethnic Mexicans and the Corrido, Conjunto, and Ranchera

The musical traditions that ethnic Mexicans brought to Houston were cultivated on both sides of the Rio Grande. Between 1900 and 1930, large waves of ethnic Mexican migrants entered the United States in search of labor opportunities and to escape the Revolution of 1910. Those who settled in Houston established neighborhoods throughout the city, but Second Ward, or *Segundo Barrio*, became their cultural epicenter. Ethnic Mexicans who migrated to Houston were either Mexican-born *Mexicanos*, or *Tejanos* who were Texas-born with Mexican heritage. Both groups brought their distinct traditions and preferences to their new communities in Houston.



Narciso Martínez (left) and Santiago Almeida (right) were recognized as pioneering musicians of Texas-Mexican conjunto in the 1930s.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Tejanos developed the musical traditions of the *corrido* and *conjunto*. Although corridos could vary stylistically, the stories told in their lyrics were paramount. For those living in the Rio Grande Valley in the early twentieth century, Anglo supremacy, and the power structure marked their social conditions. By the early 1900s, corridos began to incorporate themes of conflict between ethnic Mexicans and Anglos as a protest against the violent racial system.<sup>14</sup> One notable example is “El corrido de Gregorio Cortez,” which is based on actual events. After being apprehended by an Anglo sheriff for a crime he did not commit, Gregorio Cortez protested his arrest and fatally shot the sheriff in the fight that ensued. Cortez then went on the run until law enforcement apprehended him after ten days. The lyrics tell his tale:

Venían los americanos  
más blancos que una paloma,  
de miedo que le tenían  
a Cortez y a su pistol

*The Americans were coming  
they were whiter than a dove,  
from the fear that they had  
of Cortez and of his pistol.*

Decían los americanos,  
decían con timidez:  
–Vamos a seguir la huella  
que el malhechor es Cortez.

*Then the Americans said,  
they said fearfully:  
“Let us follow the trail;  
the wrongdoer is Cortez.”*

Le echaron los perros jaunes  
pa’ que siguieran la huella,  
pero alcanzar a Cortez  
era seguir a una estrella.

*They set bloodhounds on him  
so they could follow his trail,  
but trying to overtake Cortez  
was like following a star.*

Tiró con rumbo a Gonzales  
sin ninguna timidez:  
–Síganme, rinches cobardes,  
yo soy Gregorio Cortez.

*He struck out for Gonzales  
without showing any fear:  
“Follow me, cowardly Rangers,  
I am Gregorio Cortez.”*

Decía Gregorio Cortez  
con su pistola en la mano:  
–No corran, rinches cobardes,  
con un solo Mexicano.

*Then said Gregorio Cortez,  
with his pistol in his hand;  
“Don’t run, you cowardly Rangers,  
From just one Mexican.”<sup>15</sup>*

The corrido hails Cortez as feared and powerful, while the Anglo law enforcement are portrayed as weak and cowardly. Specifically known as “hero corridos,” songs such as this allowed Tejanos to assert a heroic folk tradition as a cultural response to Anglo dominance.<sup>16</sup>

The conjunto style also began to take shape from Tejanos in the Rio Grande Valley in the early twentieth century. Like la-la, conjunto emerged from working-class communities where people worked in the fields during the day and gathered at house parties and in dance halls at night. Similarly, conjunto ensembles also included an accordion. Appearing in Mexico around 1860, the instrument became



central to the regional sound. The other instrument which defined the rural style was a twelve-string bass called the *bajo sexto*. The music is upbeat and lively; the resonant bajo sexto keeps the beat while the fluttering accordion creates a rollicking melody. It is the perfect combination for toe-tapping, hand-clapping, and dancing. As a communal tradition, conjunto represented Tejanos' distinct cultural subjectivity by situating regional sounds from Mexico in their Texas homeland.<sup>17</sup>

Mexicanos, on the other hand, developed their own preferred style, *ranchera*. Ranchera developed in Mexico around the turn of the twentieth century. Its name comes from the popular themes of the genre, which told romanticized stories of cowboys, *vaqueros*, and life on the ranch and open country. As such, rural, working-class Mexican performers played this music for rural, working-class, Mexican audiences. Ranchera was traditionally sung solo with accompaniment from the bajo sexto. In Houston, the ranchera tradition helped Mexican migrants in their transition to urban life, as the tales of country life offered an escape from the stress of modern industrialization. Communal institutions in Segundo Barrio such as Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, would often host bazaars where Spanish-speaking musicians performed dances and songs popular in Mexico and along the Rio Grande Valley.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most notable ranchera musicians was Houston-born Lydia Mendoza. Raised in a highly musical family, she spent some four years living in Monterrey where she was greatly influenced by the songs and fashion of the Mexican

borderlands. Lydia became proficient on the bajo sexto, guitar, and mandolin, and was well-versed in the ranchera folk songs passed down from her Mexican-born mother. As a performer, she drew from this repertoire and dressed in traditional Mexican styles to appeal to ethnic Mexican audiences from both sides of the border. In Houston, Lydia sang at Our Lady of Guadalupe for the first time in 1936. Most significantly, she brought a woman's perspective to a style that had focused on male figures. In her song "Mal Hombre," she reverses the trope of a scorned man and details a woman's experience with an abusive lover, as demonstrated by this selection of verses:

Era yo una chiquilla todavía  
cuando tú casualmente me encontraste  
y merced a tus artes de mundano  
de mi honra el perfume te llevaste.  
Luego hiciste conmigo lo que todos  
los que son como tú con las mujeres,  
por lo tanto no extrañes que yo ahora  
en tu cara te diga lo que eres.

Mal hombre,  
tan ruin es tu alma que no tiene nombre,  
ere sub caballa, eres un malvado,  
eres un mal hombre.

*I was but a young girl  
when, by chance, you found me  
and with your worldly charm  
you crushed the flower of my innocence.  
Then you treated me like all men  
of your kind treat women,  
so don't be surprised now if I  
tell you to your face what you really are.*

*Evil man,  
your soul is so vile it has no name,  
you are despicable, you are evil,  
you are an evil man.<sup>19</sup>*

Whether emanating from the street corners of Third Ward, the house parties in Frenchtown, or the church festivals in Segundo Barrio, the music of migrants could be heard throughout Houston by the end of the 1930s. Although their sonic origins were rooted in the regional conditions of each migrant group, they were certainly not limited to these borders. Migrants travelled with instruments on their backs, rhythm in their step, and songs in their hearts, tracing a sonic map of their journeys. Thus, the practices were never lost along the way, but made stronger in the feat; the traditions and memories of the past merged with new experiences of migration and the challenges of life in an urban, segregated society. Music was the great means that drew people together to express their shared culture, history, and identity, and fostered a sense of community support, enrichment, and solidarity. The foundation of this cultural diversity was pioneered by the black, Creole, and Mexican migrants of the early twentieth century who rejected a passive existence as newcomers in favor of being the bold conservators of their heritage in Houston. **HH**



Lydia Mendoza was well known for her great talent for singing and playing the bajo sexto, along with her traditional Mexican dress, which endeared her to mixed audiences of Mexicanos and Tejanos.

Photo courtesy of the Lydia Mendoza Collection,  
Houston Public Library, MSS0123-0016.

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