The Texas–Mexican Conjunto

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One of the most enduring musical traditions among Mexicans and Mexican Americans is the accordion-based ensemble known as *conjunto* (and as *música norteña* outside of Texas). Popular for over 100 years — especially since its commercialization in the 1920s — this folk ensemble remains to this day the everyday music of working-class Texas Mexicans and Mexican *norteños* (northerners). During the course of its long history, the conjunto evolved into a tightly organized style that speaks musically for the aesthetic and ideological sentiments of its adherents. In the process, this music of humble beginnings along the Texas–Mexico border has spread far beyond its original base, gaining a vast audience in both Mexico and the United States.

The diatonic, button accordion that anchors the conjunto made its first appearance in northern Mexico and south Texas sometime in the 1860s or '70s. The first accordions were simple one- or two-row models — quite suitable for the musical capabilities of the first norteño and Texas Mexican musicians who experimented with the instrument. A strong regional style developed by the turn of the century, as the accordion became increasingly associated with a unique Mexican guitar known as a *bajo sexto.* Another local folk instrument, the *tambora de rancho* (ranch drum), also enjoyed prominence as a back-up to the accordion. In combination with one or both of these instruments, the accordion had become by the 1890s the instrument of preference for working-class celebrations on both sides of the Texas–Mexico border.

In Texas, these celebrations were organized frequently — too frequently for some Anglos, who voiced their disapproval of fandangos, or "low-class" dances, in the newspapers. For example, the *Corpus Christi Caller* and the *San Antonio Express* on more than one occasion expressed Anglos' negative attitudes toward *tejano* music and dance. In one report, the *Express* equated music and dancing with idleness and concluded that "these fandangos have become so frequent they are a great curse to the country" (August 20, 1881). This typical attitude developed early on and persisted well into the 20th century.

Despite Anglo disapproval, the conjunto and its dances thrived among tejano workers, eventually eclipsing all other forms of music for dancing. Yet, popular as it was, the conjunto remained an ad hoc ensemble until the 1930s. No permanent combination of instruments had been established prior to that time, perhaps because creative and material forces had not yet crystalized to spur radical stylistic development. To be sure, some changes had been wrought by the 1920s, as the button accordion and the bajo sexto by now formed the core of the emerging style, while such common European dances as the redowa had been regionalized and renamed. The redowa itself had been transformed into the *vals bajito,* in contrast to the waltz, which was known as a *vals alto.* Indeed, most of the repertory for the dance, or fandango, was of European origin and included the polka, mazurka, and schottishe, in addition to the waltz and redowa. One regional genre from Tamaulipas, Mexico, the huapango, rounded out the usual repertory of conjuntos until World War II.

Beginning in the 1930s, an innovative surge rippled through the emerging conjunto tradition, as performers like Narciso Martínez (known as "the father" of the modern conjunto), Santiago Jiménez, Lolo Cavazos, and others began to strike out in new stylistic directions. This new surge of innovation must be attributed, at least in part, to the active commercial involve-

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Pedro Ayala was one of the early accordion leaders and innovators in the *conjunto* tradition. ***Photo courtesy National Council for the Traditional Arts***

ment of the major recording labels in the music of the Hispanic Southwest. From the 1920s, companies such as RCA Victor (Bluebird), Decca, Brunswick, and Columbia (Okeh) began exploiting the musical traditions in the Hispanic Southwest, hoping to repeat the success they had experienced with African American music since the early '20s. Under the commercial impetus of the big labels, which encouraged record and phonograph sales, radio programming and, especially, public dancing (much of it in cantinas, to the dismay of Anglos and "respectable" Texas Mexicans), musicians like Narciso Martínez began to experiment. By the end of the 1930s, the conjunto had begun to evolve into the stylistic form the ensemble reached during its mature phase in the post-World War II years.

Without a doubt, the most important change came in the 1930s, when Narciso Martínez began his recording career. Searching for a way to stamp his personal style on the accordion, Martínez abandoned the old, Germanic technique by virtually avoiding the bass-chord buttons on his two-row accordion, concentrating instead on the right hand, treble melody buttons. His sound was instantly distinctive and recognizable. Its brighter, snappier, and cleaner tone contrasted with the older sound, in which bajo sexto and the accordionist's left hand both played bass-and-accompaniment, creating a "thicker," drone-like effect. Martínez left bassing and chordal accompaniment to the bajo sexto of his most capable partner, Santiago Almeida.

Narciso Martínez's new style became the hallmark of the surging conjunto, just as Almeida's brisk execution on the bajo sexto created the standard for future *bajistas*. Together, the two had given birth to the modern conjunto, a musical style that would challenge even the formidable mariachi in cultural breadth and depth of public acceptance. Indeed, by the 1970s it could be said that the conjunto, known in the larger market as *música norteña*, was the most powerful musical symbol of working-class culture. Martínez, however, remained an absolutely modest folk musician until his death. He never laid claim to anything but a desire to please his public. Yet, as Pedro Ayala, another of the early accordion leaders, acknowledged, "after Narciso, what could the rest of us do except follow his lead?"

In the years following World War II younger musicians rose to prominence — *la nueva generación* (the new generation), as Martínez himself called the new crop of accordionists. Led by Valerio Longoria, who contributed a number of innovations to the rapidly evolving style, the new generation quickly brought the conjunto to full maturity after the war. Longoria started his trailblazing career in 1947; however, his greatest contributions date from 1949, when he introduced the modern trap drums into the conjunto. Com-

bined with the contrabass, introduced in 1936 by Santiago Jiménez, the drums rounded out the modern ensemble, which after 1950 consisted of accordion, bajo sexto (sometimes guitar), drums, and contrabass (electric bass after about 1955). Longoria also is credited with another major contribution: he introduced vocals into the ensemble, which prior to World War II had restricted itself almost exclusively to instrumental music. After Longoria's move, most of the older genres — redowa, schottishe, etc. — were abandoned as the polka and the vocal, in the form of the *canción ranchera* (either in vals or polka time), became the staples of the modern conjunto.

Several highly innovative performers followed Valerio Longoria. Among the most notable is Tony de la Rosa, who established the most ideal conjunto sound in the mid-1950s — a slowed-down polka style, delivered in a highly staccato technique that was the logical culmination of Narciso Martínez's emphasis on the treble end of the accordion. Los Relámpagos del Norte, a group from across the border (Reynosa), made significant contributions in the 1960s, synthesizing the more modern conjunto from Texas with the older norteño tradition to create a style that reached new heights in popularity, both in Mexico and the U.S. When the leaders of Los Relámpagos, Cornelio Reyna and Ramón Ayala, went their separate ways, the latter formed another conjunto, Los Bravos del Norte, and that group went on to make significant contributions in the 1970s that kept the norteño tradition at its peak.

But perhaps the label of "greatest" belongs to a conjunto that had its origins in Kingsville, Texas, in 1954 — El Conjunto Bernal. Led by accordionist Paulino Bernal and his brother, bajo sexto player Eloy, El Conjunto Bernal began early on to lift the conjunto style to new heights, as the Bernals' absolute mastery of their instruments allowed the group to probe the very limits of the conjunto style. Bolstered by some of the finest singers and drummers within the tradition, El Conjunto Bernal came to be acknowledged as "the greatest of all time." The successes of El Conjunto Bernal's musical experiments, especially in the 1960s, have never been duplicated.

Since the 1960s, the conjunto has remained rather static, despite the advent in the 1980s of so-called "progressive" conjuntos, which incorporate newer, synthesized sounds into the basic style. Neither these newer conjuntos nor those who pursue the older style have succeeded in transcending the limits set by El Conjunto Bernal, but this relative lack of innovation has not slowed the spread of the music. Thus, despite its relative conservatism, the tradition has expanded far beyond its original confines along the Texas–Mexico border. In the last 30 years the music has taken root in such far-flung places as Washington, California, and the Midwest, as well as in the entire tier of northern Mexican border states, and even in such distant places as Michoacán and Sinaloa.

As it spreads its base in the United States, norteño conjunto music, especially as synthesized by Los Bravos del Norte and its successors (e.g., Los Tigres del Norte), continues to articulate a Mexican working-class ethos. In its stylistic simplicity, its continuing adherence to the canción ranchera and working-class themes, and most importantly, in its actualization in weekend dances, the conjunto remains the bedrock music for millions of people whose everyday culture is Mexican at its core. More than that, however, the conjunto represents a clear musical and ideological alternative to the Americanized forms that more acculturated, upwardly-mobile Mexican Americans have come to embrace. Accordionist Paulino Bernal best summarized the musico-ideological significance of the conjunto when he recalled the sharp status differences that existed among Mexican Americans of an earlier era:

> . . . at that time there was a division — that he who liked the orchestra hated the conjunto. That's the way it was: "Who's going to play, a conjunto? Oh no!" Those who went with Balde González [a middle-class orchestra] were not going to go over here with a conjunto. (personal interview with the author)

Thus, although nowadays it is patronized by many ethnically sensitive, middle-class Mexican Americans, conjunto continues to represent an alternative musical ideology, and in this way it helps to preserve a Mexican, working-class culture wherever it takes root on American soil. Endowed with this kind of symbolic power, conjunto has more than held its own against other types of music that appear from time to time to challenge its dominance among a vast audience of working-class people.

Further Reading

Peña, Manuel. 1985. *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: History of a Working-Class Music.* Austin: University of Texas Press.