

## Texas Music: A Living Legacy

Pat Jasper

"You can't hear American music without hearing Texas." That's the official motto of the governor's Texas Music Office, and it is a startlingly true statement. This simple truism speaks to the diversity of Texas music, to its reach into the American musical landscape, and to its tremendous influence on blues, jazz, rock and roll, and country and western—music considered quintessentially American. Texas has a breathtaking sonic landscape: in part this is due to its unparalleled size among the forty-eight contiguous states, to the diversity of its early and newly arrived communities, to its shared 1,200-mile border with Mexico, and to its unique history as a republic. All of these elements contribute to the contemporary musical traditions of the Lone Star State.

With close to 25 million inhabitants, it is common sense that plenty of music making goes on throughout the small and large towns. Add to this the fact that Texas is home to more true urban centers than any

other state in the country—yet boasts a significant rural population—and you know music styles will be bountiful. There are blues in Dallas, *corrido* traditions in small towns along the Texas-Mexico border, and fiddle bands at ranch dances in West Texas and the Panhandle.

But Texas is not just about largeness and largesse. While we Texans enjoy feeling as if we are a separate nation, the cultural and geographic reality of Texas is anything but self-contained. It is, in fact, a region of regions—a place where the arid Southwest, the spacious Central Plains, the verdant Upper and Deep South, the wetlands of the Gulf Coast, and the spare landscapes of Northern Mexico come together. In Texas, these different landscapes are home to distinct cultural communities and local industries. Early waves of immigration to the state, especially from Central

Historic dancehalls are sprinkled all over the Lone Star State. Many are still in use. Photo by Krista Whitson





Creole fiddler and accordionist Ed Poullard crafts accordions in his home workshop. Photo by James Fraher

and Eastern Europe, have made for a heady ethnic mix. In Southern Anglo, African American, Tejano, German, Polish, and Czech communities, people still follow or adhere to traditional occupations and religious beliefs that inform the music Texans enjoy.

Without doubt, East Texas shares a Southern agricultural legacy built by Anglo landowners and African American slaves and laborers. South Texas—defined by the legendary Rio Grande River, which flows from Southern Colorado through El Paso and into the Gulf of Mexico at Brownsville—has a history in Greater Mexico. As you move into the vast stretches of arid land across West Texas, the Southwest's ranching culture is noticeable in all aspects of life. Dallas is often characterized as a business town in contrast to its western neighbor Fort Worth, which champions its ongoing connection to cowboy culture and cattle drives. The culture and geography of the Gulf Coast, where piney woods meet wetlands, extend west of Houston well into Louisiana and Mississippi.

Thus, Texas's music defies stereotypes. In fact, the closer you listen to the earliest Texas country, blues, or Tejano music, the more you hear the harmonies of the state's different cultural and ethnic communities. The cross-pollination continues in contemporary Texas music in which conjunto artists play and sing classic country tunes in Spanish, country artists hit unexpected blues notes, rock and rollers cop the vibrancy of ethnic accordion licks to rev up their sound, and Texas singer-songwriters draw on it all to enliven their lyrics. This is the history of Texas music. This is the current state of Texas music. And this is exactly why people talk with presumptuous casualness about "Texas Music" in a way that no one speaks about the music of other states.

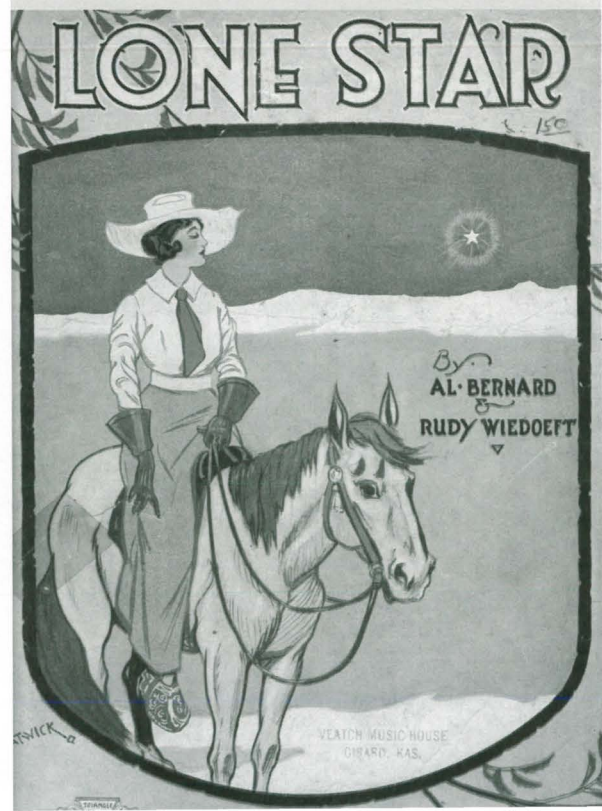
Pieces played from sheet music provided a popular diversion for family and friends in early Texas. Songs about Texas were always a favorite.

Photo courtesy Texas Music Museum



### Accordions According to Texas

When it comes to naming the Texas state musical instrument—be it guitar, fiddle, harmonica or mandolin—you should never take sides. But facts are facts; it is the accordion that dominates music performed by and for communities that draw from distinctive and frequently non-English-language repertoires, including Czech and German polka music, Tejano, conjunto, Cajun, zydeco, and Creole music. In smaller and often more rural communities where resources are limited, a full band isn't on hand, or the piano is poorly tuned, the accordion offers a versatile, available, and loud alternative.





# COWBOY DANCE - SPUR RANCH

As such, a stroll through the musical landscape of the Lone Star State turns out to be anything but. In fact, a stroll in Texas usually becomes a waltz, a *schottische*, or a two-step when music is involved. This is telling because most Texas music incorporates dance, which sets it apart from other traditions. In the Lone Star State, social dance (where men and women dance together and usually touch) was historically far more common than it was in the American South. Most Texas music, with the exception of sacred music, was, and continues to be, spawned as dance music in informal locales, like ranches and church halls, or in entrepreneurial ones, like *salones de baile* and juke joints. Whether country, Tejano, polka, or the blues—dancing and dancehalls complete the Texas musical equation.

Even in small communities throughout Texas, it is not uncommon to find multiple musical and dance venues, each hosting a specific ethnic clientele and their preferred genre of music. On a Saturday night, in a town of 5,000, there could well be a zydeco dance at the church hall, a country and western dance at a local club, a Czech polka dance at a fraternal lodge, and a popular conjunto cranking out *cumbias* and *redowas* for a swirling crowd of hundreds in a salon or cantina. These dancehalls and juke joints allow Texas musical traditions to influence each other; Texas musicians often say that their love of music flowered at an early age in these places. Frequently, when a club or venue was restricted through custom, prejudice, overt segregation, or the cost of admittance,





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young musicians-in-the-making strained to listen outside a window or a backstage door. Through these cross-cultural and cross-generational sneak attacks, the many musical communities of Texas absorbed each other's repertoires, rhythms, and voices.

The musical story of Texas is multi-layered and many-faceted, and where you end up is usually determined by where you start. But let's be bold and begin with the type of Texas music best known to most—country and western. Country music in Texas is very much an outgrowth of the early musical traditions brought to the state by Anglo migrants from the Upper South, many of whom landed temporarily on the trek westward or permanently in East, North, and West Texas. In the lonesome settings of single farmhouses, small

ranches, bunkhouses, and open-air trail drives, the tunes, songs, and traditional melodies that entertained an isolated family or a handful of cowboys became a country music legacy. Some of the earliest, most familiar expressions are cowboy songs originally collected by John Lomax in his youth and published years after during his stint at Harvard. Cowboy songs say a lot about Texas's musical roots because they combine the British tradition of balladry with the occupational traditions and lingo of ranchers and cowboys. But as Lomax himself noted, some of the finest singers he encountered were Black cowboys, who added a dash of blues shouting to the style, especially when they needed to move stubborn herds of cattle along dusty trails.

Ranch dances brought together neighbors from miles around to enjoy a little two-stepping to music provided by local musicians.

Photo courtesy Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University





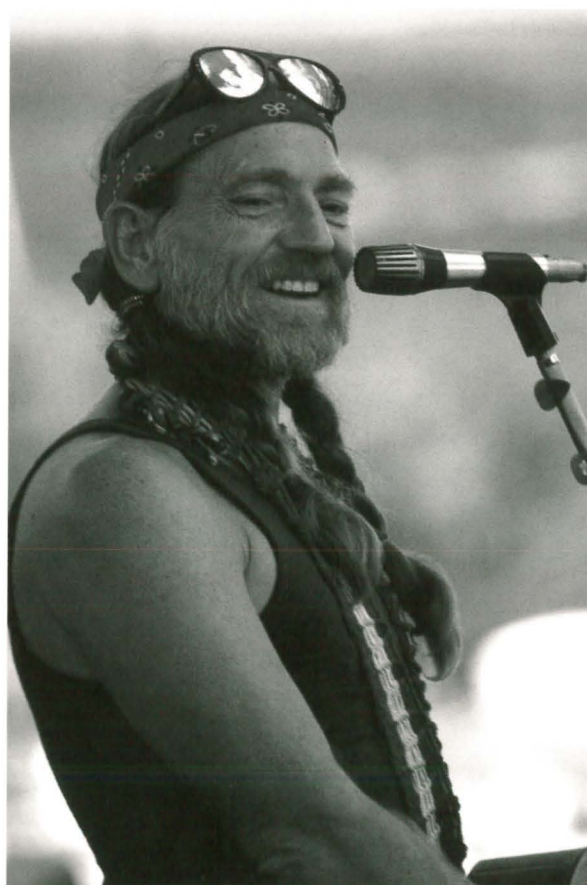
Fiddle music was also part of the musical frontier in Texas. As Bill C. Malone notes in *Country Music, U.S.A.*, the fiddle was "...most favored by rural folk, for a long time the fiddle [was] virtually the defining instrument in country music." In the early days, fiddlers, like the casual cowboy singers, performed for family, friends, and small gatherings. The fiddle was central to the ranch dances so prevalent in West Texas, where there were few nonchurch-related social and musical enjoyments. Out of this fiddle tradition comes Texan Eck Robertson, who is generally credited with the first commercial country music recording, a version of "Sally Gooden" released by the Victor Talking Machine Company in 1922. Over time, the fiddle became the centerpiece of early Texas country—from the romping and wide-ranging repertoire of the Light Crust Doughboys to the adventuresome Western swing of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, and Milton Brown and the Musical Brownies. Masters like Wills would sometimes pack the band with fiddlers, and the "twin fiddle" sound was de rigueur. The instrument's presence in Texas country music still flourishes today in contest fiddling, swing, honky-tonk, or straight-ahead country. As the song (ironically by the non-Texan group Alabama) says, "if you're gonna play in Texas, you gotta have a fiddle in the band."

As a result of the world wars of the twentieth century, country music, like much of life in the state, began to change. People moved about, and families broke up due to the demands of military service and the concomitant shifts in the economy. Rural life gave way to jobs in cities and industries that offered greater financial promise. In a sense, modern life caught up with Texas country music. Towns like Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth became hubs of Texas life and introduced an urban edge to the music, an edge that spoke, not to the nostalgia of the home place or the

(Above) An important bridge between the western swing and honky-tonk traditions, Hank Thompson's music spanned decades and produced dozens of country hits. Photo courtesy Hank Thompson

(Below) Willie Nelson is the wizard of Texas music—a staggeringly talented songwriter, an artist of unparalleled depth and breadth, and a performer whose music is rooted in tradition yet beloved by mass audiences. For many, he is the personification of the Texas sound.

Photo courtesy Texas Tourism





lonesome life of the heartsick cowpoke, but to the crushing realities of separation, working on someone else's clock, and partying hard after the clock stopped. As early as 1936, East Texan Al Dexter had a hit with "Honky-Tonk Blues," the first song to use the term "honky-tonk" to describe hard living, hard drinking, and hard loving in a tough, modern world.

This is not to say that western swing didn't address its share of contemporary and primal issues. Both styles shared the stage for a good period; the western swing repertoire was fluid enough to include pop and blues tunes just as readily as western ones. But the advent of honky-tonk really marked the shift to contemporary music. It also elevated individual artists who sang songs (often of their own composition) that came straight from their own experiences. The cheating, truck-driving, drinking songs that characterize this style originate in cowboy ditties and murder ballads, but their power lies in substituting the timelessness of the latter for the immediacy and urgency of the so-called "honky-tonk life." From such heyday greats as Lefty Frizzell, Floyd Tillman, and George Jones to today's Dale Watson and Junior Brown—honky-tonk lives in Texas country.

And this is due to the simple fact that Texas's hefty country music history is one of innovation and renovation. Since the 1970s, movements as variously described as "progressive country," "cosmic cowboy," "outlaw" or "renegade," and "alternative country" have attracted veteran artists and young upstarts, who have embraced, expanded, retained, and reinvented the representative genres. Examples include Willie Nelson's sampling of traditional folk songs, Asleep at the Wheel's update of western swing, George Jones's return to hard-core honky-tonk, the Dixie Chicks' acoustic offerings, and The Little Willies' swinging renditions of classic country.

## Whose/Who's Country?

Some say that Texas put the "western" in "country and western music." And while much of early country music in Texas has roots in the Southern United States, such as a shared repertoire of British folk songs and an affection for Anglo fiddling, there are important differences. In fact, Texas's contributions to country often go unrecognized. For example, cowboy songs, swing fiddle, and early honky-tonk styles were developed in the Lone Star State and have had an impact on country music across the board. And more than any other place, the Lone Star State borrows from its diverse ethnic communities to create a new sound. Mexican songs were turned into popular Anglo fiddle tunes; African American blues styles became ready parts of jazzy Western swing; and European polkas were regularly translated into country music dance standards.

## "For the Sake of the Song"

"For the Sake of the Song" comes from a song by Townes Van Zandt, one of Texas's finest songwriters. While many think the contemporary singer-songwriter phenomenon is a product of popular music, a different case can be made for songwriting in the Texas tradition. From early cowboy singers to contemporary guitar-toting troubadours, music in Texas has largely been defined by its lyrics. To reflect conditions of life on the range, ranch workers recast ancient tunes and familiar stories in new language to mirror their experience. With hindsight, we understand that the hard-drinking, heart-breaking, and truck-driving songs of Al Dexter, Lefty Frizzell, Floyd Tillman, Ted Daffan, and Cindy Walker chronicled the lives of Texans as the state's population increasingly moved from rural to urban settings and from agricultural to nerve-wracking industrial jobs. Like Van Zandt in his time, today's Texas tunesmiths transform life-driven stories, old and new, into song.

## Austin: Are There No Limits?

In the popular imagination Austin is, without a doubt, the center of contemporary Texas music. The city doesn't hesitate to spread this idea with a Texas-size boast, calling itself the "Live Music Capital of the World." While other cities in the Lone Star State may legitimately debate the claim, there's no denying that a town that gave birth to the "Cosmic Cowboy" scene of the mid-1970s and hosted the *Austin City Limits* television show for over thirty years has plenty of ammo for making such an assertion. The perception was cemented in folks' minds with the institution in 1987 of South By Southwest, the single most successful music conference in the country. It attracts equal numbers of industry personnel and avid fans but always acknowledges its roots by including Texas talent and expertise in all of its showcases and presentations.

Of equal weight in Texas music is the blues tradition, which African American slaves and laborers brought to the state from the American South. Based on work songs, shouts, and hollers, blues expanded over the decades from a rural to an urban, from an acoustic to an electric, and from a guitar- to a piano-based tradition. To make a living, blues artists—sharecroppers and migrant workers among them—moved with their music from community to community. As the “race record” industry developed, the Texas blues tradition spread throughout the state and the nation, and Houston artists heard those in Dallas on the radio and the phonograph. Many blues artists and African American songsters shared their music in person through minstrel and tent shows that traveled the state, the South, and the Southwest.

This is especially notable because Texas was the birthplace or longtime residence of an awesome, perhaps unparalleled lineup of the most prestigious blues players and performers. One of the earliest and easily one of the most celebrated performers (then as now), was Blind Lemon Jefferson, who started by playing on street corners and in brothels. He recorded extensively during the late 1920s and may have been the most popular blues artist of the time. He influenced country and urban blues performers alike; his repertoire contained both sacred and very, very profane material. In a sense, his career presaged the diversity of Texas blues styles. Occasionally, he performed with Huddie Ledbetter (better known as Lead Belly) in the Deep Ellum district of Dallas. Lead Belly drew on Jefferson’s acoustic range and rural tradition. However, because Lead Belly was a younger artist who lived longer and

found many important sponsors and promoters over the course of his career, contemporary music audiences tend to know him better.

A second generation of Texas blues artists included Lightnin’ Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb, whose very different careers embodied the diverse directions a musical tradition can take. Houston-based Lightnin’ Hopkins was clearly a fan of Jefferson’s style. He recorded prolifically and played for years on the so-called chitlin’ circuit of Black clubs and juke joints, which were standard venues for early blues artists. Hopkins started on acoustic guitar but switched to electric to reflect his own and his audience’s change in taste. Until Whites became interested in the blues, his audience was largely a Black one, and he had a substantial following. Mance Lipscomb of Navasota, Texas, on the other hand, played music in strictly informal settings for most of his life; only later was he “discovered” by blues aficionados. Though Lipscomb did not have a “professional” career in the blues until well into his sixties, his repertoire was no less wide-ranging and impressive. He performed mainly before White audiences who discovered the blues through the festival and folk club circuits.

Jefferson also had an enormous impact on T-Bone Walker. He encountered the younger musician when T-Bone was growing up in the Oak Cliff area of Dallas. At one time, Jefferson enlisted T-Bone to lead him to the street corners where the older artist plied his trade for spare coins. Walker cleverly combined what he learned from Jefferson’s aggressive guitar strumming with amplification techniques he learned from his onetime partner, the legendary jazz musician Charlie Christian (also a Texan). It proved a mighty recipe for popularizing the electric guitar in blues circles. Walker became one of the founders of urban electric blues and spread the sound through his successful recording career and his move from Texas to the West Coast. His innovations inspired a generation of remarkable Texas blues guitarists such as Pee Wee Crayton, Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown, Z.Z. Hill, Albert Collins, Freddie King, and Johnny Clyde Copeland—all nationally known musicians. But almost every town in Texas



In cities like Houston, Texas, there are still local clubs that serve up live blues for largely Black audiences. Photo by James Fraher





In the 1940s, Texas native T-Bone Walker revolutionized blues guitar playing by amplifying the instrument. Photo by Amy van Singel, courtesy BluEsoterica Archives

with a sizeable African American community had one or more local Black guitar heroes, who held down gigs in popular Black venues and often backed big acts when they came through town. Today, such artists include I.J. Gosey of Houston, W.C. Clark of Austin, and left-handed Barbara Lynn of Beaumont, Texas.

Texas is home not only to a blues guitar tradition, but also to a formidable crew of blues pianists based in cities such as Austin, Houston, and Dallas. For a while, there was even an itinerant tradition known as “the Santa Fe circuit.” Artists like barrelhouse piano player Robert Shaw jumped trains to play gigs in towns along the Santa Fe Railroad. Shaw had stylistic followers, such as Lavada “Dr. Hep Cat” Durst and fellow rail rider The Grey Ghost. These artists played in local settings and had limited recording careers, while pianists such as Sippie Wallace of Houston and Charles Brown, originally from Texas City, carried Texas piano blues to national audiences. Wallace turned her church-bred licks into a straight-ahead shouting style which was heard nationwide on recordings, and Brown forwarded a smooth R&B-type sound. Like T-Bone Walker, Brown was a Texas artist who performed on the West Coast for much of his career.

## Blue Dallas

by Alan Govenar

The blues came to Dallas in the 1890s, brought by itinerant African American musicians fleeing the blighted cotton fields of East Texas. Of these musicians, the most seminal guitarist and vocalist was Blind Lemon Jefferson, born in 1893 in rural East Texas and discovered on a Dallas street corner. Considered one of the first folk blues singers on record, Jefferson made eighty recordings between 1926 and 1929 and was a profound influence on the blues musicians who followed him. From Lead Belly and Aaron “T-Bone” Walker to Stevie Ray Vaughan and Anson Funderburgh, Dallas has offered a hotbed of blues activity. Barrelhouse blues pianist Alex Moore, who made his first recordings in 1929, received a National Heritage Fellowship in 1987. Today, the House of Blues brings nationally known acts to the city, while R.L. Griffin’s Blues Palace in South Dallas still nurtures the blues in the African American community.

*Alan Govenar is the author of the forthcoming Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound (Texas A&M University Press, 2008).*

## Houston’s House of Hits: Sugarhill Recording Studios

by Andy Bradley

The oldest continuously operating recording studio in Texas is nestled in a southeast Houston neighborhood that has over time been home to legendary producers, record labels, and artists, with staggeringly important releases. To kick things off in 1946, musician Harry Choates and producer Bill Quinn laid tracks for the Cajun classic “Jole Blon” for Gold Star Records. Blues icon Lightnin’ Hopkins recorded with the label soon thereafter. For Pappy Dailey’s D label, George Jones cut “Why Baby Why?” in 1955; in 1958, the Big Bopper recorded “Chantilly Lace.” Willie Nelson, Bobby Bland, and Arnett Cobb have all used the studio. In 1965, the Sir Douglas Quintet made the classic “She’s About A Mover.” In the mid-1960s, Clifton Chenier recorded his first album there, and in the mid-1970s, Crazy Cajun producer Huey P. Meaux introduced Freddy Fender to the studio. Since the 1980s, Sugarhill has hosted Tejano artist Little Joe, country greats Johnny Bush and Ray Price, and urban powerhouse Beyoncé.

*Andy Bradley is a co-owner and company historian at Sugarhill Recording Studios.*



Despite the longstanding debate about the relationship of the blues to gospel music within the African American community, many Texas artists performed both. And the Texas African American gospel tradition certainly had its share of soloists, including Blind Lemon Jefferson, Sippie Wallace, and the lesser known but electrifying Blind Willie Johnson. However, the state's Black gospel scene has always been more noted for its quartet sound. The early vocal quartets often performed a cappella, while later ensembles preferred a feisty vocal style and relied on amplification to spark the Holy Spirit in church, concert, and record audiences. In the 1940s and 1950s, the center of Texas Black gospel was Houston, where the early Soul Stirrers and The Pilgrim Travelers sang. During this era, even the Austin-based Paramount Singers and the still-active Bells of Joy traveled to Houston to record on the Duke-Peacock label, which was owned by the first Black recording entrepreneur, Don Robey. Personal and family connections kept the Texas gospel sound alive, even in places like California, where many early Texas groups and individual artists moved and continued to perform. The Los Angeles-based Mighty Clouds of Joy were cofounded by Austin's Junior Franklin, whose father was one of the founders of the Paramount Singers, who now reside in Oakland, California.

The storied and still vibrant Texas Mexican tradition also distinguishes the musical riches of the Lone Star State from those of other parts of the South and urban America. A large, long-resident population of Mexican descent has influenced every aspect of Texas culture, including music. After all, the story-song style of the *corrido* is not that different from the cowboy ballad. And don't the twin fiddles of western swing evoke and in some ways echo the big violin sound of mariachi music? Isn't a polka still a polka, even if its lyrics are in Spanish and not in Czech or Polish? Somehow, however, the Tejano musical traditions have remained outside the mainstream and have been less appreciated than African American genres by the commercial recording industry. Clearly, this is largely the result of discrimination and linguistic



Lydia Mendoza performed for years with her family in *carpas*, Spanish-language traveling shows. When records and radio became popular, her fame flourished. Photo courtesy Arhoolie Productions, Inc.



difference. Still, whether you speak of the corpus of *canciones* and *corridos*; the styles of *orquesta* and conjunto; the more contemporary, straight-out Tejano sound; or the politically oriented music of the *movimiento*, Tejano music both expresses and maintains a coherent cultural identity and community.

Tejano music comes from the banks of the Rio Grande, which forms the “border” between Texas and Mexico. Now so often thought of as a dividing line, it was, in fact, a meeting place for the Texas Mexican community. Women vocalists and instrumentalists played a large part in developing the repertoire from the 1920s through the 1950s. Lydia Mendoza, for example, was known for accompanying herself on twelve-string guitar. Artists, such as Lydia Mendoza, Chelo Silva, and Carmen y Laura popularized border music through performances, radio appearances, and recordings. Tejanas still follow in the footsteps of their female forebears; singers and songwriters such as Shelly Loves and Tish Hinojosa keep alive this vocal tradition.

Men (often with women as vocalists) dominate conjunto and *orquesta*, which were born and bred in Texas and the Southwest, respectively. Conjunto’s beginnings are generally associated with the 1936 recording of “La Chicharronera” by accordionist Narciso Martínez. The style combines two-row button accordion with the *bajo sexto* (a twelve-string guitar), an instrument that provides the rhythmic accompaniment unique to conjunto and replaces the bottom-sounding bass keys of the accordion. The conjunto repertoire is made up of an extraordinarily wide range of song styles and rhythms—including *rancheras*, polkas, waltzes, *redowas*, *huapangos*, *schottisches*, and *cumbias*. They reflect the Mexican and Central European traditions blended by Tejano accordionists from South Texas. Conjunto is always called *la música de la gente* (the people’s music); its roots in rural life and farmwork are understood. Yet even the early style had an urban version, which was pioneered by artists such as San Antonian Santiago Jiménez Sr. Like so many other forms of Texas music, conjunto is dance music. Every Friday and Saturday night, there are dozens of conjunto dances in towns all over the Lone Star State. They feature artists such as Don Jiménez’s sons, Flaco and Santiago Jr., Mingo Saldivar, Eva Ybarra, Joel Guzmán, and Sonny Saucedá—to name just a few.

## Border Ballads: The Corrido Tradition

The ballad is a story-song that puts poetry to music. Ballads exist in many cultural and linguistic traditions, but the Texas Mexican *corrido* is one with a special history in the Lone Star State. The publication of *With His Pistol In His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*, by Tejano scholar Américo Paredes, recognizes the *corrido* as a vibrant musical tradition that offers an alternative history and perspective on the struggles of the Texas Mexican community. Whether it is the story of an unjustly accused ranch hand seeking vindication, the exaggerated exploits of border smugglers, or the brags of a winning South Texas football team, the *corrido* carries news to the community.



For many Tejanos, mariachi music expresses the essence of Mexican identity. School-based instructional programs and ensembles, like this group of young musicians from Roma High School in the Rio Grande Valley, have especially fueled the genre’s prevalence in the state.

Photo by Scott Newton



*Orquesta*, like conjunto, is dance music, but it requires, as its Spanish name indicates, a larger ensemble, driven by strings, reeds, and horns. It weds Mexican- and Latin American-inspired rhythms, such as the rumba, bolero, and cha-cha, with mainstream American dance-band styles, such as the foxtrot and boogie-woogie. The great masters of the genre Beto Villa and Isidro López, bandleaders in the “big band” sense of the word, understood that *orquesta*’s appeal lay equally in conventional American musical culture and the Tejano community’s *ranchera* roots. And while *orquesta* was considered a more sophisticated, or *jaitón* (high tone) musical tradition than conjunto, it remained a very important vehicle for Texas Mexican identity, even as the genre became less elitist with the advent of straight-out, politically aware Tejano groups like Little Joe y La Familia, and Rubén Ramos and the Texas Revolution. This second and third generation of musicians combined big-band *orquesta* with consciousness of the Chicano movement. Consider Little Joe’s treatment of the traditional Mexican song “Las Nubes,” which is about a desperate young man who gazes at the approaching clouds and hopes for rain—and a new day. This well-worn song became an anthem of cultural empowerment for the Texas Mexican community. Tejano music, like all Texas music, renews itself while holding close its beloved heritage.

Perhaps more important than claims of “influences,” “firsts,” and “innovations” of Texas music is a far subtler point: Texas music has always served to bridge the complex cultural identities of the region’s

many residents. In the Lone Star State, if you are an Anglo, a Tejano, a Czech, or an African American—or even if you are a rancher, an oil worker, or a Southern Baptist—there are specific styles of music that entertain, articulate, and celebrate your heritage and experience. In contemporary Texas, the polka dance is alive and well. There are soul-riveting gospel services in countless communities every Sunday. Dancehalls throughout the state are filled with the sounds of Western swing and hard-core honky-tonk on Saturday night. And Texans take advantage of them all, often in direct relation to and as an expression of, a singular cultural identity that attaches to specific genres like conjunto, country, gospel, or polka.

Yet, through an affection for music that unabashedly embraces combinations of all of these styles, Texans also rejoice in being Texan and in their shared regional identity. You hear it in Tejano’s nod to country and in Texas country music’s fascination with jazzy, swingy elements that first arose in African American styles. You especially find it in completely contemporary styles of pop and rock—from Doug Sahm to Lucinda Williams to Los Super Seven to Norah Jones. That is simply because music in Texas has always been a means for diverse communities to communicate with each other—even communities that have not interacted directly with each other for decades or sometimes centuries because of physical distance, social difference, or, downright discrimination. By circulating tunes, passing on licks, exchanging genres, and borrowing stylings, the music has fostered an understanding of being Texan that transcends the time, the region, and the individual. And, you can dance to all of it!

*Pat Jasper is a folklorist and the founding director of Texas Folklife Resources, a statewide nonprofit dedicated to preserving the folk arts and folklife of the Lone Star State. Since 2002, she has worked as an independent consultant, curator, and project director for a wide range of nationally noted festivals, museums, and documentation projects. She lives in Austin, Texas.*

The longest-running concert series on national television, *Austin City Limits*, presents a broad spectrum of artists and celebrates homegrown music. The legendary Flatlanders performed on the show in 2002 for its twenty-seventh season. Photo by Scott Newton





Texas wines reflect “wide open places, a love of tradition, independence, and the joy that comes from being larger than life.”

to make the most of the state’s unique terrain and weather conditions. They focused in some areas on Mediterranean-style varietals similar to those of Italy, Spain, and southern France.

Today, the state has eight federally approved wine grape-growing regions, or “appellations,” from the Panhandle to the Gulf Coast. The Hill Country has become America’s second-largest viticulture area, while the High Plains and Far West regions have proved most productive. (Other areas have battled Pierce’s disease, black rot, and severe weather conditions.) Each region has its own *terroir* (climate, soil, and unique characteristics), enabling Texas, as a whole, to produce an unusually diverse group of varietals with unique flavors and vintages. Joshua Coffee of Llano Estacado Winery in Lubbock says Texas wines reflect “wide open places, a love of tradition, independence, and the joy that comes from being larger than life.”

Though many come from wine-making families, Texas grape growers and winemakers are generally considered mavericks, who stubbornly confront the

elements, government regulations, and consumer tastes. They judge their success by sales, national attention to the industry, satisfaction with their own product, and the awards that Texas wines increasingly garner. Texas is now the fifth-leading wine-producing state in the nation; the industry employs about 8,000 people and contributes more than \$1 billion annually to the state’s economy. With their tasting rooms and picturesque atmospheres, wineries have become tourist destinations. Along with new immigrant communities, they are changing the culinary landscape of the state. They add a new dimension to the Texas dinner table and help expand the perception of Texas cuisine.

*Dawn Orsak has spent the last fifteen years working in the areas of food and culture, first for Texas Folklife Resources and most recently as executive director of the Texas Hill Country Wine & Food Festival. She has curated over fifty foodways presentations and has been a presenter at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and the Louisiana Folklife Festival, among other events.*

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