



Issue No. 6:

THE CONJUNTO ISSUE

TEJANO MUSICAL LEGENDS

SOUTH TEXAS DANCE HALLS AND SALONES

THREE HALLS OF FAME, MUSEUMS, AND FESTIVALS TO VISIT

ARHOLIE RECORDS' FRONTERA COLLECTION: A MUSICAL LEGACY

FROM THE EDITOR

**New for 2019:
Themed Issues for
TDHP Newsletters!**



Steph McDougal
TDHP CO-Founder
Board President, 2017–2018

If you've been a regular reader of this newsletter, you'll notice something different this year: each issue will be built around a theme. In this issue, we're heading to South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley to visit the home of conjunto music and the many talented musicians who did and do make Tejano music famous. Our May issue will focus on dance hall weddings — a very special way to start a married life together!

Did you get married at a Texas dance hall or host your wedding reception in one? If so, we'd love for you to share your story and a photo or two with TDHP. So many dance halls survive and thrive by hosting these special events that make beautiful memories for couples and their families. It's a tradition that has stood the test of time, as weddings and wedding parties have been a big part of most halls' histories. Send your story and a photo or two to admin@texasdancehall.org or through our [Facebook page](#). We may include it in our June newsletter (with your permission, of course).

I was privileged to have the opportunity this quarter to talk with Rey Avila, Ruben Lopez, and Chris Strachwitz as we were putting together this issue. Thanks to those gentlemen — especially Mr. Avila, who generously shared many stories and historic photos of La Villita Dance Hall in San Benito — and to TDHP board member Tracy Rohrbacher and her colleagues at the Harlingen Convention and Visitors Bureau, who provided the travel tips featured later in this issue.

You might also notice that this issue is being published about six weeks later than intended. While TDHP had help to develop our newsletters in the past, I've taken over the entire production for 2019, and getting up to speed took a bit longer than I had planned. Look for our next issue, on time, in May.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this issue and some fine conjunto music! Don't hesitate to let us know what you think via Facebook or email. We love to hear from you!

Steph McDougal

Texas Dance Hall Preservation, Inc.
3005 S. Lamar Blvd., Suite D-109 #315
Austin, Texas 78704

Deb Fleming, Executive Director
Steph McDougal, Editor

<https://www.texasdancehall.org>

On the cover: The Grammy award-winning conjunto band Los Texmaniacs (photo courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings and Shore Fire Media)

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TDHP NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

TDHP to Offer “Traveling” Dance Lessons

Starting this spring, TDHP will provide free 30-minute dance lessons, led by an instructor, before scheduled dances at selected halls. Dates, times, and locations will be announced on [our website](#) and [our Facebook page](#). This program, which will “travel” to different dance halls, is designed to engage a younger audience of music lovers, help them develop confidence on the dance floor, and encourage them to attend more dances ... and bring their friends along! The “Traveling Dance Lessons” are made possible by the generous support of the Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation and the Texas Hill Country Trail Region Small Grants program. If your hall is interested in more information about this new program, email Deb Fleming at deb@texasdancehall.org or call 512-921-1250 for more details.



Dance lessons at the Galveston Garten Verein in November 2017 (photo by Dave Norris)



The remains of Gruenau Hall, after the 2007 electrical fire that destroyed it (photo by Donald Haase)

Insurance Appraisals for Dance Halls

Over the last decade, Texas has lost a handful of dance halls to fire and floods, and in every case, hall owners found that their property insurance only covered about 25% of the cost to rebuild. To help halls be better informed about replacement costs and obtain sufficient coverage, TDHP is working with Historic Appraisals LLC to provide insurance appraisals for six representative halls. By creating a set of baseline appraisals for comparison, TDHP will make it easier for halls to receive accurate appraisals from National Trust Insurance Services (NTIS), which specializes in historic buildings before, during, and after renovations. (NTIS also provides coverage for the League of Historic American Theatres.) Thanks to our generous donors during Giving Tuesday in November 2018, whose gifts are funding this project!

2019 Dance Hall Tour Dates Announced!

TDHP and Asleep at the Wheel’s fourth Texas Dance Hall Tour will visit dance halls in the Dallas-Fort Worth area from June 13–16, 2019!

Tickets are now on sale, with special offers just for TDHP Lifetime Members. Whether you’re solo or a couple, whether you’d rather make your own lodging/transportation arrangements or take advantage of the all-inclusive packages, the Texas Dance Hall Tour has an option that’s right for you! For more information, visit texasdancehalltour.com.



Preservation Fund Grants

Applications for TDHP’s spring round of Preservation Fund grants were due on March 1, and awards will be announced in April. Halls with current tax-exempt status can apply for grants (usually up to \$2,500) to help with repairs. The deadline for the fall round of grants will be September 1. Thanks to Lone Star Beer’s 2018 Tabs and Caps for Texas campaign, which is funding this spring’s grants, and Lone Star’s most recent donation of \$5,000 to help with Hurricane Harvey recovery. You can help too! To donate to the Preservation Fund, visit texasdancehall.org/donation, click on Donate, and select “Apply my donation to: Preservation Fund”.

Dance Hall Photo Exhibit

Our dance hall photo exhibit wrapped up its most recent display at the Texas Czech Heritage and Cultural Center in La Grange in February. Deb Fleming gave a great talk about Texas dance halls and TDHP; thanks again to Mark Hermes and TCHCC for hosting us! Next stop: Dallas’ Love Field, where the exhibit will be displayed in the main airport terminal starting on June 3, 2019. Stay tuned for future location announcements! If you know of a spot in your part of the state that might be interested in hosting the exhibit, please let us know.



TDHP executive director and past board president, Deb Fleming, with the photo exhibit at the Texas Czech Heritage and Cultural Center



Photo by iStock.com-MediaPhotos

Survey for Dance Halls

Has your dance hall received our survey yet? One of TDHP’s 2019 projects is the development of an online dance hall database. This information will help us better communicate with halls, provide services, collect and manage historical information, as well as assist bands and booking agents. We plan to eventually develop a tool to help musicians and others map their own dance hall road trips. If your hall has not already received a survey, or if you want to let us know about a hall in your area, please contact Deb Fleming via email at deb@texasdancehall.org or call 512-921-1250.

TDHP NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

DANCE HALL FOR SALE:

Albert Ice House and Dance Hall

Here's a sweet historic dance hall that just hit the market in the beautiful hill country. Albert Hall was the last stop on our last Texas Dance Hall Tour in November 2018 where Ray Benson and Asleep at the Wheel performed. The owners have put a whole lot of work getting this little hall back in shape as well as the great ice house/road house next door. The Albert Ice House and Dance Hall would make a great investment for the right person offering unlimited possibilities (vineyard, tasting room, event center, cottages, RV park and so much more). If you're interested, don't wait -- act now. This beauty won't be on the market for long.

[View the real estate listing here.](#)



You Can Own a Dance Hall!



Photos courtesy of Deb Fleming

Central Market Rolls Out Curbside Service with Help from Asleep At The Wheel and The Derailers



Two generous supporters of Texas Dance Hall Preservation made news earlier this year when the popular Austin grocery store Central Market launched its curbside service with help from Western Swing band Asleep At The Wheel. On January 9, 2019, the AATW tour bus pulled up to Central Market's Westgate location at 4117 South Lamar, and Ray Benson was on hand to receive the delivery himself. Following remarks from Benson and HEB/Central Market president Stephen Butt, which included the presentation of a \$5,000 donation to Texas Dance Hall Preservation, Benson and band members Katie Shore and Dennis Ludiker entertained guests in the Central Market café.



TDHP executive director Deb Fleming and board member Bratten Thomason were on hand to accept the generous donation from Central Market (photo by Randy Dalton).

HEB/Central Market's director of public affairs, Mabrie Jackson, says, "Texans have a distinct sense of pride in their food and their music. [Central Market](#) is proud to support the Texas Dance Hall Preservation Inc. team in their quest to preserve the very roots of Texas music institutions — Texas dance halls and the authentic music and culture that is still found in them."

Two weeks later, Central Market celebrated the chain's 25th anniversary and launched curbside service at its original Austin location (4001 North Lamar) with music from dance-hall favorites The Derailers. Central Market now offers curbside service at multiple locations. For more information, visit [centralmarket.com](#). They are really into food!



Asleep At The Wheel's Ray Benson shares a laugh with Central Market/HEB president Stephen Butt.



Asleep At The Wheel's Katie Shore, Ray Benson, and Dennis Ludiker perform in the Central Market café.



Ray Benson picks up the first curbside delivery at Central Market's Westgate location.

All photos on this page by Deb Fleming, except where noted.

★ CONJUNTO!

BY STEPH M^CDOUGAL

What happens when you mix German polka bands with Mexican fandangos? In northern Mexico and southern Texas during the 20th century, a unique crossover musical genre developed from that very combination, and its name is *conjunto*.

People from the area now known as Germany emigrated to Mexico for more than 100 years, starting in the last half of the 1800s and into the 20th century, just as they settled in Texas during that period. Germans also helped to establish the beer-brewing industry in Mexico and to build the railroads that opened all of Mexico to international trade, starting in 1890.



Photo by iStock.com-restafoto

Germans (and, to a lesser extent, Czech immigrants) brought to Mexico their music — polkas, waltzes, schottisches — and musical instruments, including the button accordion. Invented around 1850, this early style of accordion is played by pressing buttons on both sides of a bellows, which can be pumped in and out to change or hold notes. Originally with one or two rows of melody buttons, the accordion became readily available (thanks to the railroads) and was widely adopted by Mexican and Tejano musicians in the 1890s.

It originally was played as a solo instrument, then accompanied by a goatskin drum known as *tambora de rancho*. In both rural Mexico and rural Texas, social events revolved around eating, drinking, and dancing, and accordions had enough volume needed to be heard outdoors. Parties known as *fandangos* (after the Spanish dance of the same name) were popular with working-class people on both sides of the border.

Known as “the father of conjunto music” and “El Huracán del Valle” (“the hurricane of the valley”) for the speed at which he played, [Narciso Martínez](#) is largely credited with changing the accordion’s musical role to exclusively focus on the melody, starting in 1935. Bass accompaniment was provided by [Santiago Almeida](#) on the *bajo sexto* (a 12-string acoustic bass guitar), and the pair’s influential early recordings established the accordion-*bajo sexto* pairing as the foundation of conjunto music.

Martínez’s polkas were his most popular recordings, but he also recorded Bohemian dance music such as the *redowa* and the *chotis* (schottische). His own songs were mostly instrumental, but after signing with San Benito’s [Ideal Records](#) in 1946, he accompanied many popular Tejano singers.

Conjunto continued to evolve throughout the 20th century. [Santiago Jiménez, Sr.](#), a San Antonio accordionist, added a stand-up bass to the musical mix in the 1930s, an addition that became more popular after the second World War. Big-band-style arrangements of conjunto music played by *orquestas* were popular before World War II, particularly among middle-class Tejanos. Even as more modern instrumentation has been introduced, including the three-row button accordion, the polka and *canción ranchera* (a traditional style from northern Mexico) remain the bedrock of the genre.

In the 1940s, the innovative [Valerio Longoria](#) — who began playing accordion in Kenedy, Texas, at the age of eight — added drums and vocals to the mix, with great success. Perhaps the first accordion player to add straps to his instrument and play standing, rather than sitting, he popularized the *bolero*, a slower style that spread from Cuba around the turn of the 20th century, thanks to the radio broadcasts of *boleros* sung by famous tenors.

[Tony de la Rosa](#) from Sarita, Texas, was another pioneer; he amplified the bajo sexto or used electric bass, added horns in the 1960s, and slowed the tempo of his polkas. He also incorporated western swing and the country music he heard and played in Texas honky-tonks into his sound.

Along with [Conjunto Bernal](#) (the Bernal brothers, Paulino and Eloy of Kingsville), these musicians had together established by the 1960s the style of conjunto still played today.

Perhaps no single musician has popularized conjunto around the world as much as Leonardo “[Flaco](#)” [Jiménez](#). The son of Santiago Jiménez, Sr., Flaco began his career as an *acordeonista* while still a child and has recorded with musicians across many genres, winning five Grammy awards along the way. One of those was with the [Texas Tornados](#): Jiménez, fellow San Antonians Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers, and San Benito native Freddie Fender.

[Ruben Vela](#), “the king of the dance hall sound,” was one of Flaco’s contemporaries. Known for his upbeat staccato accordion sound, Vela and his band, which included electric bass, drums, and synthesizers, performed at dance halls throughout the Rio Grande Valley.

Another multiple Grammy winner, [Little Joe y La Familia](#), grew out of Temple, Texas bandleader José María de León Hernández’s orchestra, Little Joe and the Latinaires. Their big-band sound took them to the West Coast in the 1970s, where Joe became committed to the Chicano farm workers movement, and changed the band’s name and sound to reflect his focus on the community. Little Joe was named Texas State Musician in 2019.

In more recent years, Max Baca and [Los Texmaniacs](#) (featured on our cover) have incorporated elements of rock and roll, jazz, and country music into conjunto. Baca first learned to play accordion as a child in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but switched to bajo sexto when he and his brother Jimmy founded their first band, Los Hermanos Baca. Max Baca was mentored by Flaco Jiménez, with whom he played for many years. Los Texmaniacs also pays homage to the Texas Tornados. They received a Grammy award in 2010.

Today, conjuntos are still flourishing throughout Texas, with many regional variations in the music. You can hear music and interviews with legends and up-and-coming musicians on Austin’s [Rancho Alegre Radio](#), an internet station devoted to preserving and promoting conjunto music.



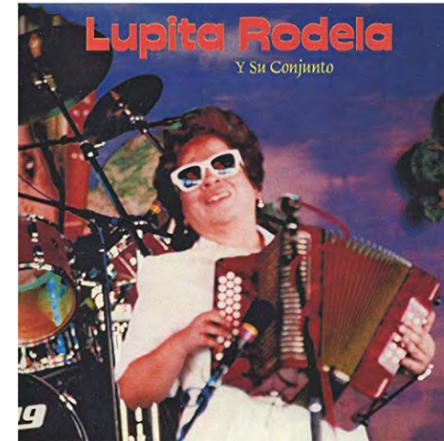
TEJANA SINGERS AND ACCORDION QUEENS



Lydia Mendoza (undated; photo courtesy of the University of North Texas Portal to Texas History, crediting Rose Marine Theatre)



[Laura Canales](#), a Kingsville native, began singing as a teenager, performing with bands including Conjunto Bernal. Canales' recording career included traditional polka-based music and contemporary Tejano songs, always with an accordion in the mix. She was recognized with multiple awards and accolades in the 1980s.



Top to bottom: Eva Ybarra (Library of Congress); Lupita Rodela album cover; Silvia Navarro (courtesy of Silvia Navarro); Laura Canales (The Brownsville Monktor)

La Villita Dance Hall

ALICE, TEXAS



Head due west from Corpus Christi, and you'll soon reach a small town called Alice, Texas. Once home to Ideal Records — one of the most influential record labels in Texas from the 1940s through , — the city is home to both the famed [La Villita Dance Hall](#) (above) and the [R.O.O.T.S \(Remembering Our Own Tejano Stars\) Hall of Fame and Museum](#) (see page X). This La Villita was established by Armando and Carmen Marroquin in 1952 and featured Tejano and Mexican singers, conjuntos, and orquestas until closing in 2004. In its heyday, the hall was known as “the Grand Old Opry” of Tejano and conjunto music because so many stars played there.

With more than 12,000 square feet of combined dance floor and seating, the hall's signature bright pink color scheme was selected by Carmen and continued right down to the cashbox that she used for selling tickets at the door. The hall was briefly closed prior to Armando's death, aged 78, in 1990, following a long illness. Carmen re-opened the business and continued running La Villita on her own for another two decades, before retiring at the age of 83. La Villita opened sporadically to host the R.O.O.T.S. Hall of Fame induction ceremonies for a few more years. A civic leader in Alice as well as a Tejana trailblazer and entrepreneur, Carmen Marroquin passed away in 2010.

Since then, the hall has been mostly unused. It has been for sale in the past few years but is currently off the market. Ruben Lopez, executive director of the R.O.O.T.S. Museum and Hall of Fame, says that the hall (now owned by sons Armando Jr. and Mario Marroquin, both in their 70s) was full of dancers in the 1980s, but not so much after that. “In those days, you'd spend your holidays and free time out dancing, but now that generation spends their time with their families, and the younger generation has moved away.” Unfortunately, it's a common problem that faces many dance halls and rural communities.

Today, prospective buyers would benefit from a renewed interest in live music, including conjunto, and the hall's convenient location in Alice, the county seat of Jim Wells County, at the junction of US Highway 281 and Texas State Highways 44 and 359.

The City's Community Development department reports that it could grant a variance to allow alcohol sales at La Villita, even though it's within 300 feet of a school's property line, since the hall would be open after school hours and Garcia Elementary, across the road, is currently closed.

Anyone interested in buying and reopening one of Texas' most famous dance halls can contact [Texas Dance Hall Preservation](#) for more information.

La Villita Dance Hall



SAN BENITO, TEXAS

Two hours south of Alice and just past Harlingen on US 77, you'll find San Benito, Texas, home to another La Villita Dance Hall. Located in the 200 block of Robertson Street behind a strip of commercial establishments, the site had previously housed a lumberyard before Fernando and Maria Eva Sanchez purchased it in the 1940s. Back then, you walked through a door at the center of the block and followed a long hall until you reached an open-air dance floor.

Originally the venue was little more than a concrete pad covered with tiles made in Mexico especially for the Sanchezes, with wooden benches around the perimeter. Spectators got in free, but you had to pay if you wanted to dance.

Fernando Sanchez was an entrepreneur with many business interests; he owned the entire block and rented storefronts to tenants like a meat market and barber shop. He also had a successful salt-harvesting business and was also politically active in San Benito. Eva was involved in the dance hall business, too, and worked the door.

The stage was decorated in 1948 with a mural featuring the slogan “Visitors Welcome to our Magic Valley along the Rio Grande”. The Sanchezes constructed a wall around the dance floor in the early 1950s and added the venue's first roof in 1961. It has been replaced and repaired over the years.

Although La Villita Dance Hall was the place to be in the 1950s and 1960s, by the late 1970s, fewer people were coming out to dance, and the hall closed. Accordion music had fallen out of favor with young people, who were into rock and roll. The hall passed through other owners' hands before being purchased in 2005 by Mike Diaz, who has restored and reopened the hall, featuring live music several times a month.



Top to bottom: La Villita Dance Hall (on right side of photo), January 1958; Fernando Sanchez harvesting salt at La Sal del Rey, 1923; a band onstage in front of the mural, date unknown (all photos courtesy of the Texas Conjunto Hall of Fame and Museum)

TEXAS' CONJUNTO HALLS OF FAME AND MUSEUMS

Three different options cover all the bases. Check them out online and in person!

TEXAS CONJUNTO HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM, SAN BENITO

Founded by Rey Avila in 2001, the Texas Conjunto Hall of Fame and Museum in San Benito focuses exclusively on conjunto in the Lone Star state.

It's currently located in the San Benito community center, along with the Freddy Fender museum and the local history museum, but will move to a brand-new facility next door in the near future.



Rey Avila holds a recording master disc at the museum (photo by Steph McDougal).

The museum's exhibits showcase the musicians, radio disc jockeys, and record-label owners who have captured and promoted the music throughout the state for more than 75 years.

This Hall of Fame holds an induction ceremony each summer and has recognized 80 people during the past 17 years.

[Texas Conjunto Hall of Fame and Museum](#), 210 E. Heywood St., San Benito. Open from 10:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. Thursday–Saturday.

R.O.O.T.S. HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM, ALICE

The R.O.O.T.S. (Remembering Our Own Tejano Stars) Hall of Fame and Museum in Alice was founded by Javier Villanueva in 1999. This Hall of Fame recognizes Tejano music and musicians from all over the United States, including sidemen, sound engineers, and radio station owners. Inductees must have been in the music business for 15 years.

After Villanueva died in 2011, Ruben Lopez took over the organization. Their annual induction ceremony takes place each year in early January, and includes a Friday-night public dance with the ceremony on Saturday. In the past few years, the Hall of Fame has inducted more than 70 people annually in 20+ categories.



R.O.O.T.S. Hall of Fame and Museum, 213 N. Wright St., Alice. Open Saturdays from 10:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m. most weeks; call 361-668-6666 (no website at this time).

CONJUNTO MUSIC HALL OF FAME, SAN ANTONIO

The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center hosts its own Conjunto Hall of Fame as part of the annual, five-day [Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio](#) (now in its 38th year). Featuring a dinner and musical performances by inductees and friends, this induction ceremony takes place each year in May.



In addition to the annual festival poster contest, the 2019 event kicks off with a dance and film screening and Hall of Fame ceremony, both at the Guadalupe Theater, followed by three days of musical performances from noon until midnight at Rosedale Park.

To purchase tickets, visit the [Guadalupe Cultural Center's website](#) or call 210-271-3151.

Let's Plan A Trip to San Benito!

The Rio Grande Valley in South Texas is filled with Mexican and American culture and surrounded by so many things to see and do, including some of the best birding in Texas.

Getting There

Getting to the Rio Grande Valley is relatively easy by car or air. Major highways US 77 and US 281 thread the region, connecting several small towns. Harlingen sits in the center of the Rio Grande Valley and is home to Valley International Airport (VIA), which serves as a gateway to the region.

Harlingen

Birding enthusiasts flock to Harlingen to see birds not seen elsewhere in the country, including the Altamira oriole and the green jay. The city's embrace of nature extends to the Harlingen Arroyo Colorado, one of nine World Birding Centers in the Valley, with the Hugh Ramsey Nature Center connected to its east.

Take a break from nature at Las Vegas Cafe or Antigua Bakery & Cafe to sample local cuisine. Then, soak in more than a dozen colorful murals throughout the city on a mural tour.

San Benito

Just south of Harlingen, San Benito is known for its strong ties to the roots of Conjunto music. The quiet town hosts several annual events and includes lots of local spots to grab a bite to eat.

Worth the Drive

No trip to south Texas would be complete without a visit to South Padre Island. Ranked #1 on the 2018 ["15 Amazing Island Getaways – In America!"](#) by Southern Living Magazine, South Padre Island is approximately 45 miles from Harlingen. Home to 34 miles of undeveloped beaches, South Padre offers activities for adventure seekers and sunbathers alike.

Relax and enjoy a view of the sunset over the bay at Laguna Bobs with a cold drink and live music. Or, try sand castle lessons, horseback riding on the beach, or surfing lessons.

Best Time to Visit

South Texas is a popular destination for Winter Texans between November and February. Spring break season is in full swing beginning early March through mid-April. The best time to visit the Rio Grande Valley is October, when the crisp fall weather is accompanied by plenty of events in the region.



Photos courtesy South Padre Island Convention & Visitors Bureau

CHRIS STRACHWITZ AND ARHOOIE RECORDS

Many original conjunto recordings are available today because of one man and his quest to collect American music. Originally from Germany, Chris Strachwitz began his musical journey in the late 1950s, a “song catcher with a tape machine” who eventually amassed hundreds of thousands of recordings. Strachwitz purchased masters from Texas record labels, including Ideal Records; bought vinyl records and cassettes; and captured music himself. His record label, Arhoolie Records, re-released albums and helped to popularize older acts for younger generations. Through a partnership with University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), more than 135,000 recordings of Mexican and Mexican-American musicians have been digitized and archived by the [Strachwitz Frontera Collection](#). Arhoolie releases are also available for purchase through [Smithsonian Folkways Recordings](#). Chris Strachwitz spoke to TDHP in February 2019 and told us about how he came to collect and preserve this music.

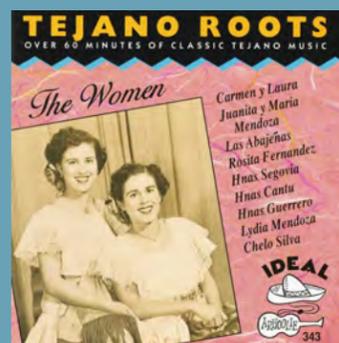
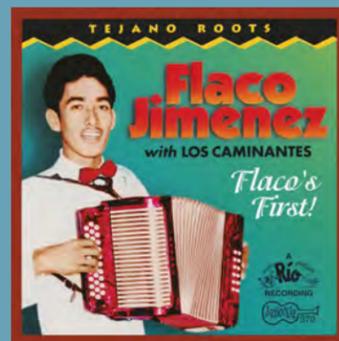
You started out in California ... what brought you to Texas, as a collector?

I was first turned on about going to Texas by Sam Charters [author of *The Country Blues*] in 1959. He sent me a postcard and said, “I found Lightnin’ Hopkins, and he lives in Houston.” I was a fan from Hopkins’ recordings that I heard in San Francisco on the radio. So in 1959, I took a pilgrimage to Houston to visit Lightnin’ Hopkins. That’s what started me thinking I should record. Mack McCormick, the music historian, guided me. I heard Lightnin’ in a beer joint and I was absolutely knocked out. He just casually made up these songs. He would talk to the women in the audience and they would yell back at him. The next year, when I came with the tape machine, he was in California! I recorded him many times anyway, and we became good friends.

In 1970, Arhoolie released its first conjunto record. When did you get first down to the Rio Grande Valley? Was that where you first encountered conjunto music?

I’d heard it before, but Los Pinguinos del Norte was the first album. My friend had been working for the farm workers’ union in the Valley. I went to visit him, and he told me where the Pinguinos were, and I met [Rumel Fuentes](#). I lugged my big tape-to-tape machine all over the place. I couldn’t record in the cantina [where the Pinguinos were playing] so we had to go around the corner, and people started coming in and asking to audition and be heard. We eventually issued a CD by Rumel, and he helped me and [independent filmmaker] [Les Blank](#) record the Pinguinos. [That film, *Chulas Fronteras* (“beautiful borderlands”), has been re-mastered and is available on DVD or Blu-Ray along with a film of love songs called *Del Mero Corazon*, from [Down Home Music](#) or [Les Blank Films](#). You can read more about the film in [this essay](#) from the Library of Congress National Film Preservation Board.]

Below: some of the Arhoolie albums available from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.



As a collector, How did you find these little record labels and decide “this is something I want”?

I used to collect blues records and jazz and country records, and I looked for jukebox stock; people were selling their 78s cheaply at record stores. I started buying everything. I was amazed at all these little labels and I started visiting them. I remember meeting Mr. Marroquin [founder of Ideal Records] in Alice. I enjoyed hanging out with these people. When we did the book on Lidia and her family [[Lydia Mendoza: A Family Autobiography](#)], we met all these amazing people. People would translate the *corridos* for me, and I was so intrigued.

Did you know anything about the two La Villita dance halls in San Benito and in Alice, Texas? Did you do any live recordings in those halls?

No. I never wanted to record that much stuff because the labels were already doing that and I didn’t want to compete with them. I was more interested in the historic old records. They were hard to find.

Rey Avila at the Texas Conjunto Hall of Fame and Museum down in San Benito told me that conjunto music was considered working class. Was that your impression as well?

Definitely. Many orquestas wouldn’t play with conjuntos. [Guitars were]the most popular sound through the 1930s. In the 1940s and 1950s, the *norteño* music took over, and all of a sudden they wouldn’t hire you if you didn’t have an accordian. It’s a class thing. Narciso Martínez was famous in the 1930s, and as the orquestas became more popular, Armando Marroquín brought [the conjuntos and orquestas] together to record for Ideal Records, and they started touring together. It attracted both classes of people.

You’ve made your Frontera Collection available for listening online, and I’m sure you know that the sheer number of recordings is kind of overwhelming. For folks who are new to conjunto and other Tejano music, are there a few essential albums that you’d recommend they start with?

Narciso Martínez is essential to find out who started it all. Previous accordian players were more like Italian [musicians] or had a piano sound. Conjunto Bernal was very significant. Valeria Longoria started introducing the *boleros*. Chela Silva made zillions of records and Columbia Records in Mexico picked her up. Her CD from the Ideal recording includes some cuts live from [a concert in] the park, with Flaco Jiménez backing her. She talked her way through the song, because her voice was shot by then. I was driving in my car when I heard that on the radio and had to pull over. I put my microphone to the car radio speaker and taped it that way. You get the feeling of how much she meant to the women in San Antonio. There are so many others. Freddy Fender was an amazing guy.

Any other suggestions for our readers?

Get into the history of [this music] and the poetry of it. [Those songs] are so gorgeous.

