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FROM ACCORDION ROOTS TO CONJUNTO MUSIC: AN UNLIKELY JOURNEY

by Manuel F. Medrano¹

Culture reveals who we are to the rest of the world. Art communicates our ideas and projects a sense of beauty. Architecture provides, sometime timeless, joyous spaces for life activities. Literature connects individuals to society and records thoughts and experiences to make them accessible to others. Food nourishes us and is passed down as part of our cultural identity. Music conveys human feelings through sound and dance that universally inspire and unify people. It is a timeless global language that still connects us, regardless of who we are and where we live. Nowhere is this more evident than in accordion music. The accordion is a portable, free-vibrating instrument that has roots in China and was invented in Europe. Its major components are the reed and bellow, and it is virtually self-contained. From Europe, the accordion travelled to the Americas, and more specifically, the South Texas border where it became the foundation for an ensemble called the conjunto. From the very beginning, its sound has brought together generations of families who celebrate themselves with music and dance.

Approximately 2,000 years before the Qing dynasty and 2,500 years before Donald Trump, Chinese invented the Sheng, the first known instrument to use a free vibrating reed to create a sound. It was shaped like a resting phoenix and consisted of bamboo pipes, a resonator box, a wind chamber and a mouthpiece. The sheng would become one of China's most traditional and versatile instruments, being played for royalty at imperial palaces and as a folk instrument at festivals and weddings.² *It was probably later taken to Persia through the Silk Road and did not reach Europe until the mid-1700s.*

The sheng was probably introduced to Europe in 1777 by French missionary Pere Amiot, who had brought it from China. In 1822, German Christian Buschmann developed and patented the Handaeoline, an instrument with free vibrating reeds, a portable keyboard and expandable bellows. Seven years later, Armenian-born Cyrillus Damian added four chord-producing bass keys, received a patent and called it the akkordeon, a word meaning concord of sounds.³

Additionally, some Russian scholars claim that the first accordions were invented by Timothy Vorenstov (1820) and Ivan Sizovin (1830) in Tula, Russia. This theory, however, lacks sufficient historical evidence.⁴

Its sound and portability first popularized the accordion in German-speaking regions, and soon it appeared throughout Europe. By the early 1830s, the diatonic accordion had reached Great Britain where it received an unfavorable review in *The Times* indicating it had “little beside its novelty to recommend it.”⁵ Despite the criticism, its acceptance increased. Approximately a decade and a half later, this folk instrument with Chinese roots crossed the Atlantic Ocean probably with German, Czech and Polish immigrants.

In 1850 a chromatic accordion was invented. Unlike its diatonic predecessor, it produced different notes when the bellows were open and closed. Seven years later, steel reeds replaced wooden ones, and soon, companies such as Dallini and Hohner began to manufacture accordions.

How did the accordion arrive in South Texas? One theory proposes that it travelled with German migrants where they lived and worked, in the northern Midwest, French Louisiana, central Texas and the Texas-Mexico border. A second possibility is that German settlers brought it to Monterrey, Mexico in the 1860s.⁶ When they migrated north, they took their music and dance with them. Ethnomusicologist Manuel Pena writes, “whatever music was extant in Monterrey, or at least some of its elements, were eventually diffused northward to Mexican Texas.”⁷ Regardless of its path, accordion music, by the 1890s, was heard and danced to on both sides of the Texas-Mexico border.⁸

As in every other musical genre, the genesis and innovation of the conjunto sound emerged from musical risktakers. In 1935 Narciso Martinez, a young pioneer accordionist from northern Mexico and later known as the father of conjunto music, began a musical collaboration with Santiago Almeida, a young bajo sexto (twelve-string guitar) player from South Texas. Together, they formed the conjunto, a simple two-player ensemble, that changed Texan-Mexican border music forever. They performed, recorded and remained popular for the next two decades. Martinez was dubbed “el huracan del valle” (the Hurricane of the Valley) after a hurricane that blew through the Rio Grande Valley in 1933 and because of his innovative performing style.⁹ Initially, he was paid very little. He once said, “Tocaba el sabado y el domingo de sol a sol, por diez pesos por las dos noches” (I played Saturday and Sunday from sunup to sundown for ten dollars for both nights).¹⁰ In fact, Martinez was one of the first conjunto accordionists to tour in southwestern states such as Arizona and California.¹¹ He received numerous recognitions throughout his life including the Conjunto Hall of Fame Award (1982) and the prestigious National Heritage Award (1983) for contributions to folk music. For ten years he performed at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center Music Festival in San Antonio, Texas. The audience applause and respect there caused him to reminisce

and comment, “hasta ahorita me aprecian como si fuera cosa buena” (Even now, they appreciate me as if I were a good thing).¹² On October 29, 1991, officials in San Benito, Texas, dedicated a cultural arts center bearing his name. It was also the musician’s eightieth birthday. Civic leaders and museum founders invited “Chicho” (what his close friends called him) to attend the celebration and asked if he could perform for one hour; he played for two. To those there, the energy in his music confirmed the validity of the nickname once given him. He died the following June.

A second conjunto pioneer, Valerio Longoria, revolutionized what Narciso Martinez had begun before World War II. His career was precedent-setting for several reasons. Longoria was the first to “incorporate the Mexican cancion, a vocal genre, into his repertory...by superimposing the lyrics of the cancion” over the instrumental song. Additionally, he was first to perform the Mexican bolero (slow tempo Latin music and its associated dance) with conjunto music. Arguably, his most significant contribution was to add a contemporary dance-band drum set to the conjunto.¹³ These innovations nearly completed the evolution of the modern conjunto. For these and others, Longoria also earned a Conjunto Hall of Fame (1982) and National Heritage Awards (1986). “He was a survivor and his life and music were testaments to his spirit.”¹⁴ He once commented, “my music is a gift to the younger musicians. Music is something that no amount of money can buy... something precious... Music is a treasure everywhere. Someone is going to have to carry on the music; I am seventy-two years old. I can’t take it with me. I hope my students will remember my name.”¹⁵ He died at the age of seventy- four, and yes, people remember his name.

Eva Ybarra, the most recent trailblazer, probably faced the most obstacles in achieving recognition as an accordionist. Originally, gender, machismo and lore dictated that only males could perform in conjuntos. Throughout her life, however, Ybarra challenged tradition. Because of her talent and resiliency, she has earned the endearment *La Reina del Acordeon* (the Queen of the Accordion). Over the years, she has been a multi-instrument instructor at universities and cultural arts centers and performed to standing ovations in Chicago, New York and Puerto Rico.¹⁶ In doing so, she has unlocked Eva Ybarra was inducted into the South Texas Conjunto Hall of Fame (2015) and bestowed a National Heritage Fellow Award (2017) by the National Endowment for the Arts. Seven decades after she began performing professionally, this accordion queen still holds court wherever and whenever she performs. She comments emotionally, “...I feel like a reina (queen); I feel so honored; I feel...that I’m somebody... I think I feel angels surround me and give me energy, strength... I’m a real Tejana musician...It’s all in my blood.”¹⁷

Concurrently, conjunto music became popular in Texas when the *jianpan shoufenggin* (keyboard accordion) was introduced in China. Beginning with venues in harmonica performances, the accordion was later heard in theaters, concerts and dances. After World War II, it was used by military song and dance troupes to

promote the political ideas of the Chinese Communist Party and entertain the general population. Zhang Ziqiang and his wife, Wang Biyun, were popular during the 1950s. By the early 1960s, it was quite popular. This popularity waned in the 1980's when the electronic keyboard was introduced.¹⁸ Today, a type of keyboard accordion renaissance is occurring in modern China. Older military accordionists who participated in public revolutionary programs find it nostalgic. Accordion websites and societies and increased programs from music conservatories are evidence of this rebirth.

The versatility of this instrument has increased its acceptance by different social groups with varied musical genres. In addition to traditional venues, it has been integrated into Tejano, country, rock and roll, opera and orchestra, European folk, Latin American, and Mexican norteno music. On the South Texas border, accordion -based conjunto music is heard on the radio, compact discs, the internet and at concerts and dances. Often, three generations of the same family dance at a quinceanera (15-year-old celebration) or boda (wedding). The impact of accordeon music is indelible. It crosses ethnic, racial and gender lines with a universality that continues to bring people together and make them happy, cementing both its legacy and its future.

Endnotes

1 Manuel F. Medrano is Emeritus Professor of History at UTRGV. He is producer/director of the Los del Valle oral history documentaries and author/co-author of six books and over twenty-five articles and essays about people, history and culture in the Rio Grande Valley.

2 Alan R. Thrasher, "Sheng," *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, v. 3, 371-372.

3 "Accordion," entry in *Etymology Dictionary Online*.

4 Gayle Research Inc., "How Products Are Made – Accordion," *Encyclopedia.com*, 1996.

5 "Performance Review of Sediatzek," *The Times*, June 9, 1831, 5.

6 Rafaela G. Castro, *Chicano Folklore: A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans* (Oxford, England: Oxford Press, 2001), 63.

7 Manuel Pena *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1985), 29.

8 *Ibid.*, 54.

9 Narciso Martinez interview, November 12, 1991.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Pena, 59.

12 Juan Tejeda and Avelardo Valdez, *Puro Conjunto* (Austin: Center for

Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas, 2001, 38-39.

13 Manuel F. Medrano, "Valerio Longoria: For a Quarter a Song," *Extra Studies in Rio Grande Valley History* (Brownsville: The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, 2016), 187.

14 Valerio Longoria interview, September 8, 1987.

15 Eva Ybarra interview, March 16, 2017.

16 Ibid.

17 Yin Lee Kwan, *An Untold Story: The Accordion in Twentieth Century China*, A Master's Thesis in Music, 2004, 14.

18 Ibid., 15.

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