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STORIES OF SOUTH TEXAS

NARCISO MARTÍNEZ

El Huracán del Valle *de Sol a Sol*

BY MANUEL F. MEDRANO¹

In 1911, as the revolution was raging in Mexico, Don Porfirio Díaz, who had ruled there for over thirty years, was overthrown. In the United States, during the Progressive reform era, William Howard Taft was President. That same year in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, the fifth of eight sons was born to Anastacio and Zenobia Martinez. His name was Narciso, and his music touched the lives of people across three generations. Working-class people still attend dances on Saturday night and listen to the conjunto sounds of the accordion, *bajo sexto*, bajo and drums, like their parents and grandparents did years ago. Many are reminded of the man whose musical talent and vision created an enduring legacy. A few remember the dances years ago when they danced to his music. Those fortunate enough to have attended a Narciso Martinez dance understand why he is called “el Huracan del Valle.”

When Narciso or “Chicho,” as his friends called him, was only two and a half months old, his family moved to McAllen, across the border from Reynosa. They were extremely poor. Martinez recalled, “Mi papá fue un hombre muy pobre. Trabajaba para comer, para vivir.” [My father was a poor man. He worked to eat, to live.]² There, they planted crops, cleared the fields, and harvested. His family moved again to Río Grande City when Narciso was fourteen years old. Everyone that was old enough worked, but even so, he said, sometimes “there wasn’t enough money to buy soap for the women to wash clothes.”³ Martinez remembers that his family worked to eat, not to live. His father had no formal education and neither did he because there were no means to get to school. He remembered, “I attended only one day of school, but

somehow later I learned to read and write in Spanish . . . the only reason I know the inside of the school is because I've performed in them."⁴ Martinez, however, was quick to point out that in the modern world, a formal education was essential. Fortunately, he did not need one, and he thanked God for his success.

In 1926, the family moved to La Paloma a small town about twenty miles north of Brownsville, Texas. Two years later, on January 4, he visited Brownsville "*a dar la vuelta*" (to cruise).⁵ Although the largest city in the Rio Grande Valley, this border town had a population of less than twenty thousand, many who were *rancheros* and farmers. La Paloma became home for most of his life, but in 1928, he left the Valley to live in the Corpus Christi area "in tiny settlements like Bishop, Chapman Ranch and Riviera."⁶

There, he heard and developed an affinity for the polka accordion music of Central European immigrants such as Czechs, Germans, and Poles. The accordion probably originated from the Sheng, a single-reed wind instrument developed in China over two thousand years before.⁷ It travelled to Germany and there, evolved into an accordion with multiple reeds. By the second half of the nineteenth century, it crossed the Atlantic Ocean and arrived in northern Mexico and Texas.⁸ In the late 1920s, Martinez heard of young accordion musicians like Lydia Mendoza, later known as "La Alondra del la Frontera" (The Lark of the Border). Mendoza, who originally performed with her family in the fields for a few pennies a song became a popular performer and recording artist.

For Martinez, these years were also important for more personal reasons. With assistance from his brother Santos, he learned to play the accordion lyrically and soon created the conjunto sound. In 1929, he married his lifelong partner, Eduvina.⁹ They met working in the fields on a rancho near Corpus Christi. Although ten-hour days and miserable pay were the norm, they somehow survived what was arguably a feudal-like agricultural system.

Mrs. Martinez recalls that first meeting with her future husband, "We were both in the fields picking cotton, carrots, peas and other vegetables."¹⁰ Narciso remembers, "Her father and I worked together . . . he valued my companionship (they probably drank together). He didn't know I was winning over his daughter. I was about nineteen and she was about fifteen years of age."¹¹ They remained married for over six decades

and had five children; a son who died eight days after birth, and four daughters, Esther, Tiburcia, Anastacia and Patricia.

Martinez purchased his first accordion for twelve dollars on installments from local Brownsville businessman, Enrique Valentin.¹² He described the used accordion as a piece of junk, but it enabled him to practice and improve his skills. His first new accordion was a one-row button Hohner model bought in Kingsville, Texas in 1930.¹³

Valentin saw in both Martinez and Santiago Almeida, his *bajo sexto* (12 string bass guitar) player, musical talent that would lead to a successful recording career with Bluebird Records, a subsidiary of RCA. Valentin drove them to San Antonio for a trial session that produced "La Chicharronera," a polka that he performed on a new two-row button accordion.¹⁴ It was the first of fifty-eight popular recordings on the Bluebird label over a five-year period.¹⁵ Many were Martinez's own compositions, and they resonated with field workers. Among them were huapangos like "El Zurco" (The Row) and "El Relámpago" (The Lightning Bolt) and polkas such as "Los Coyotes" (The Coyotes) and "La Polvera" (The Dust Cloud). All his early recordings were instrumentals. Nearly all were produced in San Antonio during multiple recording sessions. On occasion, as many as twenty songs were recorded for a one-hundred-and-fifty-dollar flat rate with no future profits from royalties.¹⁶ His music also gained popularity outside Texas. In California, Basque farmers and sheep herders bought his records. In Louisiana, the Blue Bird Cajun series promoted him as "Louisiana Pete," and the label's Polish series marketed Narciso's conjunto as the "Polski Kwartet."¹⁷

In 1935, Valentin nicknamed Martinez "El Huracán del Valle," after the powerful hurricane that had struck the Valley two years earlier.¹⁸ Narciso's reacted to this new nickname by saying, "You can call me what you want. I wanted to be paid and I was."¹⁹ Martinez still remembered the hurricane. He said, "It frightened us. My wife and I were here (La Paloma, Texas). We knew little about it because radio stations, including Brownsville's KBOR, broadcast primarily in English. The hurricanes were not even named yet. My wife, my mother, my father, and my three-month-old daughter survived in an old wooden home."²⁰ During the storm as Martinez held his youngest daughter, the wind blew her away. Fortunately, she was later found unharmed in a blanket next to a fence post. He reminisced, "We were very lucky."²¹

It was during the Great Depression that Martinez met Américo

Paredes, Brownsville native and University of Texas professor, for the first time. Paredes, an accomplished *cancionero* (singer) and musician in his own right, sang on the local radio station and at community functions and festivals in the Brownsville area. In 1938, both performed during the first Charro Days Festival, a four-day celebration recognizing the common history and culture of Brownville and Matamoros. Paredes recalled that he and Chicho became friends and, at times, would see each other at “the singles dances,” funded by the purchase of tokens that entitled the young men to dance with young women. Américo referred to him as a virtuoso who many times mesmerized his audiences with his talent and stage presence. Paredes quickly pointed out, however, that Chicho never let his fame “go to his head.”²² He remained humble, respectful, and accessible. Paredes once described Martinez in “Tres faces del pocho” this way,

“The scene is a little rundown 3.2 beer joint on the border, *los agachados*. The bar is in the rear, facing front. Lights come up to the tune of a very fast polka played by Chicho Martínez (El Huracán del Valle) on a wheezy old accordion, accompanied by a bajo player who is obviously having trouble keeping up with Chicho.”²³

What was ironic about this description is that Martinez never played in *cantinas* (bars). Most of his venues were at family dances. Furthermore, he performed so often that he constantly wore out his accordions and purchased new ones periodically.

Soon, the conjunto evolved into an ensemble with the accordion and bajo sexto (twelve string guitar) accompanied by a bass guitar and drums. The sound it produced was fuller and more sophisticated, yet it remained the music of the Mexican and Mexican American working-class people. Ultimately, it was these individuals who attended Narciso’s dances and remained loyal to his music.

Government rationing of shellac, which was used to make vinyl records, put Martinez’s career on hold during World War II. After the war, however, he began to record with Discos Ideal, a San Benito, Texas company owned by Armando Marroquin and Paco Betancourt. Martinez and Almeida helped to launch the company by accompanying the duet of Carmen and Laura on their initial four recordings.²⁴ Discos Ideal was followed by other successful Mexican recording companies such as Falcon Records. Narciso continued to perform with Santiago Almeida at outdoor dance sites such as la Gloria, las Brisas and el

Mesquitón in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Regionally, their music was heard in Robstown, Bishop and Corpus Christi. Martinez reminisced, "I continued to play my accordions. They rarely lasted me longer than six to seven months because of the amount of use."²⁵ Narciso soon became the most popular conjunto musician of his era.

During these years, conjunto musicians made nominal sums for recording and performing, while their recording companies made nearly all the profits. They were paid in lump sums for recording sessions and usually performed only on weekends when most of their audience did not work. Additionally, "they were considered entertainers who were there to fulfill a social function and never accorded stardom privileges."²⁶ Good musicians were rewarded by large turnouts at dances and by being asked to perform in the future, not by loud applause or much fanfare.

Martinez described outdoor dances on earthen floors and kerosene lamps hanging above the dance floor. He recalled, "We played from sundown to sunrise (*de sol a sol*), por diez pesos por las dos noches (for ten dollars for the two nights). I wore everyday clothes and played my accordion."²⁷ He said this with a sense of pride. It was a time when people who worked in the fields came to dance all night. On many occasions, he performed at *bailes de negocio* or dances for business at which families brought their daughters to both enjoy the dance and make some money. They were usually paid fifteen cents for three dances. Five cents was for the dancer; five cents was for the dance promoter and five cents was for the musician. For Martinez, more people at the dance meant more income.

The indoor dances, however, were different. Some were held at exclusive salons for social clubs such as *la Sociedad Hidalgo* and *la Sociedad Juarez*. He also performed at local movie theaters in Brownsville such as *el Teatro México*, *el Teatro Iris* and *el Teatro Victoria*. At these dances, patrons were charged thirty-five to forty cents for a four-hour dance. Of course, for these dances, Narciso wore a shirt and tie or a suit because as he said, "Eran de mas calidad" (they were of higher quality).²⁸

World War II provided more employment opportunities for many American women, including those of Mexican descent, in factories, war-related industries and government assembly plants. Martinez recalled that before 1945, "women would not pay to attend a dance."²⁹ Because

the war enabled women to become more economically independent, some could now pay for themselves and their dance partners. The first time Narciso witnessed this was at the *La Villita* Dance Club in Alice, Texas. He couldn't believe it, but Armando Marroquín, the owner of the club, commented that the dance business was a business, no matter who paid.

Although other working-class musicians played in cantinas (bars), Narciso never did. He recalled, "I never played in the streets or in the bars. Others did it for the practice at a dollar a song. That's something I didn't do."³⁰ Martinez did, however, perform at hundreds of public and private gatherings including "bailes de negocio" (dances for pay), weddings and quinceañeras. It was at a neighborhood quinceañera that Sabino Salinas, an aspiring young accordionist, introduced himself to Martinez. Salinas later formed his own conjunto and toured with Narciso. Salinas described Martinez as a mentor and friend.³¹

Martinez was also a touring musician. He vividly remembered,

"In the 1950's when I played in Fort Worth and Dallas, we were paid \$250.00 a performance, but I had to pay three or four musicians and pay my hotel and gasoline for my car. One night I would play in Dallas . . . and the next night in Laredo. It was very difficult, but I made it. I made it because I had to live. I could not afford a driver, so I drove the vehicle from place to place."³² Low pay was not his only challenge. It was in Texas that Narciso recalled the most discrimination, especially against African and Mexican Americans. In Big Springs, his Anglo friend, who was also a World War II veteran, was told by the owner of a restaurant that he could eat there, but his Mexican wife could not. In Austin, he remembered racial segregation in restaurants and hotels. Martinez was also told to leave a club because he was 'Mexican.' He recalled that afterwards, "I knew where to play."³³

Despite the experiences in his own state, Narciso and his conjunto were among the first to tour outside of Texas. They performed in the bordering Mexican states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León. He played venues in Sacramento, Oakland and Los Angeles, California. In Fresno, he performed at a very upscale club called La Palma. He remembered, "I've always been poor, very poor. I never believed I would play in a place like that. My class (socioeconomic) would never enter a place like that."³⁴ His music was also heard in Great Lakes states such as Minnesota

and Ohio by some of the Mexican population who had immigrated there during the early 1900's looking for employment.

Eduvina never accompanied Narciso on his travels but vividly remembered what it was like to see him go, knowing he would not return for weeks or months. She recalled, "Le hechaba la bendición cada vez que andaba allá. Es una vida triste la de un músico . . . todavía lo espero cuando se va (I would give him my blessing every time he left. The life of a musician is a sad life. I still wait for him when he leaves.)."³⁵ Narciso added, "Me iba y regresaba en dos meses . . . mi mama o mi suegra o las dos se quedaban con ella. Nunca estaba sola (I would leave and he returned in two months . . . my mother or my mother-in-law or both would stay with her. She was never alone.)."³⁶

Narciso epitomized the working-class musician. Throughout his life, to augment his wages as a musician, he worked at a variety of day-time jobs. Martinez was a field worker, manual day laborer, truck driver and animal caretaker at a zoo in Brownsville. He fed the animals daily, and once commented that he had surely made a good impression on them because they never complained. Although his prolific recording days ended in the 1950's, Martinez continued to record with various recording companies until his death. On one occasion he recorded with Lydia Mendoza. At the age of seventy-nine he was contracted by Ramiro Cavazos, owner of R & N Records, to record a single for a new album called "16 Exitos de Narciso Martinez" (16 Hits of Narciso Martinez).

In the 1980's, Narciso Martinez received several awards for his lifetime commitment to conjunto music. In 1982 he was inducted as a member of the Conjunto Music Hall of Fame.³⁷ That same year, he began a tradition that continued for the rest of his life, performing at the Tejano Music Festival in San Antonio, Texas with other veteran and upcoming conjunto musicians. The irony was that he was paid very well to perform only a few songs and that he hired a chauffeur to drive him to San Antonio and back. With a smile, Narciso said, "Hasta ahorita, me aprecian como si fuera cosa buena" (Until now, they appreciate me as if I were a good thing).³⁸ In 1983 during the Reagan administration, he received the National Heritage Fellowship Award in Washington, D.C. for his major contributions to the musical heritage of the United States. In 1989, a re-release of some of his earlier recordings, resulted

in a Grammy nomination for best Mexican American recording.³⁹ In September 1991, Rogelio Nunez visited Martinez at his La Paloma home and informed him that the San Benito Cultural Arts Center would be renamed in his honor. Martinez responded by asking what he wanted and what he could do. On October 29, 1991, Narciso was recognized at the inauguration ceremony. Later, Nunez, co-founder of the Center said, “we are honored and privileged to name the center for don Narciso Martinez. We feel he captured the essence of the philosophy of our center being a proud man of Mexican ancestry and working-class origins; a man of the people who over the years gave of himself and his musical talents so that others could enjoy his contributions; a man who was willing to share his rich musical and Texas-Mexican border experience.”⁴⁰

That day was also Chicho’s eightieth birthday. He graciously agreed to perform one or two songs for the official opening of the Center, but he played for two hours. For many there, it was a time they would never forget. For over a quarter of a century after, the Center hosted the Narciso Martinez Conjunto Festival, an annual event that showcased traditional and contemporary conjuntos from the United States, Europe, and Asia. Even the acclaimed Japanese conjunto, Los Gatos, performed there for several years.

When asked if he could say one thing to his fans, Martinez replied, “I don’t know how, but I know God helped me, that I should come to know so many people from having started so poor (I would like to) thank all the people for remembering me, helping me and my career become what it is.”⁴¹

Narciso Martinez died of leukemia in San Benito on June 5, 1992.⁴² Musicians, young and old, from the United States and Mexico, attended his funeral and remembered what he meant to them and to their working-class audiences for over sixty years. They played his music and celebrated his life. The outpouring of admiration and affection from three generations was an appropriate final tribute to the man who represented their time, music, and culture. Yet his legacy extends much further than his music and style as an accordionist. His frontereno origins mirrored those of many along the South Texas border and his success and longevity garnered him a respect few border musicians have ever known.

Notes

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/coauthor of six books and over twenty-five articles and essays about people, history, and culture in the Rio Grande Valley.

2. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.

3. Jack Bertram, "El Huracan' Martinez: A Valley, National Treasure," *The Valley Morning Star*, August 12, 1983, 12.

4. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.

5. Ibid.

6. Manuel Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, The University of Texas Press, Austin, 1985, 55.

7. Alan R. Thrasher, "New Grove Musical Dictionary of Musical Instruments," V. 3, 371-372.

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

9. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.

10. Interview of Eduvina Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.

11. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.

12. Ibid.

13. Manuel Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, 56.

14. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.

15. Manuel Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, 57.

16. Ibid.

17. Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Martínez, Narciso," Handbook of Texas Online, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/martinez-narciso>.

18. Interview of Narciso Martinez La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Interview of Américo Paredes, Austin, Texas, September 22, 1994.

22. Manuel F. Medrano, *Américo Paredes, In His Own Words*, Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2010, 30.

23. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas. November 12, 1991.

24. Ibid.

25. Manuel Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, 49.

26. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Interview of Sabino Salinas, Brownsville, Texas, May 22, 1996.

30. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.

31. Ibid.
32. Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Martínez, Narciso," Handbook of Texas Online, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/martinez-narciso>.
33. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.
34. Ibid.
35. Interview with Eduvina Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.
36. Interview with Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.
37. Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Martinez, Narciso," Handbook of Texas Online.
38. Interview of Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.
39. Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Narciso Martinez," Handbook of Texas Online.
40. Interview of Rogelio Nunez, San Benito, Texas, 6 June 6, 1997.
41. Interview with Narciso Martinez, La Paloma, Texas, November 12, 1991.
42. Agustin Guiza. frontera.library.ucla.edu/blog/2015/06/artist-biography-narciso-martinez.