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EL GUITARRISTA Y SUS CAMBIOS DE CODIGOS: CRUZANDO FRONTERAS  
MUSICALES [THE GUITARIST AND CODE-SWITCHING:  
CROSSING MUSICAL BORDERS]

A Thesis  
by  
HECTOR MANUEL AGUILAR

Submitted to the Graduate College of  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF MUSIC

August 2021

Major Subject: Music



EL GUITARRISTA Y SUS CAMBIOS DE CODIGOS: CRUZANDO FRONTERAS  
MUSICALES[THE GUITARIST AND CODE-SWITCHING:  
CROSSING MUSICAL BORDERS]

A Thesis  
by  
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August 2021



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## ABSTRACT

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The guitar in border towns has links to many musical cultures that vary in their ways of being due to the customs of the specific space. Individual guitarists learn how to navigate the different environments because they understand the etiquettes needed to belong and participate in the musical circles.

In this autoethnographic work, I explore the various musical spaces that I have participated in through my musical journey growing up in Brownsville, Texas, to understand further how the individual musician embodies the style of music s/he performs. As a primary data source for my work, I use the experiences that I have had in the high school band, garage metal band, academic settings, and *carnezasos*. By framing the overall analysis through the lens of code-switching, the study documents and highlights the differences between musicking in formal and informal settings. My scholarship contributes to the considerable music ethnographic discourse surrounding the importance of individuals' perceived identity and how local music cultures reshape the use and meaning of instruments to fit new contexts.





## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to *mi Pareja*, Jocelyn Torres, who is an *artista* that immerses herself in various art forms. To *mijo*, who is always watching and *copiando* what we do artistically, thank you for your inspiration and unconditional love. Also, to all the artists that have been my tutors in their artistic tongue, *les agradezco por ayudarme en mi jornada musical*. *A mi madre y padre tambien les dedico mi trabajo*.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: BUT STILL, I PLAYED ON

It was a Friday or Saturday evening in December of the year 2010. I parked on the side of the gated house and walked to my trunk to get my equipment but made sure to leave behind the extra mics, cables, and speaker that I take with me in case unexpected changes happen during the gig. I proceeded to walk up to the door of the house. I held my guitar case from the left strap as it wrapped around my left shoulder and carefully placed my music stand between the left side of my chest and the inner part of my left arm to ring the doorbell. As I waited for the door to open, I assured myself that this was the typical private Christmas party that I usually get hired to perform at and that I just have to get through the performance, and then I could go jam out with my band. A few seconds went by before Pete, the house owner, opened the door.<sup>1</sup>

A few days earlier, Pete called me asking me if I could perform for a private gathering on such short notice. As he gave me the details of the time and day of the gig, I realized that I had to rehearse with my band for a bar gig that same week. Still, I let Pete know I was available and needed to know what musical atmosphere he would require to prepare accordingly. "Hector," Pete said, "you are a life savior; this is a gathering for my company. I had hired a cellist, but she could

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<sup>1</sup> Pete is an alias that is used. All other characters in this work will be presented in a different name because formal consent was not obtained within a proper timeframe.



not make it, and I enjoyed your playing and singing on Leti's birthday. However, this is a more formal gathering, so please play light music, like in the background. Nothing too noisy." I replied, "Sounds good to me; I will see you then. Thank you for contacting me." I thought, "Typical! Unfortunately, background sound is what our playing is in these types of events instead of an actual musical performance." Nevertheless, I agreed to the terms because, as a working university student and aspiring professional musician, I was willing to take any gig that offered me a reasonable payment.

Pete asked me to come in, and as I walked into the house, I noticed the corridor that takes you to the living area to the right, at an opening about fifteen feet from the front door. On the adjoining side of the living room hung a big mirror where one could see their entire body if they faced it at the proper distance. Next to the living area was the dining table, an open space floor plan. As I passed the living room to where the corridor retook its place, I noticed the door to the restroom on the left side, and a few feet further were the two glass doors that took you to the kitchen. Pete instructed me to set up in the area between the living room and restroom about two feet in front of the restroom door, close enough to the party but far enough to where I could be heard and barely seen. As usual, Pete introduced me to his guests by saying my name and letting them know that I studied classical guitar at the university and gave his son lessons.

The evening performance seemed to be going as smoothly as any other gig. I began the background music with some lovely Christmas medleys. Guests drank their wine. Some complimented my guitar playing as they passed me on their way to or from the restroom. The event was light, lively, and entertaining, and it became evident to me when Pete looked in my direction. With a wink and by creating an ok sign with his left hand, his index finger and thumb making a circle while the other three fingers pointing up and the palm of his hand faced my

direction, he made me aware of the great setting the music had created. The gesture was reassuring because I often felt on edge when I got hired for these types of private gatherings. Subsequently, I kept playing as they had their cocktails, and I went back and forth between Christmas music and the various genres of music that the classical guitar exhibits. The gig was a 3-hour performance, and usually, I allow myself a five to ten min break between sets. As I concluded my first hour, one of the guests, a tall, white-complexioned man wearing a sports coat, came to me and complimented me on my playing. He followed his compliment by asking me if I ever sang and played. I told him that I do *boleros*, *rancheras*, jazz, pop *en Español* and English, and some classic rock for some gigs I do. He then exclaimed, “*Y porque no te avientas un bolero o ranchera?*” [Why don't you play a *bolero* or *Ranchera*?] Of course, the request caught me off-guard because I had assumed that I would not be doing any singing. I replied with, “*Claro que si, a sus ordenes. Empiezo con un bolero en la proxima hora*” [Yes, of course, at your service. I will start with a bolero on the next set].

At this point, I was glad that I had brought extra equipment with me just in case. I used my break to get my microphone and set up the mic stand next to my music stand. I had a small speaker that I connected to my guitar. I replaced my guitar with the mic because I figured I could balance the volume of my playing to the singing. I sang and played “*Sin Ti*” [Without You] by Los Panchos and got a nice applause at the end. I received this applause in a bittersweet manner because Pete came to remind me, “That was great, but we agreed on nothing too loud, Hector.” I apologized and went back to playing. Soon after, another man, much shorter and more casual than the previous one, came to ask me why I stopped playing the *boleros*, and I replied that it was just one song that I performed upon request.

I wanted to say much more than that but bit my tongue and just thought about the many things I would have voiced in a different setting. Why am I being censored/limited? I am a musician, and performing is what I get paid for, but still, I quietly played on. After a couple more tunes, the shorter man came to me to ask if I knew any 'Zepplin' or 'Eagles' or 'Credence.' I responded in my next musical offering. I played the intro to *Hotel California* by The Eagles and *Stairway to Heaven* by Led Zepplin to demonstrate that I was fluent in that musical style. I played a few seconds of both songs, smiled at him, and quickly began to play the 'classical' music again. As I did that, the man said under his breath as he turned around to go back to the party, "All those years of studying music, and he cannot even play the full song. He calls himself a guitarist." I felt helpless, cheap, tiny, and out of place for a split second, I almost got up to tell him my thoughts, but still, I played on.

That evening, my gig ended at 8 pm, and I was ready to dismiss myself from a space where I did not feel fully welcomed. As I packed my equipment and moved my stuff closer to the front door, Leti and Pete approached me to pay the remainder of my payment. I expressed to both of them that I appreciate their consideration for their gatherings. Leti replied, "*Hector, muy hermoso como siempre*" (Hector, lovely as always), to which I replied thank you with a smile and nod. Pete followed her statement with, "Hector, thank you again. We will see you soon, I hope." At this point, my equipment was outside the door already, and I thanked them one more time and wished them happy holidays.

I soon loaded the musical gear inside the trunk of my car; I drove off and parked at the corner store about a mile away. I sat in my car for a few moments, and the frustration kicked in from the thoughts about the experience I had at the gig. "What the 'fuck' am I doing? I should just play my classical stuff at school and stick with my band for gig money." The thoughts kept

filling my head; all this practice and I cannot even show off the ability I have gained. I did this to myself for about five minutes. I slammed my closed right fist on the steering wheel and followed it with a grunt while I pulled my face down with both hands. Reflecting on the inner frustrations and tension that these instances bring – and at times still do affect me – also help me understand why and how I have come to embody the free artist I am today. With a sigh and blank stare at the white wall in front of my car, I grabbed my phone and proceeded to call my band to let them know I was already on my way.

The drive to my friend's garage was about fifteen minutes from the gathering where I had performed. I was still somewhat frustrated, but I began to get excited about jamming out. I played music with this group of metalheads since my sophomore year of high school; we were all now about 21 years old. I got my electric guitar out of the case and quickly plugged it into the amp. I believe we were working on "Trust," an original song, and I had reworked one of the riffs the previous night. I mentioned this to the guitar and bass player, who both replied that I should show them. I had studied classical guitar for a few years now and figured that we could play everything in one position.<sup>2</sup> As I began to show them the riff, I began to explain that "We could play everything in 9th position because this would help the chord voicings and the shifting would be much easier," and that by doing so, "the modulation to the," and then I was interrupted. "Nah, bro, no need to get all fancy with the words. *Nomas dime donde y como tocar mi parte.*" (Tell me where and how to play my part). He said it with a smirk on his face; the usual way we would get along, so I attempted to laugh it off by saying "*tabueno*" (alright).<sup>3</sup> Again, for the third time that night, I felt unsure of my musical place and wished I could voice something out loud.

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<sup>2</sup> Guitar position refers to location on the fretboard where fingers are playing at a given moment.

<sup>3</sup> Tabueno is a common form of slang where the words 'esta' and 'bueno' are combined in Brownsville, Texas.

Nonetheless, in this musical circle, this is how we spoke and learned from each other, and I enjoyed it. My internal frustration was at an overwhelming level, but still, I played on.

### **Los Guitarristas [The Guitarists]**

Many dear friends have experienced situations like those described above that make us question how and what we are doing artistically. I am from Brownsville, Texas, and in my musical circles, the guitar is embraced and taught in academic settings and communal ones. The guitar crosses many musical and cultural borders in this community and along the Rio Grande Valley River. The different styles of music learned in this region include *Rancheras*, *Conjunto*, *Tejano*, *Rock en Tu Idioma*, *Pop en español*, church band, *corridos*, classical guitar, rock, metal, and many more. The narrative describes how specific musical settings have limitations and boundaries for the artist to express entirely and how we can switch genres to abide by the rules of the environment.

Furthermore, as a guitar player, I have experienced many times in formal gigs a moment where I can connect with another individual through a 'different' set of genre. For example, when the man requested me to perform a *bolero* during Pete's gathering, the man and others were swaying their bodies with smiles on their face because they knew the music and/or felt the 'music's affect.'<sup>4</sup> Still, Pete and I felt tensions because the general setting needed to be filled with background music, and I embraced other musical styles that 'crossed the line' at that moment. Nevertheless, while I quickly switched back to classical music, the guests were also able to shift

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<sup>4</sup> Jeff Todd Titon uses the term music's affect to describe the experience and "emotional impact-whatever makes you give assent, smile, nod your head" etc. Titon, *Worlds of music*, 16.

thought to the ‘proper’ of the space, a formal light gathering and not a party. I will further explore these tensions and forms of moving in the upcoming narratives.

Moreover, the ways of learning and playing the many genres found in Brownsville varies, in what Jeff Todd Titon calls the music-culture, because “[d]ifferent cultures give music different meanings” and the “associated sets of ideas and activities” are situational.<sup>5</sup> In addition, “music-cultures have their own ... music authorities, formally trained or not, whose curiosity ... leads them to think and talk about music in their own culture,” such as some of the members in the *carnezaso*, that I discuss in the later chapters, who construct the etiquettes of the moment.<sup>6</sup> Even more, my experiences in Brownsville have taught me that often musicians are “assign[ed] a low social status,” but we are still respected because there is “power and sometimes [they] see [the] magic” in our work.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, negotiating my artistic identity at Pete’s gathering compared to the jamming with my metal band in the garage demonstrates my understanding of the space which allows me to adapt to the given musical setting naturally.

In my community, I learned how to play different styles of music through a variety of approaches. *Rancheras* and *corridos* were taught to me using a rote model and learning shapes.<sup>8</sup> *Conjunto* and *Tejano* music was introduced to me by my family members as *pisadas* and *circulos* (often used in the *Rancheras* too).<sup>9</sup> I learned all other popular styles by ear and/or guitar tablature. Furthermore, in critically thinking back into these various styles and how making music happens (or what Christopher Small refers to as musicking), there are different forms of

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<sup>5</sup> Titon, *Worlds of music*, 3 and xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 23. *Carnezaso* is a term used in weekend gathering or birthdays in many local communities of Brownsville, TX.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>8</sup> By shapes I am referring to learning how a chord looks and then imitating it.

<sup>9</sup> *Pisadas* are used in reference to chord shapes and alternate voicings. *Circulos* are standard chord progressions like I-VI-II-IV-V7-I which are so standard they can be easily transposed according to the performance circumstances.

participating in the musical expression and performance.<sup>10</sup> Creating and learning music varies from place to place because the local community obtained their musical knowledge by word of mouth, observing, or by ear. For example, the way we would jam and speak in my friend's garage and participate in the music-making of gatherings like Pete's would be different because, in the garage, I often felt freer to improvise and create original music with my bandmates. After all, the conditions of the place were to develop. Unlike the garage band, I often had to play what was needed to establish the required musical atmosphere in paid gigs. The feeling of 'freer' is highly connected to the ideas of 'flow' that Thomas Turino poses in his work because I was challenged to create something new or perform a song as virtuosic as I would be able to in the garage.<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, in the same way, that I have obtained the understandings of the musical cultures in my community, other guitarists have also trained their "ears, eyes, hands and voice and fluency" to acquire the skills that allow them to navigate and negotiate their performances when presenting the necessary behaviors for a given musical space.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, training through imitation to learn these different ways of speaking and performing, as Mantle Hood states, is perceived at times as more "rewarding in both time and retention" because the challenge of learning and participating becomes the individual's focus with the given social group.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Small defines the term "Musicking as follows: "A human activity that allows us to understand both how and why we are all actors in the making of a musical performance. These acts further help us understand the links between the self and others. Small, Christopher. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Turino is applying the concept of 'flow' developed by Czech psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to explain that 'flow' is achieved when the task needs to have a balance between skill and level of difficulty of the task that the participant has. Turino, Thomas. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Hood, Mantle, "The Challenge of "BI-Musicality," *Ethnomusicology* 4, no. 2 (May 1960): 55.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

My argument is that there are disparate musical cultures in which a guitarist can be fluent by embodying the different ways of musicking. Even as ‘switches’ from one style to another are necessary and create tensions at times, they help keep the identity of the artist fluid and continuous. Individuals choose which music cultures to be a part of while other times they are born into them. Still, musical knowledge lets us swiftly perform and make the needed cultural switches that allow us to belong to specific cohorts. Moreover, while pressures, limitations, and boundaries might repress other musical identities in specific musical cohorts, the artist has the capabilities of embracing and performing other-selves in the spaces that they make for themselves. Analyzing and understanding these variable settings and how the musical styles are passed on generationally in varying manners is vital in creating a holistic artist in academic and general environments. Thus, it emphasizes and generates the links that bind the artist with the different music cultures.

Furthermore, I suggest that specific behaviors exist in a local environment, whether academic or otherwise, because of the different manners music is learned, understood, and performed. This study documents, highlights, and emphasizes the differences between the performances enacted in educational and other locations by framing the overall analysis through the lens of code-switching with the guitar in musical cultures to belong or adapt at a given moment. Like the ethnographer, we must immerse ourselves in the protocols that musical settings require to fully embody the space and find a harmonious flow that becomes a part of musical identity within the individual and the social group. Comprehending these settings as sites of musicking differently thus enables a different type of artistry that can further understand how other nonclassical music styles nurture and fulfill the individual's musical identity.



## Using Language

Dealing with questions of musical identity and the use and adaptation of different spaces has been an eye-opening task. Experiencing the challenges that I have as I navigate borders and negotiate identity has produced a need to nurture these varying music-making styles to create a fulfilled artist. I have always questioned why I had to repress particular music identities in specific spaces. Nevertheless, I have practiced and taken joy in the music-making that happens in diverse music circles. Moreover, as other academics and artists have interrogated notions of identity and the use of space, I have now obtained specific knowledge that allows me to critique the participation in different musical cultures. Exploring this topic and experiences in my local community can help me understand how individual musicians negotiate identity and navigate settings when making music in other musical circles.

It has been intriguing to learn how narratives regarding borders can fluctuate from one given space to another. Borders are not just physical constructs that geographically disconnect societies, but also imaginaries that become a "force of containment that inspires dreams of being overcome and crossed; motivates bodies to climb over, burrow under, or float across" a created product of the local culture.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, my experiences as a border native and gained knowledge in academia have led me to understand borders as a place of ambiguity where the self is neither from here nor from there, an alien and native, like the family's black sheep that neither side wants but all claim. Border cultures create constructs of both oppression and resistance. Consequently, as musical styles clash and mesh in border spaces, the guitar becomes a channel to

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<sup>14</sup>Young and Rivera-Servera, *Performance in the Borderlands*, 2.

other musical cultures that help develop the artistic identity of individuals. Therefore, the guitar's versatility entails that movements across the spatial and temporal dynamics allow the individual to transition and embody the constructs within a given setting.

The ability to swiftly move between different musical settings because of one's shared subset of habits can be further understood by what Thomas Turino refers to as cultural cohorts. In his book *Music as Social Life: The Politic of Participation*, Turino defines cultural cohorts as "the habits of thought and practice that are shared among individuals" and that these habits "bind people into social groups."<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the ways in which my bandmates of the garage band and I would speak to each other were aggressive, but our understanding was that it was the 'metal' lifestyle. Talking to each other in a heavy tone indicates our acceptance and connection because otherwise, we would be 'cordial' and 'nice' to those that did not fit the environment. Even so, the ways of making music were the same because we would jam out on made up riffs that would help us get in a flow state and "all other thoughts, concerns, and distractions disappear[ed] and ... [we were] fully in the present... [and] a feeling of timelessness, or being out of normal time and to feelings of transcending one's normal self" was a common perception.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Turino describes the "flow experience [as] restful and liberating, because the problems and aspects of ourselves that sometimes get in our way from reaching a clear, open state of mind disappear during intense concentration."<sup>17</sup> This experience becomes possible when the artist can immerse themselves in the cohort because they understand the ways of being, accept the etiquettes of the space, and perform musically within the set of habits that they require to reach a heightened state of connection.

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<sup>15</sup> Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 95

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

## Bi-musicality and Code-switching

Bi-musicality is a term coined by ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood to conceptualize how the researcher studies (an)other style of music foreign to them and explores the "varying degrees of understanding, from the technical to the aesthetic and social" through immersion into the foreign musical culture.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, what if the researcher is also a native to various musical cultures? Recent works on bi-musicality have demonstrated that there should be a "subjective realm of musical experience" because it "leads to a particularly active form of musical being and knowing."<sup>19</sup> Bi-musicality has developed into an area where the researcher no longer 'studies' only the music of (an)other but integrates the self to embody the ways of being of the cohort. This integration notwithstanding, given the emphasis that most scholarship on bi-musicality place on studying a foreign or secondary musical culture, my experience as a native to diverse musical cultures can be best explained in terms of code-switching. To understand my ways of navigating space and negotiating my identity, I have used the same methodology that Isbell and Marie used to study music students' perceptions in the academy versus popular band settings through musical code-switching.<sup>20</sup> In their work, the authors used the concept of code-switching from linguistics to understand further the multiple ways that the students inhabit "formal and informal musical worlds and [how they] can switch gears depending on, where, what, and with whom they are performing."<sup>21</sup> Like code-switching in linguistics, academics have recently looked at the switching from nonformal musical understanding to 'classical training' with an optimistic gaze. Using this framework in my research helps me understand how the individual participates in these different musical cultures' functions and the connection to artistic identity.

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<sup>18</sup> Jeon, "Bimusicality," 137.

<sup>19</sup> Titon, "Bi-Musicality," 295.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley and Isbell, "Code-switching" 1-18.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 3.

Code-switching in the Rio Grande Valley is used in 'made-up' languages like Spanglish, Tex-Mex, slang, and English. These languages tend to have a specific space of acceptance with the different social groups. However, these ways of using language are now analyzed to understand a local community's practices further. In this same style, we have seen how the guitar has developed multiple border genres such as *Tejano*, *Rancheras*, and numerous language uses in rock (Spanish and English singing within the same song). Accordingly, exploring the use of the guitar in multiple spaces can help us comprehend how artistry and culture are being passed on to the native performer, who is also an academic musician. Needless to say, the code-switcher uses this tool as a means of belonging but also to adapt, or better yet, prepare for the possibilities of needing to code-switch. These switches are seen in not just the “collection of habits” practiced musically but also in the way the actors speak to each other and how the cohorts physically present themselves.<sup>22</sup> For example, the switches are evident in my conversations with my band members upon arriving to practice after Pete’s gig. As I was attempting to explain my reasoning behind moving the riff around, I was interrupted with the “Nah bro” show me my part without getting fancy. Though my bandmate hurt my ego, I accepted the moment because ‘that’ was just how we communicated, and even though it had the potential to be stressful, it was also rewarding.

Moreover, the narrative also describes how I pack extra equipment ‘just in case’ I need it. Bringing the additional equipment is an implication of how the guitar and artist navigate multiple musical cultures. Here I was prepared ‘just in case’ I would need to sing or play some backing tracks if necessary during the gig. As described, a mutual member of the *bolero* culture made his

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<sup>22</sup> Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 17. He describes shared habits, or how I use here a collection of habits, as actions that are similarly learned from the social group that surrounds us.

presence known. The interaction enabled the opportunity to, even if momentary, to code-switch because another interlocuter was interacting, which is necessary for the switch to happen. Still, this is persistent in demonstrating how specific cultural cohorts have limitations and guidelines that the participant must abide by.

## **Understanding Space**

As mentioned above, spaces are areas of social construct. In exploring my musical negotiations while navigating different environments, I have observed that the ways of being and performing music are relative to the specific culture of the location. Accordingly, I have divided this work into three chapters, followed by an analysis of the composition/presentation that I have produced.

In chapter two, I explore the school band hall and how it creates a space where the 'music *nerdos*' can go and be a community.<sup>23</sup> Here language is tied to the academic space. Students go there to have lunch, practice and become better musicians. Still, the metalhead, in my case, is not entirely accepted in this space. Therefore, how do they negotiate identity in this space? What implications come from neglecting one's musical ability because of their 'look'? These are some of the questions that I explore in this chapter.

Chapter three I discuss my experiences in the university setting and the garage band. This chapter locates and demonstrates how the aspiring professional musician questions their musical ideologies. For example, spending hours of classical practice to experience situations like the one

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<sup>23</sup> 'Music nerdos' is what the band students of my school were referred to as by other students.

described above at Pete's house and playing metal music at a bar to feel accepted and welcomed. How do we embrace dual identities? Do we need to repress one musical culture from another?

In the fourth chapter, I explore learning the rancheras in the *carnezasos* while being questioned about my instructional methods. Here, I analyze the ways of playing music at gatherings with friends and family. Additionally, I describe the ways that this space creates tensions of dominance because "the knowledge of the elders and the community reigned and that no matter what, [I] must perform deference to that knowledge over and above what he had acquired outside of the home, unless and until... granted permission for [me] to "profess."<sup>24</sup> This exploration will be followed by a summary and conclusion of my work, where I restate the paper's purpose and how, through this exploration, I demonstrate the importance of nurturing and embracing code-switching within musicians to help create a complete artist.

Following the research narratives, I include a section that analyses an original composition and performance that I produced to illustrate how I navigate the different spaces musically and with the physical presentation. The performance demonstrates the code-switching that I have done by presenting the composition in various styles and settings.

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick "Border Intellectual," 153.

## CHAPTER II

### EL METALERO EN LA ORQUESTA [THE METALHEAD IN THE HIGH SCHOOL BAND]

#### **The Bandhall**

*I don't 'code-switch' to hide my identity. I 'code-switch' to celebrate it...*

*- Vaidehi Mujumdar*

I do not specifically remember the exact date, but it was in the fall of 2005, and it was marching band season because we had practiced, so it had to be fall semester at about 7 pm. My childhood friend, who I will call Max, and I were sitting on the floor between the orchestral chimes that rested to the right side of the exit in the big rehearsing hall. As usual, we had our electric guitars out to play along to some Pantera or Metallica songs; this was our ritual most evenings after practice as we waited for the bus that would take us home to arrive. The percussionists came in to put their equipment away; they were usually the last ones to finish rehearsal because of their crucial role in making the music synchronize within the band. As we sat, the principal band director walked in. He gave us what became a familiar smirk, the type that brings the right side of the lip in, raised left eyebrow, and a slight nod of the head. In those moments, I do not recall ever paying any attention to his dismissal of us because I was in my zone jamming out. In retrospect, I ask myself if the smirk was condescending.

Max was a tenor sax player, and I was a bass clarinet player in the high school band, so we regularly were placed in the same groups to rehearse, march, and take marching trips. During this marching season, 2005, Max and I began to take our guitar playing a lot more seriously and

decided to start our metal band. Consequently, we would take our guitars on trips to work on our shredding chops any time we had the opportunity. Frequently, we would carry our electric guitars into the band hall. Both Max and I were assigned the bigger lockers because of our band instrument. The locker space was barely ample enough for us to place our band instruments and guitars in there, but after a few attempts of 'Tetris playing,' it would fit. Needless to say, the area of the lockers was at eye view from the band directors' office.

During one of the rehearsals, the director made us aware that the lockers should be strictly used for our instruments only and nothing else. I felt this was unfair because most of us in the band would use our lockers as school lockers; the school had lockers that were never assigned or used. Still, not having a locker did not stop Max and me from bringing our guitars to school; all it meant was that we would have more luggage with us when we went from one class period to the next. Those days of my sophomore year, many of us were called the 'music nerdos' because we would use the mornings, before the first school bell rang, to practice reading and etudes for the UIL All-State competition. We would also go to the band hall to practice during lunch, but I would practice my metal music by reading guitar tablature. That year was before cellphones were accessible to everyone, and I would always print the tablature and practice in one of the practice rooms in the band hall.

I did not think that practicing my guitar in the practice room would be an issue because I was studying music. Nevertheless, during one of those lunch periods, I had a bitter interaction with the head director about the purpose and usage of the practice rooms. I sat in the practice room facing the door where anyone could see through the glass right above the door handle. I went through my standard warm-up of playing the chromatic scale with the metronome to work on speed. As I did this, I saw the director pass by the practice room out of the corner of my eye,



and it seemed as if he was headed to the percussion room. I kept practicing for about two minutes before I heard a knock on my door. I stopped playing and got up to open the door. This man seemed so big back then, and his teaching approach was one that some students were apprehensive about.

That typical smirk took its place for a second before his mouth voiced, "Hector, these practice rooms are for students who are practicing their parts. If you are not practicing your instrument, then you need to allow someone else to use it. You can practice that at home." I just replied with, "ok." I grabbed my stuff and left the practice room. I wondered at that moment if it was just me that he had an issue with because frequently, other students would hang out in the practice rooms even after that interaction. What did he mean by 'that'? I thought. Was it the music I was working on, the instrument I was practicing, or the fact that I was using tablature to learn guitar music? I know that school programs have their rules about the proper usage of space. Still, as an adolescent who felt the band hall to be a place of belonging, at that moment, I felt as though my artistic endeavors were cheated; the metalhead in me was humiliated. The classically trained student wondered if the electric guitar was a 'good enough' instrument to learn. More confusion set in when the embodiment of the 'metalhead' kicked in, and I brushed it off by simply telling myself that "it's whatever, man, just keep shredding."<sup>25</sup>

Thomas Turino states that when “people find flow [the] experience [is] restful and liberating, because the problems and aspects of ourselves that sometimes get in our way from reaching a clear, open state of mind disappear during intense concentration.”<sup>26</sup> Turino also poses that achieving flow requires a proper balance between the skill level and the challenge.<sup>27</sup> As

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<sup>25</sup> By metalhead here, I mean the ways in which I (we) would not allow for things to get to me mentally and emotionally – a ‘hard’ guy.

<sup>26</sup> Turino *Music as Social Life*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

stated in the narrative, that year was when we began to take our guitar playing and metalness seriously. The smirk that Max and I came to get very familiar with was one that I would often quickly dismiss because of the ability we had to stay in the ‘zone’ while we ‘jammed out.’ We would often practice the fast solos from our favorite bands because they were challenging but made us faster guitarists. The focus required to learn all the guitar licks was immense because we were self-taught in metal. Nonetheless, working hard and having the goal of understanding the music felt liberating and rewarding.

Still, participating in the metal music culture demonstrated to be limiting at times because I was stuck between two cultural cohorts that demanded a different set of applications. Embodying the metalhead meant that I had to ‘cross the lines’ of the boundaries set by the band hall and the formal musical practices; I crossed to where “both material and imagined, where space, knowledge, and power converge through the circulation” of cultures.<sup>28</sup> I was musicking in the ways of the marching and symphonic band but still finding ways to make metal music. Jeff Todd Titon explains that music cultures have their own rules, musical vocabulary, and methods of learning.<sup>29</sup> The band hall had guidelines that its members had to abide by; lockers were for band instruments only, practice rooms were strictly to work on band music, and your participation there meant that you had to embody the classical. Still, as I did my part to fulfill the requirements by practicing as best as possible to be a ‘music nerdo’ and to have my parts down and make the All-State band, I also navigated my use of time to get the metalhead experience.

### **El Metalero y su Identidad en la Orquesta**

My curiosity to understand how the artist has to negotiate identity in spaces is rooted in my questions after incidents in the band hall and other experiences. Furthermore, I believe that

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<sup>28</sup> Young, Rivera-Servera, *Performance*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Titon, “Bi-Musicality,” 287-297.

my sophomore year was the year that helped the shaping of my metal and classically trained musician identity the most. I never directly heard from the head band director the words expressed to me by one of my friends and girlfriend at the time, but I often felt, and it seemed to me, that I was not a favorite. Marisol, my girlfriend at that time, was a lovely girl who right away became a part of the honors band her freshman year playing the clarinet. My friend Sandy, was a band favorite because she made All-State her freshman year. One could tell by simply observing the excellent relationship she and the director had; I mean, she made All-State her freshman year and played the same instrument as the director. Still, Sandy and I were terrific friends, and we often hung out outside of school. We had our tiny cohort made up of freshmen from different middle schools, and we would 'chill' anytime we could meet at hangouts outside of school.

I can remember this experience as if it was yesterday because it reinforced my thoughts about how the band director thought of me. It created some resentment, frustration, and type of anger in me. I grew up knowing that music was something that I would do my whole life, but after this, I began to reconsider if studying music was something that I needed; maybe I could play my way up as many others have, I thought. Moreover, that day Sandy, Marisol, and I were hanging out, and I was showing them "Cemetery Gates" by Pantera and telling them how challenging some of the pinch harmonics were for me. At a point, Sandy said to me, "Dude, do you know what Fitz (band director) told us today?" to which I confusingly replied with "No, what?" "He told Marisol and me that we should not be hanging out with you guys because you are trouble and a bad influence," Sandy said. With a grin on my face, I stopped playing and stated furiously, "What the fuck? This guy doesn't even know me; I am top 10 in my class, never absent. I made it to pre area for All-State so far and don't really speak much around him. What is his deal?" I just sat for a second quiet and in my thoughts. Sandy and Marisol mentioned how

they told him, “Nah, he is cool, sir,” and how he just said to be careful because we seemed like we could be trouble. I intensely disliked him after that, perhaps I should have approached him to ask him about it, but I just kept playing music. After this, I shredded more on my electric guitars and told myself that I did not need him to make All-State and that I would do that on my own, which I did my junior and senior years.

The section above describes how I questioned myself about continuing my studies in music. The moment when I was told that I was viewed as a bad influence hindered my feelings and perceptions of the band hall, where the ‘music nerdos’ went to belong. I lost my sense of “social comfort, belonging, and identity.” Nonetheless, it is essential to point out that the need to ‘belong’ pushed me to find other ways of ‘making it,’ of making music, such as my commentary of “maybe I could play my way up as many others have.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, why did I still claim to want to make it to All-State? Was it the need to belong and prove that I am good enough for a traditional art form that “can’t change or adapt much without losing its identity and functions[?]”<sup>31</sup> Or was it because the metalhead in me wanted to prove to the elitist in this genre that even someone like me can perform? It was both. All my friends were in the band, and I loved its intensity, but I was not too fond of the politics that surrounded the style. On the other hand, I wanted to ‘cross that line’ that border set up to stop the metalhead from participating.

About a decade after these experiences, Daniel S. Isbell and Ann Marie Stanley, published their work *Code-switching Musicians: An Exploratory Study* which demonstrates how individuals that code-switch navigate musical worlds.<sup>32</sup> The purpose of this study was to illustrate the “skill and comfort [of] switching between formal ensembles in a school and music

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<sup>30</sup> Turino. *Music*, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Hurley-Glowa, “Alaska Native,” 101-112.

<sup>32</sup> Stanley, Isbell. “*Code-switching*,” 1-18.

and ... of multiple genres outside school... to understand flexible, comprehensive musicianship.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, this study shows how code-switching is indicative of the ability needed both musically and socially to navigate multiple spaces. Moreover, the authors add that other studies reveal how pedagogical approaches often ignore and denigrate the music “enjoyed and treasured by the great majority,” especially those of school age.<sup>34</sup> Even more, those students who partake in the multiple musical learning environments witness the varying instructional approaches.

On the one hand, formal instruction is “defined [by] curricula: teachers lead; rules and procedures are prescribed” and on the other spectrum, “[i]nformal learning is often non-linear, cooperative, and controlled by a social group.”<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the individual that immerses themselves in the acts of learning both formally and informally must develop the cultural musical ways of the cohort. In other words, the artistic approach used by the musician must be adept to the etiquettes of the environment they are to perform in.

Isbell and Stanley’s study explores the concept of linguistic code-switching to understand further this phenomenon among musicians and how they use it to navigate different settings. The authors explain how, why, and when bilinguals alternate from one language to another. Additionally, code-switching studies have explored how its use is an aid for identity construct in “both social and musical border-crossing between home and school.”<sup>36</sup> Collectively, the study promotes that

code-switching is a viable lens through which to understand the manifestation of flexible, comprehensive musicianship. [Also, how l]inks between musical and linguistic code-

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 3.

switching also provide support for continued study of relationships between acquisition and use of speech and musicality.<sup>37</sup>

Critically analyzing the verbal interactions between the director and myself and how ‘that’ can be practiced at home demonstrates a disconnect between the musical cultures obtained through enculturation and those formally learned. Furthermore, the jam sessions that happened in our living rooms felt holistic to the nature of our identity in ‘our’ space. While in the band hall, we had to listen, follow, repeat, and know our place in our metal jam sessions we could use the same tools but head-bang and improvise at our discretion. Accordingly, while our obtained formal musical knowledge could cross musical borders from classical to metal, our visas were limited to our jam sessions; they did not extend to the traditional band hall setting despite our fluency in both kinds of music.

If we explore artistic negotiation through the lens of code-switching, we can understand how crossing musical borders embodies the politics of the local culture. Initially, I describe my experiences in the band hall as oppressive. My purpose is to demonstrate how crossing musical borders allows the individual to neither “[sic] wholly nurturing or wholly discouraging” their identity but instead they embody the agents that allow them to “conform to and transgress the temporal boundaries and borders that enclose them and the politics that emerge therein.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, the use of musical code-switching to construct my artistic identity provides me the abilities required to discover and (re)learn the ways of being in varying spaces; how the “link[s] between geography and knowledge...make a point about how it informs our performances of identity.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, “Border Intellectual,” 147.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 149.

## The Classical Guitar

Towards the conclusion of my junior year of high school, I decided what courses I would take my last year of high school. At that point in my educational journey, I had finished all my core courses and had four extracurricular classes available to my discretion. My participation with the UIL All-State band had rerouted me to wanting to learn more about the academic ways of music. After I signed up for piano, theory, and an extra band period that I could use to practice my solo audition music, I still needed one more course to fulfill my schedule requirements. I knew that the school had an *Estudiantina* program that I could join, but I did not care much because they played music that I already learned at home.<sup>40</sup> Still, I had not researched the classical guitar program because I had auditioned for the fine arts program of the school band and could not take both simultaneously; therefore, I never thoroughly learned what the classical guitar program was about.

I will not forget the day that I became impressed by the classical guitar students at my high school. I could shred on the electric and play guitar solos from Metallica songs like it was no big deal, but I was mesmerized during lunch one day. I decided to have lunch with a girl that I had a crush on at the time. Her group of people was usually the computer class students that took class across the guitar room. We sat outside the computer classroom in the hall and had conversations about subjects I can no longer remember.

I remember being captivated by the playing of this one guitar student who, I assume, decided to skip lunch to practice. His playing was phenomenal, I thought at the time. I could hear an entire orchestra being played on one instrument. I mean, I knew the piano had the potential to

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<sup>40</sup> Estudiantina is a Spanish tradition consisting mostly of chordophones in the lute family (guitars, vihuelas, bandurrias, etc), and singing, usually the musicians sing and play at the same time. In Brownsville they are high school ensembles that focus mainly on Spanish speaking folk songs.

be used in that manner, but to see the acoustic guitar be used in such a way is something that changed my life. At this moment, I knew that I wanted to play guitar that way and signed up for guitar class. I was excited to learn how to perform the classical guitar because it would make my metal playing better; after all, it was like playing metal solos.

The following semester, my senior year, I focused on making the All-State band again. We also had a significant marching band competition, which did not allow me to work on my guitar studies. Also, the content of the guitar class felt accessible to me; I was fluent in the rhythms and basic reading skills covered at the level I was placed in. Additionally, I could not play in the guitar performances because my commitments with the band interfered. Nevertheless, I wanted to challenge myself and asked the guitar director to give me a solo I could work on for UIL solo and ensemble the following spring. I received Heitor Villalobos' *Etude No 1*. It felt in those days like I was now able to comfortably shift my musical knowledge to embody a chosen identity at a given time. I had a space to learn about music theory and participate in the immense feeling of performing in a band/orchestra. I also had a place to go and be a metalhead while playing a much smaller-sounding orchestra with my hands.

At the end of the fall semester in 2006, I began to feel burnt out and once again feeling unsure about my future with the bass clarinet. I despised being in the band hall by this point but enjoyed being around my friends who were trying to find their place as well. However, I was intrigued by the challenges of learning the classical guitar and how amateur it made me feel. My electric guitar playing also improved drastically this year, and I was playing more shows with my metal band. Also, while I successfully navigated and negotiated my musical identity in these spaces, I found satisfaction in my abilities to code-switch in "certain classes of population and



certain activities.”<sup>41</sup> Becoming a part of the guitar program felt like the best choice I had made musically. I was now surrounded by other musicians who would comfortably code-switch between metal and classical music, and my identity connected to this social group.

In the last semester of my senior year, I spent it trying to play *Etude No 1* as best as possible. Making it to state for UIL Solo and Ensemble competition would be my only opportunity to know if I was any good at the classical guitar, I would think then. My first performance was in San Benito for this buff, very formal, friendly, but intimidating guitar professor, Dr. Hook. My right hand was shaking and felt sweaty, but I felt at ease simultaneously because I had been in this type of situation before and went on to play. A few hours later, we got the results, and I got a superior rating which meant I was now moving to the state level UIL. I was excited. I felt genuine and light, contrary to my experiences in making the All-State band because I was congratulated differently by the guitar director. Furthermore, I was now going to travel with new friends with whom I could be that nerdy metal head that shreds on the electric while using classical approaches in the music. Even more, I felt like that 6<sup>th</sup> grader that felt “pride in learning a ‘real’ [guitar] piece: “I’m legit!” and can express various musical identities at once.”<sup>42</sup>

Looking back and critically assessing my experiences in high school through music identity and code-switching, I now understand that the interactions in these spaces require a skill set of comprehending the environment to know how to shift the performance of the individual. David T. Abalos explores the whole human to understand and describe how the individuals suppress particular identities that obstruct their wholeness and, in return, creates a ‘disappointed’

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<sup>41</sup> Stanley, and Isbell, “Code-Switching,” 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

being.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, he describes the creation of the whole being as one that happens when the individual understands the multiple aspects of their identity. While Abalos approaches wholeness in identity constructs for the Latino Male, I agree that embracing and nurturing the multiple musical cultures will enable the individual to embody a whole artist.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the musical culture of the classical guitar demonstrates that it has ties to the norms of the traditional ways of the orchestra. There are competitions where guitarists can achieve a higher rank level, and there are also ensembles where compositions are performed. Nonetheless, my experience with this cohort demonstrates that a musical identity is not fixed; it can switch within the same environment given the proper conditions.

Juxtaposing the band hall and the guitar room environments elucidates the notion that code-switching happens differently in similar musical cultures. In other words, while the band and guitar ensemble have similarities in the ways of being, code-switching takes different forms based on the conditions. The band hall conditioned the code-switching to happen only when the music-making was done. While a minimum of two interlocutors is needed for code-switching to happen, Max and I had to wait until after marching rehearsal to ‘freely’ embody another musical identity. Even individual practice before school and during lunch required that we thoroughly perform in formal traditions. The guitar room was still bound by the traditional rules but had more freedom for the code-switching to happen. We were able to bring our electric guitars as we pleased and practiced what we enjoyed on our own time.

Moreover, the majority of the cohort members were metalheads too that would do the nerd and metal talk at any given moment. Consequently, these identity shifts, and when they

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<sup>43</sup> David T. Abalos, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition*, (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> Abalos, *The Latino Male*.

happen, demonstrates that musical identity can be fluid and that connections with the cohort can aid in finding flow and identity. The following chapter will further explore these notions of belonging and code-switching and also looks into how a cultural cohort can evolve as new members join the group and thus create dynamics that shift the ways of understanding.

## CHAPTER III

### LA UNIVERSIDAD Y MI MUSICA [THE UNIVERSITY AND MY MUSIC]

*Music continues to remind me that its boundaries are limitless.*

- Haley Reinhart

In the fall of 2008, I waited my turn for the auditions required to be accepted into the guitar program at the University of Texas at Brownsville. At that point, I had decided to transfer from the premedical program into the music program. All the reading I had to do in the sciences bored me, and I figured that if I had to read that much, I might as well do it with something that I am good at and enjoy: music. Things were going as planned, and I arrived at the audition building with enough time to warm up. It was a little after 3 pm, and I had a little less than an hour before it was my turn to go in. “I got this,” I said to myself. “I am a two-year all-stater for band and can shred on my electric guitar,” I thought to reassure myself and calm the nerves that I was feeling. Although I had taken time off from studying music, I was still consistently gigging with my band at bars and other similar types of venues.

My name was called, and it was finally my turn to audition. I walked into the office, and the professor looked familiar, but in my anxiety, I did not realize that I would be judged by Dr. Hook once again. I played *Etude No.1* by Heitor Villalobos and two other pieces I cannot remember. I felt I did great at that moment, but then came the sight-reading. I had only been

reading guitar music for one year in high school before going into the premedical program, so I had not pursued reading music much. Still, I knew this would be a part of it and had practiced as much as I could to be fluent in my reading on the guitar. I aced first and third positions, but by the fifth, seventh, and ninth positions, my insecurities got the best of me, and I made one mistake after another. I was bummed but hoped that my musical background and performance would play a part in the final decision. Waiting for the verdict felt like a lifetime, and to calm my anxiety, I said to myself, “I know I can get better at it if I am given the opportunity.” After a few moments, I heard the words from the guitar professor who stated that “at this moment, I will have to say no to you. However, I will give you two weeks to work on your sight-reading and will allow you to readjust.” My ego shrunk, and I could feel my face turning red at this point.

Obviously, after being accepted into the program upon my second audition, I understood and assumed that my rejection was probably a part of the process to see my work ethic and commitment. Still, at that moment, I questioned if this decision was even worth it. Do all those years of studying music in intermediate and high school even count? Are my bandmates going to laugh at me? I thought. I felt embarrassed and a failure. I went to my dorm and just sat there for a while; I did not even feel like jamming. For a moment, I felt like I was back in a similar environment like the high school band where “the classical training that’s saying “if you play a wrong note then it’s wrong” and you are not good enough to participate in this performance. Nevertheless, the competitive side and the nature of an academic setting pushed me to practice every way I knew to get that acceptance.

Isbell and Stanley describe four different case studies from SMU and how they navigated the academic and other musical settings. These case participants applied different skillsets and musical understandings to perform in the given space through code-switching successfully. Like

these contributors of the case study, I had been a part of academic settings long enough to understand and know what needed to be done to get into a university guitar program. Needless to say, it is at this moment where I know that musical expertise is not viewed the same in every musical culture. There are expectations and knowledge that the individual should fully comprehend to succeed in being welcomed into the new cohort. Furthermore, although musical cultures can have similarities the “different types of societies and cultural cohorts value certain musical fields over others due to broader systems of value and social goals.”<sup>45</sup> In these moments, the musical affiliations reflect the dynamics of what identities are valued given the specific context of the space. Do I perform a well-trained musician who is picking up the guitar? Or do I embody the shredder guitarist to show off my abilities? Again, this demonstrates how identities are situational to the requirements of the space.

Moreover, the inner thoughts expressed above reflect the descriptions of belonging, rejection, and doubt of musical identity. I assumed that my knowledge of the ‘classical’ style would be enough to become accepted as a part of this new musical space. I had the ‘collection of habits’ required to assimilate to this music culture. I could play the guitar efficiently, read music, was rhythmically good, and knew how to play in an ensemble. What then were the reasons for my rejection at that moment? Reflecting on it was expectation and meaning. It was easy to fit into the classical guitar realm at the high school level because we all enjoyed making music with the guitar. At the university level, participating and becoming a member of the program illustrates a different level of “shared habits of thought and meaning attached to a particular object, institution, or practice” because the ensemble has formed into an environment of the academic and proficient musician. Additionally, while situations allow the guitarist to binge on

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<sup>45</sup> Turino, *Music*, 21.

the embodiments of other musical identities by offering times of freedom, the social identity transforms into one that critically analyzes, performs, and obtains the new ways of musicking within the other members.

### **The Garage**

I arrived at Max's garage at about 6 pm to rehearse a few hours after the audition. The drummer, who I will call Sam, asked me how the audition went. I simply replied with an 'ok' before asking what song we were going to rehearse first. I assume they knew things did not go my way because they asked, "What is with the attitude?" I quickly stated that I wanted to jam and not talk about it. "Bro, don't worry, you don't need 'that' shit in your life either way. This is how we make music," the bass player, Eric, assertively expressed as he moved his right-hand fingers on the strings. Some of me felt his words were correct, but the other felt I was a failed musician. Here the space is used as the 'fuck' attitude and 'rock on.' We do not dwell on things as long as we can make music, head-bang, and mosh pit. After jamming out, not being accepted into the program was out of my head; I was in my zone jamming. It seemed like that is all I needed. I found my flow again with the people that I often quickly connected with musically.

Code-switching seemed to be rewarding and natural in the garage. I knew how to express my voice without thinking twice about it. I wrote riffs using the knowledge that I learned in music theory and guitar techniques. I wrote music that fused my fingerpicking style with metal chord progressions that I loved. The musical skill required in the garage was our ear, and if it sounded good, then it was right, if the solos were melodic and fast, that was enough to be 'badass,' and if people head-banged at shows to the music, then we were doing the right thing.

But, as I gained more musical abilities, I tried to make the head-banging harder, my ear clearer, the ideas correct, and the mosh pitting more aggressive.

Recalling my years of guitar studies and jamming with my band, helps me realize how code-switching made my playing and artistry better. I saw my “musical worlds not entirely separate” and that much of my formal training transferred to my abilities to write music and improvise beautiful melodies.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, while at the university, I performed as an academic student who needed to learn solos and parts for the ensemble properly. I no longer experienced impostor syndrome. Instead, I began to apply what I was learned to original music critically.

### **Mixing the Metal with the Classical**

A few years into my undergraduate degree, my metal band began to fall through. Our first member to leave was the bass player. We understood, but Max and I spent the last five years working on original music, which set us back. The second member to leave was the drummer; this hit us badly because it was challenging to find good metal drummers in Brownsville at the time. Most drummers, good enough to play in metal bands, were usually performing in multiple bands. Often, good drummers were picky about who to perform in; if you were not selling shirts, demos, and tickets, they would hesitate to join ‘original’ bands. Luckily, I met some peers in the music program, one could shred on the bass, another played a killer drum set. We jammed. The environment created was no longer just metal but also academic, and after a few months, Max left. We were still metal in every aspect, but our musicking fused styles. One of our original pieces, *Il Circo di Juicio*, had a series of rhythmic modulations and keys. The countering melodies developed on the guitars created atmospheres of eeriness and sorrow. A story often

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<sup>46</sup> Stanley, and Isbell, “Code-Switching,” 7.



expressed the purpose of the song. We became an acoustic metal trio that fused the dissonance of death metal chords and melodic attributes of modern classical guitar pieces.

As enlightened as I was to come into this new musical dynamic, I asked, am I now the snob? Because Max left. We were childhood friends and began to grow apart. I was involved in the metal scene, and the original music fused the classical style of playing with heavy metal riffs.<sup>47</sup> However, I did not realize how I lacked social skills in my code-switching. Max's reason for leaving was because he felt outcasted and not because he could not keep up. In *Code-switching musicians: an exploratory study*, one of the participants, Billy, explains that one should take part in the varying setting with sensitivity and that:

The most important social part of it is not turning into ... 'the academic musician' because then you get into a world that's not connected to their world, so it hurts the vibe a little bit ... Everyone has to feel like they're on the same plane.<sup>48</sup>

Consequently, my inability to separate my formal musical understanding from the metal space that we often jammed in hampered my relationship with another peer. Losing a solid relationship pushed me to question the fundamental structures that make the environment work. I realized that although new band members understood each other due to our backgrounds, it did not necessarily mean it was the same case with others. Understanding how to navigate different identities: metalhead, classical guitarist, and composer/songwriter, and interpreter became a source of questioning my authorship and role in the many spaces I was beginning to frequently participate in. After this, I was able to naturally and adequately jam with others again.

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<sup>47</sup> For an example of the ways that we fused metal and classical see Appendix B.

<sup>48</sup> Stanley, and Isbell, "Code-Switching," 7.

## CHAPTER IV

### EL MAESTRO [THE INSTRUCTOR]

*A la larga le entiendes.* [In the long run, you will understand]

– Albur Mexicano

#### **El Carnezaso**

“*Saca la buena mijo,*” [Get the good one out, son] my dad said to me. I replied with, “*que paso, dad. Apoco asi?*” [What is going on, dad? It’s like that?] I followed it with a laugh and nod and went in to grab my guitar. His *compadres* [friends] laughed and made comments like ‘*que onda compadre se va a dejar?*’ [What’s up buddy? Are you going to let yourself?] He laughed it off and said while grabbing the front part of his pants, “*te dejo esta la que te cuesta*” [I leave you this one, the one that costs]. I was 24 years old and could now participate in the *albur* performances between my father and his friends. *Albur* is a practice that is commonly used in the cookouts that happen within my circles. This practice is used primarily by males, where the participants use wordplay in double entendres. Furthermore, Octavio Paz describes the albur by stating that

Each of the speakers tries to humiliate his adversary with verbal traps and ingenious linguistic combinations, and the loser is the person who cannot think of a comeback, who has to swallow his opponent’s jibes. These

jibes are full of aggressive sexual allusions; the loser is possessed, is violated, by the winner, and the spectators laugh and sneer at him.<sup>49</sup>

These were the ritualistic behaviors that I understood, growing up, to be the ‘proper’ in the space that these men made exclusive. To be able to hang out with them, I needed to think quickly on my feet, even with my father; this also paved the way for me to learn how to play *corridos* and *rancheras* from these men.

It was Saturday evening, and it was time for the typical *carnezaso* that my father liked to host for him and his friends. I walked out with my acoustic guitar and sat near my dad, who was grilling. He had positioned the table about two feet to the right side of the grill so that he could use it for the food and his *bien muerta* (real dead).<sup>50</sup> I sat at the adjacent side of the table that my dad used. “*A ver mijo, avientese la de Tragos de Amargo Licor,*” [Let’s see son, play Tragos de Amargo Licor] he requested. “*No me la se pero deja la busco.*” [I do not know it but let me look for it] I replied. He quickly replied in a laughing and sarcastic manner, “*tanta escuela y no puedes tocar la cancion. Y cuando te piden tus estudiantes que les enseñes algo tambien les dices que no ta la sabes?*” [So much school and you cannot play the song. And, when your students ask you to show them something, you also tell them that you do not know it?] I dismissed his ignorance because, after all, he is my father. Nonetheless, I wanted to explain to him how playing music is not a thing of magic; we still have to learn the song to play it.

E. Patrick Johnson explains in his chapter “Border Intellectual: Performing Identity at the Crossroads” that most learn to “code-switch and speak one way at home and another at school” and that understanding “early that our survival – culturally and academically- depended on

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<sup>49</sup> Limon, *Dancing with the Devil*, 127.

<sup>50</sup> *Bien muerta* refers to ice cold beer.

various modes of performance of identity” also “had everything to do with crossing borders.”<sup>51</sup> Navigating these understandings and how the “knowledge of the elders ... no matter what” is final unless they “granted permission for [me] to “profess.””<sup>52</sup> For example, the condescending way my dad expressed my lack of knowledge and musicianship is not questioned in these spaces for several reasons. First, the space requires that one ‘takes it’ and does not complain. Another is that because of the age difference, the father always knows best and is correct. Needless to say, I am not to ‘profess’ my musical knowledge until my achievements are being displayed as pride from my father to his friend; until that point is reached, I must know my place in the group and the space of the *carnezaso*.

Furthermore, this is how one must code-switch in this environment to participate in music-making entirely. *Albur* is dominant in the *carnezaso*, and one must switch their way of speaking to fit the norms of this environment. Moreover, understanding this multi-lingual way of speaking can allude to the “metaphorical quality in bi-musicality that leads us toward understanding, and that is that there is something the nature of the musical experience which serves as a kind of metaphor for social relations.”<sup>53</sup> The metaphor in the *carnezaso* creates links between the *albur* and ways of passing down musical knowledge. Limon describes that in *albur*, there is always a more dominant person that towers over the weaker. In that same breath, Johnson states that one must not ‘profess’ their knowledge unless allowed to. In these spaces, the artist must mitigate their understanding to the confines of what the ‘elders’ allow. While the *albur* can be defined as a moment where the lower socio-economic identities try to get away

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<sup>51</sup> Johnson, “Border,” 152.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>53</sup> Titon, “Bi-Musicality,” 294.

from the oppressions of the elite, it is also resonant with the hierarchies of ‘classical’ ensembles.

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My failure to know the song my father requested and his response to it exemplifies the prejudices between the studied knowledge and what is passed on by the historians of a musical culture. Titon explicates that musical cultures have their vocabulary and ways of passing down knowledge.<sup>55</sup> Subsequently, the instructors of the *carnezas* passed down musical expertise utilizing observation and rote training. Here there is no natural evolution of the styles until the next generation implements new ideas. However, the essence remains the same when making music; the elders know best.

I remember that he grabbed the guitar as he said, “*a ver pasa para aca*” [Let’s see, pass it over here]. To which Pelon, one of his *compadres*, replied, “*no son pasas son huevos guey*” [They are not raisins, they are eggs guey]. I laughed and gave my dad the guitar as he quickly replied with “*me los chupas y me los dejas nuevos cabron*” [you suck them off, and you leave them new, you bastard]. We all busted out in a burst of laughter because Pelon smirked and said he was just kidding; he lost the *albur* and had to take it. My father went on to show me the *pisadas* and *rasgueo* for *Tragos de Amargo Licor*. By that time, I was used to my dad’s approach of teaching music to me. He did not know what a C chord or G chord was; all he knew was that “*esta es la primera pisada y esta la que sigue*” [this is the first shape, and this is the next one], etc. Since I picked up the guitar, I had to always quickly pick up on what I was being taught in this environment. Also, in conjunction with these teaching forms, I had to gain thick skin if I

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<sup>54</sup> To learn more about the politics of *albur* look into: Limon, Jose E. 1994. *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican American South Texas*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

<sup>55</sup> Titon, “Bi-Musicality.”

wanted to also hang out with the elders of the space. I often dismissed the insults and tones directed at me because I understood that to be the way of communicating in these circles.

Interestingly enough, even at this age, whenever my dad requested that I play a rock song that I did not know, he would stop me and say I do not want to hear it until it is done. He no longer sent me to my room to work on it because I was an adult and had my own home. Nonetheless, as an adolescent, I recall my experiences in those carnezazos and his approach and response to my failures upon his requests. I remember the day that I was excited to learn the introduction to “Sweet Child O’ Mine” by Guns N Roses. I approached my dad during one of his hangouts, excited as I could be, and asked him if I could show him the song. “*A ver*” [Let’s hear it], my dad replied. I played the introduction nervously but got through it and asked him what he thought. I am not sure if my father realizes that, in a way, he was my first coach in guitar because when these situations would happen, he would say that it was not done, and he did not want to hear it until it was. I would work through my embarrassment and say ok because that is what we should do.

While the elders of this space were the music masters that I studied certain styles of music with, we were able to find our flow often still and connect. Upon properly performing a song, my father would leave me to play it, and he would get back to take his place as the grill master. I was given my place as the artist in residency, and we would all ‘jam out’ to the tune. The flow would happen because the ‘participatory traditions’ of the social gathering include various self-proclaimed roles. As I would play a song, some members would sing along, and some would even assume the part of the lead singer. Others would nod their head or dance with the air as they held their beer in one hand. My dad would bang his cooking fork on the side of the grill while keeping time while he moved his head from side to side and swayed his hips at the

pace of the song. Nevertheless, *albur*, the economic hardships, and dominance were forgotten as the flow took us on a trance of timelessness and solidarity.

These settings require a specific type of both musical and cultural understanding to navigate successfully and adequately perform. Still, as challenging as it may seem, these are the ways of being and learning in these circles. Furthermore, while other types of research can arise from what happens in *carnezasos*, it is crucial to understand the ways of musicking here, and the skills developed from such approaches. For example, the quick adapting of rote training and the ability to learn songs by ear are very important in the development of the artist. Conclusively, as a researcher who understands music academically, I comprehend that specific guidelines are required to perform appropriately in varying spaces.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

My work here has been driven by my need to understand the artistic identities within me. With this research, I am challenging a fixed musical identity's notions and suggesting that embodying different musical cultures makes our identity continuous. I have explored the settings of the band hall and my perceptions of the self within it while embracing the new me that I found in the classical guitar. Furthermore, in academia, I have felt the rejection of the academic identity while experiencing acceptance in the garage of the 'new' metal band. Finally, as a professional, I have witnessed the limitations that happen in the hierarchy of the *carnezasos*. The general understanding of how different musical backgrounds require different approaches of musicking to develop complete individual artistic identities is something that I hope can be further researched after this work. I have lived these experiences and critiqued them in this autobiographical work. In doing so, I displayed how code-switching happens in these spaces

because of the different musical understandings. As the author of this work, I hope to add to the discourse on how individuals negotiate identity in the other spaces they participate in and how this allows the artist to be complete. Needless to say, as the discussions above demonstrated how even in spaces where limitations and boundaries are set, there are still ways in which the artist may code-switch and even find flow. In this work, I have described the sometimes confusing and uncomfortable states of belonging that I have experienced in a series of different musical cultures. However, the dynamics of the tensions and satisfaction I have felt in these cultures have essentially contributed to the understanding and perceptions of how I view myself today as an artist, complete.



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## APPENDIX A

## APPENDIX A

### PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS: LA CANCION

To view the video click following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iz6ZX1h6LpQ>

The composition itself will not be written out in music notation because this process demonstrates how certain musical cultures learn/write music. Nevertheless, in my analysis of the song and video, I have discussed the musical and visual decisions I took to further emphasize how as an artist I code-switch and fluidly embody the identity that is required to belong in the cultural cohort of the moment. Sequentially, the video also accentuates the separation of spaces and highlights the cultural environments of the codes and/or flow.

The song is written out in E minor and in theme and variations form, but with this pop structure – Intro, verse, bridge, chorus, verse, bridge, chorus, and outro. The theme and its variations is found at times in the guitar playing and in other instances in the voice, and it varies in the pitch and rhythmic values of the initial idea. Also, as the scenes of the video change, the viewer will see the variations that are used in the presentation of me to adapt and fully immerse and belong to the social and musical environment. These ‘switches’ that happen musically and

physically in the video demonstrate how the artistic and personal identity is constant and situational and not fixed to a specific cohort.<sup>56</sup>

The video begins with the scene of a formal stage and piano stool sitting alone in silence. Soon after the viewer sees me walking into the frame wearing formal concert attire and carrying my classical guitar. The sound comes in with the melody to give the presence of the character its identity. This moment illustrates code-switching by demonstrating my understanding of how the musical culture here requires formality, and little to no vocal interaction. “Keeping it in equilibrium means that its beautiful music comes at a high cost at every level of production.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, the subset of habits of the social group here demands that a trained artist distinguishes him or herself from the untrained musician, and in essence maintains that the ‘high status’ of the orchestra, (or in this case the classical guitar), can come at a cost of intense self-criticism and repression of other identities. Additionally, it also demonstrates how the interlocutors - the audience and performer – exchange dialogue through admiration and the presentation of a higher understanding of music performance.

The melody begins on the third (G), of the E minor chord, because this is the note that makes the chord major or minor and it is followed by the seventh (F#) and back to the third (G). My use of this is not just a musical choice but also a metaphorical one because while the song is in minor the melody begins with the relative G major that is followed by the leading tone and then resolves back to G, and this approach was done to resonate with how the identity of the complete artist is fluid and continuous. When the theme is repeated it has a contrasting line that varies in rhythm and is used to develop the direction for the upcoming section. The intro resolves at the

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<sup>56</sup> Turino, *Music*, 101-105.

<sup>57</sup> Hurley-Glowa, “Alaska,” 108.

beginning of the next section by the strumming of the tonic chord (E minor). Again, this was done on purpose to demonstrate how the individual artist's identity is constant.

At 0:49 of the video, the image begins to get distorted, and the scene shifts to me walking out the door holding a red steel string guitar and in clothing that I would use in the general setting of a *carnesazo*. As I begin to play the verse in the style of a *Ranchera*, we see a member of this social group from the cookout fix my fingers into the correct *pisada* and then quickly move to prepare the grill that makes up the central focus of the activities, -where the primary functions of the gathering are to get away from the everyday responsibilities. Furthermore, the code-switching here happens by understanding and accepting that the 'elders' know the correct way of performing and therefore the singing and playing of the *Ranchera* are performed appropriately. Additionally, allowing myself to be corrected in my playing allows for the necessary conditions that other members of this social group use to take part in these ways of musicking. Also, the *carnesazo* creates an opportunity for participatory performance to happen because as mentioned previously, some members will sing in sync or even attempt to take the leading role while others will smack the cooking fork on the grill following the beat while swaying back and forth.

The I (Em) to V7 (B7) progression allows me to sing the theme rhythmically free while also giving room for the bending of the sung notes. The lyrics here are sung in both Spanish and English to once again demonstrate the shifts that may happen within the individual. For example, being bilingual but having Spanish as my native language and English as an obtained language that I learned formally in school has caused me to think of one or the other language when I am expressing myself verbally. Consequently, while the code-switching happens due to the circumstances, I have obtained the ability to do it in an instant. Furthermore, the lyrics used here have to do with me 'crossing borders' within the different musical cultures that the video shows

and how even though borders are constructs they are heavily viewable. The chord that concludes the verse and scene is once again not resolved and a blurred scene begins the bridge where we hear the resolution played by the E5 power chord.

The next scene shows me walking to the stage through the back door, and soon after I give the nod that drives us to ‘jam out.’ This here illustrates how code-switching happens embodied by the dark clothing to the head-banging and body movements, and the heavy and raw way of playing the style of metal music. Playing music in these types of informal environments -bars, garages, out in the open- I often felt that what Isbell and Stanley call the ‘vibe’ (or what Turino refers to as ‘flow’) was much easier to obtain. In the formal setting like the concert hall, the vibe is felt different because one can “over-analyze, and overjudge themselves too much” and playing in the “informal styles [it is] ‘less intense about criticism.’”<sup>58</sup> The theme here is played as the riff with the power chords throughout and with varying rhythms. This approach emphasizes the freedoms that the environment allows for improvisation of the ‘jam’ and the flow that is mutually felt and although it is short-lived it is fulfilling. The scene ends with the playing of the last chord without resolution and with the switching of the physical space through a glitch in the scene that takes you to a scene of walking into a separate space. Again, the resolution comes in the new setting and musical style.

The new scene at 1:45 sets up the chorus where the theme is once again heard in the voice through a rock/pop style. Here there is no necessity to code-switch because I am now placing myself in my own space where I can embody my flow musically as I wish. This first chorus was explicitly performed in this solo manner because choruses usually express the main idea of a

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<sup>58</sup> Stanley and Isbell, “Code-Switching,” 8 and 10.

song and in this manner, I emphasize that the main identity I want to portray is an authentic me and the living room is where I can be the most vulnerable. The chords here are standard made by a simple i (em), VI (CM), iv (am), to V7 (B7) progression that allows me to once again sing the theme rhythmically and melodically free. The lyrics here are sung bilingually and emphasize that identity is fluid within the individual artist. The strumming pattern being played here is one that I often play to improvise lyrics because it is easy to ‘groove’ with and that quickly takes me to my zone where all is fair and carefree. The scene ends with a subtle distortion of the image and without the resolution of the progression.

The next scene happens instantly and it is the second verse played in a simple jazz style where the theme is used to improvise over a few bars and the voice narrates the lyrics. Although I am not playing with a full jazz combo, the clothing and musical switches that are done are resonant in the casual dress that is portrayed, the use of the electric guitar, and the chord voicings used. In these spaces, the jams are the activities where “moving together and sounding together in a group creates a direct sense of being together and of deeply felt similarity, and hence identity, among participants.”<sup>59</sup> Here I am a jazzer, a soloist that passes the torch on and takes its place in the rhythm section so that all can take part in the musicking and in essence feel the flow so that everyone can connect. The lyrics place importance on the question of belonging, and how ultimately I choose to take part in these musical circles. Speaking about belonging over the Jazz progression was important because this genre was created from the feelings of not belonging and feeling marginalized, and also because in improv the player can play off other melodies, jam on the same theme for as long as the soloist wishes, move swiftly between different keys, and drop

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<sup>59</sup> Turino, *Music*, 43.

in and out as they seem fit like it is often practiced code-switching. The dominant chord closes the scene as the image glitches into the bridge at 3:56.

The bridge here is the same as the previous one where the metal scene is portrayed and it resolves the previous verse. I chose this scene again because this musical culture is one I willingly chose to embody. The other styles were not necessarily imposed on me per se but I obtained them by affiliation or by academic musical endeavors. Also, the genre is used as the bridge because this musical scene bridged my other musical associations throughout my artistic journey. As I walk out of the scene at the 4:08 mark the visual malfunction shows me walking through a door to rehearse the *bolero*. Here the switches happen with the choice of dress and instrumentation. The drum-set in the background is reminiscent of the rock and metal jams but the musical setting requires different musical approaches for performance. The nylon acoustic guitar is often used in *boleros* and a relaxed but causal formal attire is needed. Still, in this type of performance, I often give myself more freedom to dress comfortably because the expression of voice and playing is paramount. For this chorus, I chose the *bolero* because of how intimate and theatrical it can be in its presentation and mostly because it is a musical setting where vulnerability is welcomed and that allows the individual to feel satisfaction.

The closing line describes how ‘my pieces’ seem like a puzzle because of the many parts that make me ‘but they always fit’ because the complete puzzle shows the image and in this instance, it is me. The “*soy yo*” [it’s me] lyrics are sung over a black screen followed by the outro, which is the theme played in the formal concert hall again. This point is key to the notions of code-switching in the crossing of musical cultures because it is still me and my ‘identities’ have come full circle. This further demonstrates how the navigation of the musical cultures enables the



ability to perform a different identity and in doing so we can understand that there is no essentialized identity to create a complete artist.

## APPENDIX B

## APPENDIX B

### THE METAL FUSION AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

Because I am discussing how the garage setting began to fuse genres and how the code-switching started to be used differently at the university level in chapter three, I must include an example of how this was done. The following link shows how the changes in the style of music happened.

<https://ourstage.com/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&search=retsbol>

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Hector Manuel Aguilar was born and raised in Brownsville, Texas. He attended the University of Texas at Brownsville. He dedicated his undergraduate studies to Music Education, focusing on Guitar Studies under the direction of Dr. Michael Quantz and Dr. Jonathan Dotson. Hector has also obtained a Master of Arts in Performing Studies from Texas A&M University in College Station. While doing his undergraduate degree, he was a Music Theory mentor and gained experience in music instruction by working in music studios around the Brownsville area. In preparing for his Sophomore, Junior, and Senior recitals for guitar studies, Hector participated in several competitions, such as the South Texas Guitar Competition, where he was awarded 2nd place. He is an active Classical guitarist and has had the privilege of performing in cities around Texas, Louisiana, and Georgia. Upon graduating with a Bachelors in Music Education, Hector opened MusiK Studio for orchestral and pop instruments and is currently the Director of Programs. Also, Hector has started a nonprofit, CReative Assistance for Texas, Inc.. He hopes to use different art disciplines to promote wellness and self-growth to the various communities that the organization works with. His current ventures have allowed him to partner and collaborate with other organizations in promoting the arts. Hector obtained his Masters in Music Performance on August 2021.

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