

NARCISO MARTINEZ

"Father of the Texas-Mexican Conjunto"



CD 361

1. MUCHACHOS ALEGRES (Polka)
(ID 03-A; February 1946)
2. LA CHULADA (Polka)
(ID 885-A; February 1953)
3. VIDITA MIA (Canción)
(Flores & Valdez) (ID 026; July 1946)
vocal by Carmen & Laura
4. SALUDAMOS A TEXAS (Polka)
(ID 135; February 1948)
5. AMOR DE MADRE (Shottis)
(ID 125; January 1948)
6. DEL VALLE A SAN ANTONIO
(Polka) (ID 141; February 1948)
7. LUZITA (Mazurka) (ID 135; February 1948)
8. EL LUCERO (Huapango)
(ID 144; February 1948)
9. LA ESTRELLITA (Polka)
(ID 04-A; February 1946)
10. MEDALLA DE DIOS (Vals-Ranchera)
(ID 1066; April 1954) (Aurelia Garcia B.)
vocal by Lydia Mendoza
11. FLOR DE MEXICO (Polka)
(ID 05; February 1946)
12. SILENCIO DE LA NOCHE
(Vals-Bajito) (ID 14; May 1946)
13. MUCHACHA BONITA (Polka)
(ID 97; September 1947)
14. ALICE Y SAN DIEGO (Shottis)
(ID 1339; March 1956)
15. ARRANCAME EL CORAZON (Vals
Ranchera) (Raul Diaz) (ID 584-A; April 1951)
vocal by Juanita & María Mendoza
16. SALVADOR (Vals-Alto) (ID 78; 4/1947)
17. PETRITA (Polka) (ID 628; July 1951)
18. PATRICIA (Mazurka) (ID 628; July 1951)
19. MALAGRADECIDA (Ranchera)
(ID 869; January 1953)
vocal by Gonzáles & Cantú
20. LOS ARBOLITOS (Redova)
(ID 1060; April 1954)
21. LA REINA DE SAN BENITO
(Polka) (ID 1468; May 1957)
22. SI FUE POR ESO (Bolero)
(Zuniga-Sandoval) (ID 1059; March 1954)
vocal by Lydia Mendoza
23. FLORECITA (Polka)
(ID 1315A; January 1956)
24. SIN HABER POR QUE (Ranchera)
(Tomás Mario Camacho)

(continued inside on page 2)



TEJANO ROOTS
OVER 60 MINUTES OF HISTORIC TEXAS-MEXICAN MUSIC

NARCISO MARTINEZ

Father
of the
Texas-
Mexican
Conjunto



CD-361



(ID 1063; April 1954)

vocal by Las Hermanas Gómez

25. **LA DESVELADA** (Polka)

(ID 1743; December 1959)

26. **ENAGUAS ALMIDONADAS**

(Polka) (ID 1863; January 1961)

Total time: 69:26

Narciso Martinez - accordion; **Santiago Almeida** - guitar or *bajo sexto* until 1950; after that date various *bajo* players and other musicians backed him up including **Fidel García** or **Merced Martinez** - *contrabajo* (string bass); **Lorenzo Caballero** - guitar; **Beto Villa**, **Chuy Compián**, or **Isidro López** - saxophone; as well as various drummers.

Most of the instrumental selections are composed by Narciso Martinez. Other composers, where known, are given in parenthesis. ID number refers to the original IDEAL 78 or 45 rpm release number followed by approximate date of recording. Many of the selections were also issued in the early 1960s on IDEAL LPs and EPs.

Re-issue edited and produced by Chris Strachwitz.

Original recordings produced by Armando Marroquín in Alice, Texas, for release on the IDEAL label, owned by the Rio Grande Music Co. of San Benito, Texas.

Cover by Jil Weil

Essential reading for anyone interested in Conjunto Music is **The Texas-Mexican Conjunto** by Manuel Peña (Univ. Of Texas Press - 1985)

Narciso Martinez, like most accordionists in south Texas, played a two-row button accordion until the 1950s when the three-row model became widely available.

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Narciso Martínez is the father of what is today known in South Texas as **Conjunto Music**. The Spanish word *conjunto* means group and in South Texas that means accordion, *bajo sexto*, & *contrabajo* (string bass, known locally also as *el tololoche*). In Mexico this music is generally referred to as from the north or **Musica Norteña**. Since the 1950s drums, and at times an alto saxophone, have been added to these ensembles and the electric bass has replaced the stand up instrument. Narciso Martinez was the first successful recording artist who, beginning in 1936, (note Arhoolie/Folklyric CD/C 7021) made hundreds of recordings of mostly instrumental dance tunes emphasizing the melody side of the accordion and leaving the bass parts to his *bajo sexto* player. This established a new sound, a sound which to this day is immediately identifiable as Texas-Mexican Conjunto Music. Not only did Narciso establish

the *conjunto* accordion sound, but he was also one of the first to accompany singers on commercial records when he became the house accordionist for the newly established IDEAL label of San Benito, Texas in 1946.

Conjunto Music evolved in the vast region encompassing northeastern Mexico and South Texas. It began during the second half of the nineteenth century with the introduction of the accordion by importers of the German made instruments. In this area, as well as in southwest Louisiana's Cajun region, rural musicians and their public alike, rapidly became very fond of the sound of the new little black boxes and over the next 100 years the accordion ensemble replaced almost all other rural regional music groups. Today Conjunto Music is an important element of the Latin Music business in the United States and Mexico and *conjuntos* like Los Tigres Del Norte, Ramon Ayala y

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sus Bravos del Norte, Los Huracanes del Norte, among others (and all US residents), are major attractions who draw tens of thousands to their concert/dances at auditoriums and stadiums all over Spanish-speaking North America and sell millions of recordings.

Conjunto Music however, like most folk musics, had very humble beginnings out on the *ranchos* of 19th century South Texas and Northern Mexico. At country dances where music used to be supplied by a fiddler and a guitarist or by various types of string or wind instrument ensembles, (known as *orquestas típicas*), the accordion took over like the armadillo and it looks like it's here to stay.

The diatonic accordion is loud, sturdy, can play melody and bass, is reasonably priced, and one lone accordionist with strong arms can play a dance all night long by himself. The instrument's acceptance has not been universal by any means and many people still loathe the accordion. The main reasons for this disrespect are that

conjunto accordion music has been associated primarily with lower class country folks and with the poorer urban working classes; also, the diatonic two-row accordion simply can not play the range of keys, notes, and melodies that a fiddler or an orchestra is capable of. This has led to much disdain from trained musicians, who also feel that the accordion and the *conjuntos*, though somewhat limited in range, have taken a lot of work away from them since a popular four-piece *conjunto* can fill a stadium or convention center, while many orchestras are unable to fill a local community center for a dance. Nevertheless the sound of the new Texas-Mexican country accordion music had become enormously popular by the middle of the twentieth century and had reached out beyond the ranches, citrus groves and cotton fields of the border region into the *barrios* of virtually every city throughout Spanish-speaking America. The extraordinary popularity which *conjunto* and Norteño Music have achieved can not be ascribed solely to the accordion-



Narciso Martinez, accordion, with Santiago Almeida, bajo sexto, ca. 1948

ists but is the result of the blending of the best rural voices with the accordion *conjunto*.

The first accordions used in Conjunto Music were one-row button instruments. The two-row model came in by the early 1930s and finally by the 50s the now standard three-row diatonic instrument became the foundation of the *conjunto*. In order to be able to play just about every popular song in every key, most *conjunto* accordionists today carry three accordions with them, each in a different key.

An accordionist by the name of Roberto Rodriguez (note ARH/FL CD/C 7018) was actually the first to make a recording in the *conjunto* style, on June 11, 1930 in San Antonio. The few sides he made however either did not have the sound the public wanted or the 75-cent record price at the start of the Great Depression was too high. For whatever reason, he was apparently not asked to return to the recording studio. The next day however, on June 12th 1930, the same OKeh record company

recorded Bruno Villareal, a blind man who from all accounts played a small piano accordion, and went on to record prolifically over the next several years aided no doubt by the fact that by the mid-1930s, during the depth of the Depression, most record prices had dropped to 35 cents. He is today generally recognized as the first *conjunto* accordionist on records (note Arhoolie/Folklyric CD/C 7001 & 7018). He was billed as "El Azote Del Valle" (the scourge from the valley) on the record labels. ("Valley" refers to the lower Rio Grand Valley, the border region, where all this music originated.) Bruno Villareal's style however was very traditional with almost equal emphasis on melody and bass.

No single accordionist however, was more influential or had a more lasting and widespread impact than Narciso Martínez who began his recording career in October of 1936. He was perhaps not the fastest or most spectacular player, (that honor should probably go to Lolo Cavazos - note ARH/FL CD/C 7018), but Narciso had a solid, rhythmic,

danceable sound which emphasized the treble or melody side of the accordion and left the bass parts almost completely to his *bajo sexto* player. This was to be the *conjunto* accordion sound of the future. Narciso's sound caught on and his style became the role model for just about every *conjunto* accordionist who followed him.

Narciso's early success as an accordionist was perhaps not entirely due to his own fine playing but was enormously helped by his meeting and joining with the remarkable *bajo sexto* player, Santiago Almeida. Born in Skidmore, Texas (near San Antonio), July 25, 1911, Santiago Almeida was playing in the Almeida family orchestra by the time he was 14. The orchestra consisted of clarinet, flute, *bajo sexto* and string bass and was one of many *orquestas típicas* which were supplying the music at social functions of all kinds and they had to be familiar with just about every type of dance tune popular at the time. The tunes in those days were not as simple as they are today, they had more involved

chord changes and modulations which only a musician well-trained in the repertoire could master. Not long after Santiago Almeida met and joined up with Narciso Martinez and began to play dances around Brownsville and Raymondville, a local merchant by the name of Enrique Valentin heard them and persuaded them to go to San Antonio with him where he had contacts with the recording director for the Blue Bird label (an RCA-Victor subsidiary), Eli Oberstein. When their first record was released later that year (1936) the response was amazing and Narciso and Santiago were soon the most popular and well-known dance band, or *conjunto*, in South Texas. Mr. Almeida stayed with Narciso until 1950 when work for the *conjunto* was falling off. He first moved to Indiana but eventually wound up in the state of Washington where he and his family made a living picking apples. Today Santiago Almeida lives in retirement in Sunnyside, Washington and plays guitar on occasion at the local Assembly of God church where he

is a member. He hopes to get a new *bajo sexto* one day and would welcome hearing from old friends and fans. The year 1950 may have been the critical year when Conjunto Music changed from a mainly instrumental dance music to an ensemble which featured duet singers which were soon to become the star attractions.

Narciso Martinez once told me that he felt his lack of singing ability held him back. Perhaps this perceived handicap was actually a blessing since it no doubt contributed to Narciso developing his remarkable talent of mastering a huge repertoire of virtually all regionally popular dance tunes and styles including *polkas*, *redovas*, *shotishes*, *waltzes*, *mazurkas*, *boleros*, *danzones*, and *huapangos*. Narciso learned many of the tunes by having a friend whistle the melody and arrangement, which they had recently heard played by a local orchestra or brass band. While his friend, (who had a good ear to pick up tunes), whistled, Narciso would pick out the notes on the accordion thereby trans-

posing the tune to the accordion. Although Narciso considered himself primarily an accordionist, he did not shy from the task of accompanying singers and he continued to learn the latest popular *rancheras* and the more sophisticated *boleros*.

Narciso Martínez was also fortunate to make his first recordings in the 1930s for a company with not only national but international distribution. Several of his early recordings became very popular outside of his own geographic area and, when retitled, were sold in the company's Polish and folk dance series. According to Mrs. Sanchez, a San Francisco record shop proprietress, Basques, who worked as sheep herders and farmers in California and the West, were her main customers for Narciso Martinez's accordion instrumentals. Many of his records were even pressed and distributed in Mexico, probably to the dismay of the music industry honchos in Mexico City who generally frowned upon this music from El Norte and referred to it in derogatory ways!

Narciso Martínez not only set the standard for instrumental Conjunto Music in the 1930s and 40s, he also helped popularize what was to become known as Norteño Music in the 1950s by accompanying popular singers, usually duos, with his accordion sound. The sound of the duet singers, long a favorite in the region, accompanied by guitars and now backed by the ever more popular accordion, soon became THE stylized popular music of the Southwest.

This collection offers not only many examples of Narciso's delightful and varied repertoire of instrumentals but includes selections illustrating his ability to offer superb accompaniment to several popular singers of the period, especially Carmen & Laura, the Mendoza sisters, and of course their sister, the great lady of song, Lydia Mendoza. (Note ARH/FL CD 7002 by Lydia Mendoza - her first recordings from the 1930s and Arhoolie Cassette 3017 by the Mendoza sisters.) I have tried to select the best and most interesting recordings made by Narciso Martinez during this

period and have consulted with Narciso as to his favorites. He told me he liked them all but wanted to make sure I included two of his favorites: *La Chulada* and *La Desvelada*.

Narciso Martínez was born October 29, 1911, in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, and grew up in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. His early career, which began in 1936 with his first recordings, is the subject of our release Arhoolie/Folklyric 7021. In those days opportunities for touring by regional vernacular artists were extremely limited and only singing stars like the Padilla Sisters and Lydia Mendoza could take advantage of their wide spread popularity which was largely the result of record sales. As the major national record companies dropped regional musics during World War II and as the importation of records from Mexico was made illegal, local labels soon sprang up all over the country to fill the great demand especially from juke box operators whose customers wanted to hear popular songs. They didn't care if the songs were sung by

Mexicans or by homegrown Tejano talent. Texans seemed to prefer their own singers and musicians anyway. When IDEAL records started in 1946, Armando Marroquín, the recording director, hired Narciso Martinez for the label's very first release which is heard on our CD/C 341 - **Tejano Roots**. Mr. Marroquín had used accordionist/neighbor Isaac Figueroa to back his wife and her sister (Carmen & Laura) on their very first discs (one is heard on our CD/C 343 - **Tejano Roots: The Women**) Paco Betancourt, who was the financial driving wheel behind IDEAL, probably contributed to taking on Narciso Martinez because he was already well-known, respected, and a superb and versatile musician.

Narciso Martínez, besides playing and recording with his own *conjunto*, would also record with Beto Villa's Orchestra (note ARH CD/C 364 - **Beto Villa**) and along with Carmen & Laura they toured widely throughout the Southwest playing dances and shows appealing to all classes of Mexican-

Americans. The popularity of their respective recordings had made them "names" and they could demand decent money for their public appearances. The commercial popular music world, even on a regional level, is very competitive and constantly demands new faces and sounds. As more and more *conjuntos* came onto the scene both from the Mexican and the US side of the border, the older musicians were soon pushed aside. By the late 1950s Narciso Martínez had been replaced by Conjunto Bernal, Los Alegres De Terán, Los Donneños, Los Relampagos, and other artists who became well-known and popular mainly because they were good singers as well as good musicians. Narciso continued to play on weekends and for special occasions but increasingly felt forced to turn to non-musical work to earn a living. He worked as a truck driver and in the 1970s became a caretaker at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville. It was during that time that Les Blank and I filmed Narciso for inclusion in our documentary about Texas-Mexican border mu-

sic, **Chulas Fronteras**. Narciso continued to play for parties and special occasions when his peers, who used to dance to his music in the past, would hire him for wedding anniversaries, *quince añeras*, a child's baptism, birthday party or wedding.

In the 1980s Narciso Martínez and his music were finally recognized as unique cultural assets even outside his own community. He was a recipient (in 1983) of the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship Award given by the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C. to traditional musicians of special merit who have made major contributions to our musical heritage. Narciso was also inducted into the Conjunto Music Hall of Fame and was invited several times to appear at the annual Conjunto Festival in San Antonio. In 1989 the predecessor to this release, Folklyric LP/C 9055 earned Narciso Martinez a Grammy nomination. On June 5, 1992, Narciso Martinez died of leukemia in San Benito, Texas, ending a long career of a most remark-

able and influential American folk musician. I hope this recording will help preserve some of the music and spirit of Narciso Martinez for the enjoyment and appreciation of future generations

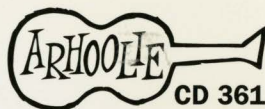
(Chris Strachwitz-1993)

The film *Chulas Fronteras* is available on video tape (BF 101) at better stores or directly from Arhoolie Records for \$30.00 plus \$3 for shipping. For our complete 100-page illustrated catalog with full details about hundreds of CDs, Cassettes, Videos and LPs, send \$2.00 to:

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Over 60 Minutes of Historic TEXAS-MEXICAN MUSIC

1. MUCHACHOS ALEGRES (Polka) (3:05)
2. LA CHULADA (Polka) (2:41)
3. VIDITA MIA (Canción) (2:47)
vocal by Carmen & Laura
4. SALUDAMOS A TEXAS (Polka) (2:23)
5. AMOR DE MADRE (Shottis) (2:25)
6. DEL VALLE A SAN ANTONIO (Polka) (2:21)
7. LUZITA (Mazurka) (2:19)
8. EL LUCERO (Huapango) (2:15)
9. LA ESTRELLITA (Polka) (2:42)
10. MEDALLA DE DIOS (Vals-Ranchera) (3:05)
vocal by Lydia Mendoza
11. FLOR DE MEXICO (Polka) (2:34)
12. SILENCIO DE LA NOCHE (Vals-Bajito) (2:31)
13. MUCHACHA BONITA (Polka) (2:29)
14. ALICE Y SAN DIEGO (Shottis) (2:20)
15. ARRANCAME EL CORAZON (Vals Ranchera)
(2:34) vocal by Juanita & María Mendoza
16. SALVADOR (Vals-Alto) (2:49)
17. PETRITA (Polka) (2:41)
18. PATRICIA (Mazurka) (2:32)
19. MALAGRADECIDA (Ranchera) (2:51)
vocal by Gonzáles & Cantú
20. LOS ARBOLITOS (Redova) (2:34)
21. LA REINA DE SAN BENITO (Polka) (2:18)

22. SI FUE POR ESO (Bolero) (2:39)
vocal by Lydia Mendoza
23. FLORECITA (Polka) (2:30)
24. SIN HABER POR QUE (Ranchera) (2:36)
25. LA DESVELADA (Polka) (2:58)
26. ENAGUAS ALMIDONADAS (Polka) (2:28)

Total time: 69:26

Narciso Martinez is the father of what is today known in South Texas as **Conjunto Music**. He was not the first accordionist in this genre to record, but Narciso's staccato attack and emphasis on the melody leaving the bass parts to his superb *bajo sexto* player Santiago Almeida along with excellent distribution of his records made him the most popular and influential player from the 1930s into the 1950s. Narciso Martinez' sound and repertoire became the role model for almost every *conjunto* accordionist who followed him.

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9629-70361-2