

# ORQUESTAS DE CUERDAS (The String Bands)

"The End of a Tradition" (1926-1938)



1. **EL GATO NEGRO** (*polka*) - **El Ciego Melquiades** (Melquiades Rodríguez) (fiddle; with *bajo sexto* and string bass); San Antonio, Tx. 4/6/1938 (BS022184-1; Bb5188)
2. **SOBRE LAS OLAS** (*Juventino Rosas*) (*vals*) - **Quinteto Típico Mexicano** (mandolin, two violins, guitar, & cello); New York 12/1926 (W95432; Co 2553X)
3. **NO TE RUBORICES** (Perez) (*one-step*) - **Orquesta de la Familia Ramos** (mandolin, mandocello, & guitar?); Chicago, Ill. 8/25/1928 (C-2350; Vo 8196)
4. **LA PALOMA** (*vals*) - **Eulalio Sánchez** (flute) y su **Quinteto Mexicano** (mandolin, two violins, guitar, & bass horn?); San Antonio, Tx. 3/14/1928 (W 400504-C; OK16281)
5. **A MI JUANA** (*canción*) - **Cuarteto Carta Blanca** (The Mendoza Family - vocals with violin, guitar, & triangle); San Antonio, Tx. 3/10/1928 (W400459; OK16278)
6. **EL CHARRO** (*polca*) (Ygnacio Castillo Pérez) - **Quinteto Los Desvelados** (two violins, violin-cello, guitar, & string bass); El Paso, Tx. 7/16/1929 (BVE 55354-2; Vi 46435)
7. **TAMAUPIPECO** (*buapango*) - **Trovadores Tamauilpecos** (vocals with guitars, Carlos Pena-violin); New York 6/1929 (W97261; Co3640x)
8. **AY TE VA DE CANTO** (*vals*) - **El Trio Crudo** (two violins & *bajo sexto*); San Antonio, Tx. 10/1929 (SA-339; Vo 8293)
9. **A LA ORILLA DE UN PALOMAR** (*danzón*) - **Trio Alegre** (mandolin & two guitars); San Antonio, Tx. 6/1930 (W112218-1; Co 4223x)
10. **ANHELANDO** (*vals*) - **Trio Alegre** (mandolin & two guitars); San Antonio, Tx. 6/1930 (W112223-2C; Co 4223x)
11. **LA MAESTRITA** (*polka*) (F. Facio) - **Cuarteto de Cuerdo de F. Facio** (two violins, string bass, & guitar); Chicago, Ill. 10/1930 (C-6450; Vo 8424)
12. **CARIÑO** (*vals*) (Ricardo Valles) - **Cuarteto de Cuerdo de F. Facio** (same as last); Chicago, Ill. 9/1930 (C-6196; Vo 8424)
13. **DE AQUELLA CREÑA** (*polka*) (Lencia Villalobos) - **Trio Alegre** (two violins & guitar); San Antonio, Tx. 8/31/1931 (Br 41385)
14. **EL PODER DEL AMOR** (*vals*) - **Trio Alegre** (two violins & guitar); San Antonio, Tx. 12/2/1932 (Vo 8494)
15. **LA BOLA** (arr. by A.D. Hernández) (*canción*) - **Cuarteto Monterrey** (includes Andres Herrera & Daniel Flores - two voices, mandolin, & two guitars); San Antonio, Tx. 12/5/1932 (SA 2058A; Vo 8470)
16. **PANCHITA** (*canción-vals*) - **Familia Mendoza** (vocals with violin, mandolin, guitar & triangle); San Antonio, Tx. 2/1/1935 (Bb 2347)
17. **JESUSITA EN CHIHUAHUA** (*polka*) - **Quinteto de Los Desvelados** (Alvaro Rivera - director: three violins, guitar, & bass); El Paso, Tx. 8/28/1934 (De 10023)
18. **MAROSOVIA** (*vals*) - **Los Alegres** (pseudonym for Al Hopkins' Buckle Busters: Ed Belcher-fiddle; Frank Wilson-Dobro; Al Hopkins-uke) New York 12/21/1928 (E-28925; Vo 8525)
19. **LA RESPINGONA** (*polka*) - **Santiago Morales** (fiddle with *bajo sexto* and string bass); San Antonio, Tx. 8/22/1935 (SA 2298; Vo 8710)
20. **PORQUE ERES ANSINA** (*polka*) - **Trio Alamo** (two violins & guitar); Dallas, Tx. 2/10/1937 (De 10229)
21. **ANDELE, VAMOS PLATICANDO** (*canción polka*) - **Medina River Boys** (vocal duet with violin, steel guitar, guitar, & string bass); San Antonio, Tx. 3/2/1937 (Bb3041A)
22. **MARIA CHRISTINA** (*mazurka*) - **El Ciego Melquiades** (fiddle with *bajo sexto* & string bass); San Antonio, Tx. 4/6/1938 (BS022181-1; Bb5160A)
23. **JALISCO NUNCA PIERDE** (*one-step*) - **El Ciego Melquiades** (as last); San Antonio, Tx. 4/6/1938 (BS022178-1; Bb5138A)
24. **SE MURIO LA CUCARACHA** (*canción-polka*) - **Lydia Mendoza y grupo** (vocal & 12 string guitar with Maria Mendoza - mandolin, & string bass); San Antonio, Tx. 10/25/1938 (Bb3299)
25. **MONTAÑA** (*two-step*) - **Mariachi Tapatio de Juan Mar-molejo**, Mexico, D.F. ca. 1938 (Bb3323)
26. **NEW SPANISH TWO STEP** (*two-step*) - **Bill Boyd's Cowboy Ramblers** (with Carroll Hubbard & Kenneth Pitts - fiddles); San Antonio, Tx. 10/30/1938 (Bb7921)

# ORQUESTAS DE CUERDAS

The String Bands

The End of a Tradition





# ORQUESTAS DE CUERDAS

(The String Bands)

"The End of a Tradition" (1926-1938)

These recordings hark back to the days when Mexican *orquestas típicas* would supply the music at house dances, ballrooms, country dances, fiestas, saloons, social functions of all kinds, serenade in the streets or in restaurants, or accompany singers who sang popular songs of the day. *Orquestas típicas* came in various sizes, from solo fiddler and small string bands to full orchestras using strings, brass, reeds, and percussion. This CD's companion, **Orquestas Típicas (Pioneer Mexican-American Dance Orchestras** - Arhoolie/Folklyric CD 7017) brings you examples of *orquestas típicas* from early recordings made between 1926 and 1938. This disc concentrates on the generally smaller, perhaps more informal *orquestas de cuerdas*, or string bands, with a mandolin or the violins taking the lead. The accompanying musicians usually play guitar, *bajo sexto* (12-string guitar), violin-cello, and/or string bass which is either plucked or bowed. The music these small orchestras played was remarkably tight and well-arranged. Many of these musi-

cians were well-trained and proud carriers of an age-old tradition. Others were probably self-taught and somewhat rougher.

These Mexican *orquestas de cuerdas* seem to have close ties to string bands from other vernacular traditions heard in the United States, such as the Appalachian old timey country bands, Polish and Ukrainian bands who recorded in New York and Chicago, Cajun string bands of southwest Louisiana, Italian mandolin-led groups, and of course, the Texas and Oklahoma fiddle bands which evolved into Western Swing. These *orquestas de cuerdas*, along with the *orquestas típicas* (a term applicable to all of them) supplied the music for most occasions in those days before the accordion replaced the violin to become the dominant instrument in rural popular music of northern Mexico and the border country. Since the 1940s, *orquestas de cuerdas* have almost completely disappeared, replaced largely by *mariachis* (who have retained the violins), accordion *conjuntos*, *orquestas Tejanas*/

Chicanas, *bandas*, *grupos*, and now a mix of all those, simply called Tejano Music. These *orquestas de cuerdas* were the Tejano music of the 1920s and 30s!

Since pre-Hispanic indigenous people did not have stringed instruments, Mexican string band music evolved from imported Spanish and European instruments along with a wide ranging repertoire which included imported dances and melodies as well as indigenous ones. Over the centuries this music has acquired a distinctly Mexican flavor and the instruments heard here were probably all built in Mexico or on the border, which is a region extending into the US as far inland as Mexican Americans have settled. During the French intervention in Mexico and throughout the long reign of Porfirio Díaz, European cultural influences were felt very strongly. The **polka** apparently arrived in Mexico from France during the middle of the last century and has continued to be the most popular dance ever since. This string band music evolved from the genteel traditions of the upper classes but was picked up by less skilled urban and rural musicians who often heard trained professionals play at special festivities. From the early 1880s until the 1930s *orquestas típicas* and *orquestas*

*de cuerdas* became the popular dance music ensembles for almost every social strata of Mexican and Mexican American society. String band musicians, like the early accordionists who followed them, often learned tunes from popular local or traveling bands and transferred the melodies to their respective instruments.

The European roots of many of these selections seem rather obvious but I am not able to state with any certainty which of these elements arrived via Mexico and which were absorbed directly from the Anglo, Italian, German, Bohemian, and Czech immigrants who settled in Texas and the border region. The compositions are mostly by Mexicans even though European elements are in evidence. I have tried to give a good sampling of the various dances still popular during the 1930s including the ever popular polkas and waltzes, the *danzón*, *huapango*, one-step, two-step, and the mazurka. I have also included some of the most popular tunes of the times, such as "Over The Waves" (Sobre Las Olas), "La Paloma," and "Jesusita En Chihuahua" (known as "Jesse Polka" among Anglos). Here is also one tune by an early *mariachi*, a sound which by the late 1930s was just beginning to gain popularity in the south-



west, but which has since then almost become the national music of Mexico.

There are two selections by Anglo bands (# 18 & 26). "Marosovia" was recorded by an East Coast hillbilly band and re-issued by the record company in their Mexican series where it apparently became a fairly good seller. The tune seems to me to have central European origins and is still popular today among polka bands from the mid-west and Texas. "New Spanish Two Step" is by one of the most popular Western Swing bands of the period and certainly shows the Mexican influence on Anglo music. "Andale, Vamos Platicando," by the Medina River Boys (#21), although sung in Spanish, shows obvious American country music influences on the Mexican musicians, including the name of the band! String band music was the popular music of rural Texas and had great appeal among Mexicans and Anglos alike, not to mention other immigrant groups.

Americo Paredes, author of **With a Pistol in His Hand** and **A Texas-Mexican Cancionero** grew up in the lower Rio Grande Valley and vividly recalls seeing old men serenading in the streets with violins, guitars, and mandolins. A few years ago a woman who was raised in San Antonio but had settled here in the Bay Area,

called me to let me know that El Ciego Melquiades used to be her father's favorite musician at house dances back in Texas. Lydia Mendoza, the first queen of Tejano music, recalls in her autobiography: **Lydia Mendoza—A Family Autobiography** (by Chris Strachwitz & James Nicolopoulos; Arte Publico Press—Houston), how she would listen to small string bands who came to serenade outside a store in the barrio of Monterrey, N.L., where she lived for a few years as a young girl. Lydia played the violin on the early recordings she made with her family (#5, 16, & 24) before she took up the guitar with which she accompanied herself on most of her subsequent recordings. Except for *mariachis* and certain regional Mexican folk traditions from the state of Michoacán and the Huastecan region, the fiddle or violin has faded from the roster of once popular musical instruments. I think of it as "The End of a Tradition," but who knows if Mexican string bands won't make a come back. After all, who would have predicted the incredible popularity in the 1980s and 90s of *banda* music, whose demise had already been considered a *fait accompli* back in the 60s and 70s! If fiddles and mandolins should return to the popular music scene, I'm sure they will be amplified, as the

harp already is in one of the most popular *conjuntos* from Michoacán!

### The Orquestas De Cuerdas:

As in the case of most of the **Orquestas Típicas** who recorded back in the 1920s and 30s, very little is known about the musicians who made these wonderful string band recordings. El Ciego Melquiades was a well-known and popular musician in San Antonio in the 1930s and played many house parties and at saloons. He was probably self taught and also worked as a singer, recording extensively until the late 1940s. Although the accordion was beginning its meteoric climb up the popularity ladder and was beginning to give *orquestas típicas* some competition, especially in northern Mexico and along the border, the decade of the 1930s still saw a number of fiddlers making records in south Texas. These included Santiago Morales, who waxed for a rival firm. His style never seemed to catch the fancy of the record buying public as did that of El Ciego Melquiades. I was told that Sr. Morales, who was billed as "El Ranchero" on his records, was probably a trained musician like many of the violinists heard on these recordings. This, after all, was by and large genteel music with a tradition going back

over a century. Most of the musicians had studied under maestros and were proud to be professionals who played mostly for polite audiences. However, many musicians were not so fortunate to receive training, learned on their own and played for anyone who would pay the piper. They were glad to receive anything, anywhere during the grim days of the Great Depression. By the mid-1930s with the end of prohibition, cantinas and rowdy dance halls were once again in need of lots of musicians to accommodate the great demand of their patrons for lively dance music and songs.

Los Trovadores Tamaulipecos were a very popular group in the early 1930s and made many recordings. They came from the state of Tamaulipas in Mexico which borders on Texas. They possibly started as a group of students, toured widely and were one of the few early groups to get their picture published in **La Prensa**, the Spanish language daily in San Antonio. They were referred to as a "folklore" group at that time and included Lorenzo Barcelata, José Agustín Ramírez, Ernesto Corlazar, and violinist Carlos Peña. The song (#7) tells about a man from the North and the violin is typical of the Huastecan music from that part of Mexico, home of the *huapango*.

Small string quartets and trios were quite popular judging by the number of recordings made by such groups as El Trio Alegre, El Trio Crudo, Trio Alamo, Quarteto Monterrey, and others. It was obviously cheaper to hire a small but tight string trio instead of a large orchestra and note the remarkably full sound of these groups.

The singing and playing of the Medina River Boys is an interesting example of how American hillbilly or country music did impress Mexican-American musicians and how some of them, even in those early days, became very much enamored by their neighbors' sounds. Using the Hawaiian guitar, which had become popular with many southern musicians since they heard traveling Hawaiian troupes beginning in the 1910s, "Andale, Vamos Platicando" (#21), comes out pure South Texas swing! The group's name derives from the Medina river which flows just outside San Antonio.

Cuts 5, 16, & 24 are by the wonderful Mendoza family who made their first recordings as the result of the father by chance seeing a tiny advertisement in **La Prensa** letting po-

tential talent know that the company's representative would be in San Antonio auditioning and recording Mexican musicians. Six years later daughter Lydia became the family's star and eventually the first Queen of Tejano music after she recorded hundreds of songs during a long career which began with her family in 1928 when they recorded "A Mi Juana" and ended in the 1980s when she suffered a stroke which left her unable to play the guitar. "Se Murió La Cucaracha," based on a very old children's game develops into a courting song. When the record was made in 1938, Lydia Mendoza was known as "La Cancionera de los Pobres" (The Songstress of the Poor). Later in the '40s and '50s Lydia was billed as "La Alondra de la Frontera" (The Meadowlark of the Border).

These are just a few audio snapshots from the last decade of the lovely, genteel, and rich String Band tradition which has just about disappeared along the border but which was once an important element in the musical spectrum of Mexican American and Chicano music.

*(Chris Strachwitz 1996)*

*May we suggest for further listening to Mexican string bands:*

- ARH CD 426 - Conjunto Alma De Apatzingán (outstanding harp and fiddle conjunto from Michoacán)  
ARH CD 354 - Conjunto Alma Jarocho (featuring the Veracruz harp)  
ARH CD 431 - Los Caimanes & Los Caporales De Panuco (Huastecan fiddle music with falsetto vocals)  
ARH/FL CD 7011 - Mariachi Coculense de Cirilo Marmolejo (1926-36) (Mexico's Pioneer Mariachis - Vol. 1) includes several cuts from 1908 by Cuarteto Coculense - the very first mariachi to record.  
ARH/FL CD 7012 - Mariachi Tapatío de José Marmolejo (Mexico's Pioneer Mariachis - Vol. 2)  
ARH/FL CD 7015 - Mariachi Vargas De Tecalitlán (Mexico's Pioneer Mariachis - Vol. 3) Their First Recordings 1937-47.

*We also suggest the following books:*

- Manuel Peña: "The Mexican-American Orquesta"; Univ. of Texas Press - late 1996  
Chris Strachwitz & James Nicolopoulos: "Lydia Mendoza - A Family Autobiography"; Arte Publico Press - (available from Arhoolie Records).

---

Re-issue edited and produced by Chris Strachwitz

Cover photo: probably taken at a fiesta in New Mexico, mid 1930s.

Photographer unknown - courtesy The Library of Congress

Cover design and photo tinting by Beth Weil

Original recordings from the collection of Chris Strachwitz

Sound restoration by George Morrow of Echo Productions using the NoNoise System

Discographical details mostly from Dick Spottswood: "Ethnic Music on Records" - Volume 4 - University of Illinois Press

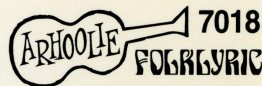
---

*Down Home Music Since 1960: Blues • Cajun • Tex-Mex • Zydeco • Country • Jazz • Regional & World Music*  
For our complete 116-page illustrated catalog of CDs, Cassettes, Videos, & more, send \$2.00 to:  
**ARHOOLIE CATALOG, 10341 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito, CA 94530**



# ORQUESTAS DE CUERDAS (The String Bands)

"The End of a Tradition" (1926-1938)



1. **EL GATO NEGRO** (*polka*) - **El Ciego Melquiades** (Melquiades Rodríguez) (fiddle; with *bajo sexto* and string bass)
2. **SOBRE LAS OLAS** (*Over the Waves*) (*vals*) - **Quinteto Típico Mexicano** (mandolin, two violins, guitar, & cello)
3. **NO TE RUBORICES** (Perez) (*one-step*) - **Orquesta de la Familia Ramos** (mandolin, mandocello, & guitar?)
4. **LA PALOMA** (*vals*) - **Eulalio Sánchez** (flute) y su **Quinteto Mexicano** (mandolin, two violins, guitar, & bass horn?)
5. **A MI JUANA** (*canción*) - **Cuarteto Carta Blanca** (The Mendoza Family - vocals with violin, guitar, & triangle)
6. **EL CHARRO** (*polca*) (Ygnacio Castillo Pérez) - **Quinteto Los Desvelados** (two violins, violin-cello, guitar, & string bass)
7. **TAMAULIPECO** (*huapango*) - **Trovadores Tamaulipecos** (vocals with guitars, Carlos Pena-violin)
8. **AY TE VA DE CANTO** (*vals*) - **El Trio Crudo** (two violins & *bajo sexto*)
9. **A LA ORILLA DE UN PALOMAR** (*danzón*) - **Trio Alegre** (mandolin & two guitars)
10. **ANHELANDO** (*vals*) - **Trio Alegre** (mandolin & two guitars)
11. **LA MAESTRITA** (*polka*) (F. Facio) - **Cuarteto de Cuerdo de F. Facio** (two violins, string bass, & guitar)
12. **CARIÑO** (*vals*) (Ricardo Valles) - **Cuarteto de Cuerdo de F. Facio** (same as last)
13. **DE AQUELLA CREÑA** (*polka*) (Lencha Villalobos) - **Trio Alegre** (two violins & guitar)
14. **EL PODER DEL AMOR** (*vals*) - **Trio Alegre** (two violins & guitar)
15. **LA BOLA** (arr. by A.D. Hernández) (*canción*) - **Cuarteto Monterrey** (includes Andres Herrera & Daniel Flores - two voices, mandolin, & two guitars)
16. **PANCHITA** (*canción-vals*) - **Familia Mendoza** (vocals with violin, mandolin, guitar & triangle)
17. **JESUSITA EN CHIHUAHUA** (*polka*) - **Quinteto de Los Desvelados** (Alvaro Rivera - director: three violins, guitar, & bass)

18. **MAROSOVIA** (*vals*) - **Los Alegres** (pseudonym for Al Hopkins' Buckle Busters: Ed Belcher-fiddle; Frank Wilson-Dobro; Al Hopkins-uke)
19. **LA RESPINGONA** (*polka*) - **Santiago Morales** (fiddle with *bajo sexto* and string bass)
20. **PORQUE ERES ANSINA** (*polka*) - **Trio Alamo** (two violins & guitar)
21. **ANDALE, VAMOS PLATICANDO** (*canción polka*) - **Medina River Boys** (vocal duet with violin, steel guitar, guitar, & string bass)
22. **MARIA CHRISTINA** (*mazurka*) - **El Ciego Melquiades** (fiddle with *bajo sexto* & string bass)
23. **JALISCO NUNCA PIERDE** (*one-step*) - **El Ciego Melquiades** (as last)
24. **SE MURIO LA CUCARACHA** (*canción-polka*) - **Lydia Mendoza** y *grupo* (vocal & 12 string guitar with Maria Mendoza - mandolin, & string bass)
25. **MONTAÑA** (*two-step*) - **Mariachi Tapatio de Juan Marmolejo**
26. **NEW SPANISH TWO STEP** (*two-step*) - **Bill Boyd's Cowboy Ramblers** (with Carroll Hubbard & Kenneth Pitts - fiddles)

Re-issue edited and produced by Chris Strachwitz

Cover photo: probably taken at a fiesta in New Mexico, mid 1930s.

Photographer unknown - courtesy The Library of Congress

Cover design and photo tinting by Beth Weil

Original recordings from the collection of Chris Strachwitz

Sound restoration by George Morrow of Echo Productions using the No Noise System

Discographical details mostly from Dick Spottswood: "Ethnic Music on Records" -

Volume 4 - University of Illinois Press

© & © 1996 by Arhoolie Productions, Inc.

