Produced in collaboration with the Narciso Martínez Cultural Arts Center, with the support of the Harlingen Area Chamber of Commerce

Recorded live at the 1998 16 de Septiembre Conjunto Festival of the Narciso Martínez Cultural Arts Center in San Benito, Texas, these powerful recordings reveal the historical roots of conjunto and show new directions taken by some conjunto bands today. This lively dance music, played by some of conjunto's best-known performers, features accordions, bajo sexto and stirring vocals. 71 minutes, 36 page booklet with English translations of Spanish song texts, photographs, maps.

1  EL BURRO PARDO
   Gilberto Pérez y sus Compadres  2:33

2  LA SICODELICA
   Ernesto Guerra y su Conjunto  2:40

3  EL SINALOENCE
   Mingo Saldivar y sus Tremendos Cuatro Espadas  4:06

4  EL PORRON
   Ricardo Guzmán y Los Tres Aces  1:50

5  BAJO SEXTO Y ACCORDION
   Freddy González y Los Super Unidos  3:27

6  JUAREZ
   Los Brillantes de Martín Zapata  3:38

7  EL CHUECO
   Los Fantasmas del Valle  3:52

8  NOCHE DE AMORES
   Valerio Longoria y su Conjunto  3:44

9  EL SENDERITO
   Amadeo Flores y su Conjunto  2:00

10 MALDITO VICIO
    Joe Ramos y Ellos  3:56

11 ATOTONILCO
    Tony de la Rosa y su Conjunto  4:21

12 CREI
    Freddy González y Los Super Unidos  4:12

13 CALLE DIEZ Y SIETE
    Ernesto Guerra y su Conjunto  3:30

14 BELLAS RECUERDOS
    Los Fantasmas del Valle  4:18

15 SKOKIE
    Amadeo Flores y su Conjunto  3:07

16 TRES FLORES
    Ricardo Guzmán y Los Tres Aces  2:32

17 ARRANCATE
    Conjunto Aztlan  3:21

18 LOS LAURELES
    Los Rieles Express de San Benito  4:07

19 EL COCO RAYADO
    Rubén Vela y su Conjunto  6:24
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RECORDING
by Dan Sheehy, Ethnomusicologist

The last quarter of the 20th century saw Texas-Mexican conjunto music take its place as a major icon of regional American identity. Working-class mexicanos of the Rio Grande Valley played it, wrote new compositions, and danced to its rhythms for a half century before, but the music was little known beyond that region or social group until later. The diversification of popular musical tastes beginning in the 1960s, Chicano activism, outmigration of Tejanos to other parts of the country, and attention from recording companies, the Grammy awards, filmmakers, folk festivals, foundations, and concert venues have taken the conjunto and its music far from South Texas. Heightened cultural self-awareness among Tejano conjunto devotees has sparked events such as the Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center's Conjunto Festival, which showcases the best of the living conjunto heritage. This recording of artists presented by the Center offers an aural "family portrait" across several generations of today's keepers of the conjunto tradition.

TACUACHITO NIGHTS
CONJUNTO MUSIC FROM SOUTH TEXAS
by David Champion, Ramón de León, and Cynthia L. Vidaurre

Social Context of Conjunto Music
On any weekend in communities throughout South Texas, sounds of conjunto music emanate from bars and dance halls such as La Villita, El Flamingo, or Club 77, and community halls of the V.F.W. or Knights of Columbus. This accordion-driven musical tradition originated and survives in a once-isolated area of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, across the river from Mexico. It is known to locals simply as El Valle. Conjunto is a music played at community events which serve to mark rites of passage such as weddings, quinceañeras (female coming-of-age ceremonies), graduation dances, and funerals. "Pay" dances, which are essentially income-generating events, remind and reaffirm for members of the community who they are and from where they came.

For the most part, conjunto music is a private music—heard only by a community of people that share a common history and experiences: This community of mostly Texas Mexican Americans live in a part of the United States that was once occupied by Native Americans, then settled by Spain in the 16th century, and later became Mexico. This historical legacy is palpable, and its influence infuses all the region's culture.

During the early part of the 20th century, South Texas was characterized by the growth of large-
scaled agribusiness. A large army of workers was needed to harvest the region's crops. Most of these workers were Mexican Americans, but there were some African Americans and Anglos. The workers followed the harvest cycles, starting in South Texas and working their way through the fields in the Midwest and beyond. Caravans of workers moved from site to site, setting up temporary homes in migrant labor camps. On Friday and Saturday nights, farm workers would take a few hours to relax and socialize. Conjunto music was an integral part of migrant worker culture. It was an available and affordable entertainment source. This music was the "social glue" of the community and was part of its life cycle.

For some farm workers, musical skills provided a way out of the fields. Many musicians could earn more money playing music than picking cotton, and, of course, the work was not so back-breaking. On a good day, a musician could earn $2.00-4.00 for playing 6-7 hours. Musicians followed the farm workers on their yearly migration. The more developed camps sometimes had areas where dances could be held, but more often music was played in makeshift settings. Dance floors were crafted by packing down earth with a combination of ashes and water. More permanent dance areas called plataformas (platforms) were sometimes constructed by entrepreneurial individuals.

The relationship between farm workers and conjunto music is inextricable. A conjunto band's financial success was greatly dependent on farm workers. As their primary audience, musicians depended on farm workers to pay admissions to dances and purchase recordings with their limited financial resources. National Endowment for the Arts Heritage American Music Tony de la Rosa credited his success to the migrant workers who supported him in good times and in bad. Today, the numbers of migrant workers have greatly diminished, replaced by machine harvesting, but the circuits established by the harvest cycles remain the circuits played by most conjunto groups.

Until recently, this strong connection between conjunto music and audience did not extend to all Mexican Americans. In short, conjunto music was for la gente pobre (poor people), and orchestra was for los jaietones ("high-toned" people, middle class.) It would take a social movement and a demographic shift to reconcile the middle class with this music.

Like other groups in the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican Americans questioned their status as American citizens. The resulting Chicano Movement included diverse issues that affected Mexican Americans throughout the country, such as the Vietnam War, farm worker rights, access to quality education, employment practices, segregation, and access to political and economic structures. Several expressive forms surfaced in this politically active environment. Many of the political and social issues were addressed through theater and music. One of the best known of these artistic venues was Teatro Campesino, which worked with César Chávez and the United Farm Workers' movement. Likewise, conjunto music became transformed into a powerful cultural icon and a tool for creating a collective awareness. Groups such as Beto y los Chocotones, the first conjunto to receive a national music award, brought conjunto music to a new audience.

In the wake of the Chicano Movement, Mexican Americans gained greater access to political, economic, and educational institutions. With their improved socio-economic status, many middle-class Mexican Americans were freer to embrace their cultural traditions publicly.

Evolution of Conjunto Music

The Spanish word conjunto refers to both a musical style and to a group of musicians that play that music. The music is often referred to by various terms including conjunto regional (regional conjunto), música de bajo sexto y acordeon (bajo sexto and accordion music), música tejana (Texas music), and Tejano. This last term should not be confused with the contemporary use of Tejano, which refers to the highly orchestrated Tex-Mex sound currently enjoying great popularity. Conjunto musicians make a point of saying they play the "original Tejano" music. It is also unlike its Mexican counterpart, norteño, which differs in instrumentation and repertoire. It is important to note that corridos (ballads), commonly associated with Mexican traditional music, are not a major part of the conjunto repertoire, although they are sometimes included when set to a polka beat. Some musicians made a point of saying that corridos, especially the more recent narco-corridos that sing praises to 20th-century outlaws, are not what conjuntos sing about, nor do they want to be associated with the themes they portray.

Conjunto has endured changes in instrumentation, but its mainstay is the diatonic button accordion accompanied by the bajo sexto (a double-cased, 12-string bass guitar). Most contemporary conjuntos include a bass guitar and drums, with other instruments occasionally added. The earlier musical groups on ranches and farms consisted of an accordion, guitar, and either a violin, tololoche (contrabass), or tambor de rancho (ranch drum). Sheep and goat skins were used to cover opposite sides of these drums to produce different sounds. The tambora de rancho was eventually replaced by the bajo sexto, and the electric bass has replaced the tololoche.

Conjunto has been influenced by music from many nations. Building on traditions such as the German polka and schottische and Mexican norteño music, Tejano conjunto musicians modified the music into a genre that was regionally distinct and uniquely American. They borrowed selectively from other musical traditions and contributed their own innovations. The accordion was possibly introduced to Mexico by European immigrants in the 19th century. Likewise, various musical styles such as the redowa, schottische, mazurka, and polka were imported from Europe and enjoyed great popularity in northern Mexico. The accordion surfaced in Texas-Mexican music sometime between the 1850s and 1860s.
did not evolve until the 1930s.

South Texas farm workers in the Midwest missed conjunto music. Conjunto musician Amadeo Flores recalls, “Mexicanos in the Midwest went anywhere they could find a polka beat to dance to.” Here they encountered other varieties of polka: German, Polish, Czech, Slovenian. The subtle changes in conjunto music reflect the influences of these excursions. The most dramatic changes occurred in association with World War II, when Valley residents ventured out to other areas of the world in the armed forces.

Other external influences on conjunto include musicians such as Spike Jones, who inspired Tony de la Rosa to incorporate a washboard sound replicated by the snare drums. De la Rosa also took Red Foley’s “Alabama Jubilee” and with Amadeo Flores on bajo sexto created a polka called “El Circo” (The Circus). Ernesto Guerra identifies several tunes, such as “Misty,” “Mexicai Rose,” “Beer Barrel Polka,” and “Lucille,” as some of the many popular tunes that have been converted into danceable conjunto music.

This music is transmitted from teacher to student through one-to-one exchanges in a private setting. Given that sheet music for the button accordion and bajo sexto is still non-existent, this approach continues. Experienced musicians easily integrate another musician’s innovations into their repertoires after hearing them only once.

The introduction of amplification greatly changed conjunto. In the early to mid-1940s musicians such as Tony de la Rosa were using amplifiers for the bajo sexto, bass, and vocals. Conjuntos were now able to play larger dance halls that had previously been orchestra territory. These larger venues provided access to a larger audience and consequently wider exposure.

Most conjunto music is recorded in locally owned recording studios and distributed regionally through “mom-and-pop” retail outlets, and by the musicians themselves during public performances. During the 1930s and early 1940s this music captured the attention of such prestigious recording labels as Columbia, Decca, and RCA Bluebird. This was short-lived, and after World War II the companies did not return. Local entrepreneurs such as Armando Marroquin of 4-deal Records and Armando Ramirez, Sr. of Falcon Records picked up where the major labels left off and continued recording conjunto artists up until the late 1960s. During the early 1990s a few traditional conjuntos such as Los Dos Gilbertos and Gilberto Perez y sus Compadres were recorded by the major labels. Companies such as Sony, Capitol EMI, and Columbia entered the arena—partly in response to the emerging Tejano scene. Like the experience of the 1930s and 1940s, the interest of the large companies was short-lived, and eventually the music was once again relegated to being recorded at the local level. Today only a handful of companies record and distribute this music. It mostly falls to the individual musician to record, promote, and distribute his product.

Bajo sexto has been one of the principal vehicles for disseminating this music to large audiences, having been for years the primary source of entertainment. Pioneering Spanish-language broadcasters such as José Cantú, Martín Rosales, and Jesús “Chuy” de León—"El Galito Madruguador"—achieved great prominence, perhaps even as much as the musicians, despite sporadic and limited programming, in some cases only 2–3 hours a day. In the late 1960s and early 1970s radio stations started broadcasting 24 hours a day in Spanish. The music they programmed was conjunto. Conjunto musicians would perform “live” in the studio as early as 5:00 a.m. Today locally owned radio stations that once programmed strictly conjunto are being absorbed by commercial conglomerates that focus on Tejano music. Conjunto musicians are once again being challenged to create new avenues for getting their music out to the public.

This discussion has focused exclusively on conjunto development in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, but a parallel conjunto development surfaced in the 1930s in San Antonio. Figureheads such as Santiago Jiménez, Sr., father of conjunto artist Flaco Jiménez, and Willie Zimmerer, father of Fred and Henry Zimmerer, founded San Antonio conjunto musicians, were setting the foundations for what would later become a very distinctive sound recognized as “el sonido de San Antonio” (the San Antonio sound). This variety is distinct from Valley conjunto in its faster beat, different accordion technique and style, and the inclusion of many other musical genres, such as Cazun, jazz, and rock and roll. It has yielded a highly stylized, urban sound. Today there are three recognized regional conjunto sounds: the San Antonio sound, “el sonido de Corpus” or the Coastal Bend sound, and the Valley sound.

The modern conjunto builds on the foundation laid by Narciso Martinez and Santiago Almeida. Martinez departed from convention by emphasizing the treble side of the accordion and leaving the bass line to Almeida’s expert bajo playing. The two forever forged the relationship of the accordion and bajo sexto in conjunto. Other musicians subsequently added conjunto’s defining characteristics. Valerio Longoria introduced lyrics through boleros and rancheras. Tony de la Rosa cemented the use of drums and amplification. Conjunto musical is seen as the most consummate and stylized conjunto with its three-part harmonies and dual accordions. Regardless of the influence of outside events, conjunto remains grounded in accordion, bajo sexto, and dance.

**Conjunto as Dance Music**

First and foremost, conjunto is dance music. One musician described the distinction between conjunto and Tejano music as music you dance to as opposed to music you applaud for. Its mainstay are polkas and rancheras (generally Mexican-originated songs with a polka beat) but also includes cumbias, huapangos, redosas, chotis, danzones, and boleros, as can be heard on this recording.

As social institutions, dances change to mirror the changes in communication technology and social
mores. In the late 1920s, when conjunto was beginning to define itself with the likes of Bruno Villaereal, Lolo Cavazos, and Narciso Martinez, the South Texas region was isolated from the rest of American society. Dances were an important part of a community's social life. Baldo Ramirez, a South Texas musician, remembers that weekend dances were spontaneously organized at a ranch or farm or throughout a county or organized system as described by Enrique Vela in an interview. A pattern of gatherings emerged at predetermined ranches and times so that communities had some sense of the pending events. In the South Texas Las Yescas area, local entrepreneur Don1 Indalecio Gonzales regularly scheduled dances called funciones (functions), at which there were a variety of activities. The dance area was the central focus, with small vending booths located around it for the sale of food or curios. Families attended with their daughters, and young men bought small bags of fruits, candies, or decorative dishes at the vending booths, which they then offered to their dance partner's mother. These funciones would last all day and could include horse racing and small-scale gambling. Don Indalecio at times had small hot-air balloons at his funciones. At the end of the evening the balloons were set on fire and released to signal the end of the dance. As these events were for the whole family, a certain "proper" demeanor was expected of the attendees.

Since their beating could be heard for many miles, the tambora de rancho served to announce the funciones. With the coming of automobiles, another advertising approach dominated. The convite, a truck loaded with musicians, drove around the countryside to "invite" people to dances.

Only instrumental music was played at these family funciones. The addition of vocals into family-oriented dances did not occur on a regular basis until the 1950s, because of the perception that singing was associated with "taxi" dances, where women were paid to dance, and with prostitution.

By the 1940s families also attended the pay dances that were becoming more commonplace. Men paid a small admission fee for the privilege of dancing. Since some of these events were still held outdoors, men were given a distintivo, a badge or ribbon, that was worn on the collar identifying them as having paid. It was not until later that women were asked to pay to attend dances. By the 1960s it became more acceptable for single women to attend dances in small groups, but never alone, as their intentions would have been in question.

Once, dancers had to know a great variety of dance steps to demonstrate their prowess. Dance styles have undergone changes, as intricate tunes such as mazurkas, danzones, and tangos have been replaced by the simpler, more dancer-friendly rancheras. By the 1940s a slower, smooth dance style known as el tacuachito (baby opossum) had evolved. Imagine dancers, with little or no space between them, rhythmically plodding to the music, looking much like a baby opossum on its mother's back. This style originated in the pachucos era as a youthful revolution against the established mores of the times. Independent of its counter-culture origins, some musicians argue that the style has persisted as a response to the region's environment. This subtle dance style does not require great amounts of energy—an asset when you're trying to dance in hot, humid weather on a crowded dance floor.

For the musicians, people not dancing is an indication that they are not enjoying the music. Conjuntos will experiment with different tunes to get a sense of what the audience wants to hear. Younger listeners prefer cumbias and polkas, while older folks enjoy dancing to more complicated rhythms. Although waltzes are part of the conjunto repertoire, they are generally reserved for the ceremonial portions of weddings and quinceañera dances. Recently incorporated influences include Cajun, zydeco, country and western, rock and roll, salsa, and Latin jazz. As long as it's danceable, it's allowable.

Conjunto bands also use other devices to keep people dancing. As they introduce a song, the musicians animate the audience with the Spanish equivalent of "shake your bootie," for example, "mover la cadera" (move the hips), "mover el bote" (move the can), or "mover la canasta" (move the basket). Exceptional dancers are recognized by the musicians. Medleys are often played to keep the dance floor full, the idea being that a medley will have something for everybody to enjoy.

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1 In Spanish the honorific "Don" is used with a man's first name as a sign of respect rather than the more formal "Mr."
Accordian classes have become extremely popular at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, Juan Seguin Cultural Arts Center, and the Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center, where they are offered on a regular basis. Master musicians, such as Valero Longoria, Eva Ybarra, Santiago Jimenez Jr., Jose Moreno, Rigo Garza, Rudy Lopez, and Oscar Hernandez serve as teachers and mentors through these courses. To some degree this process helps preserve some of the older music, at least for as long as we have the instructors.

Conjunto music is reaching wider audiences and reconnecting with local communities through festivals. The most important of these is the Tejano Conjunto Festival that takes place every May in San Antonio, Texas. For the past 18 years this event has been sponsored by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. Festival founder and organizer Juan Tejeda is credited with bringing this music out of relative obscurity even in its own regional setting. The festival now attracts an international audience and has included conjuntos from Japan and Europe.

Other venues provide opportunities for a larger audience to experience this music that they otherwise would not hear easily. Conjunto has been heard in the Washington, D.C., area at The Barns at Wolf Trap and several Smithsonian Folklife Festivals. Cultural exchange programs have taken conjunto to various places throughout the world including Russia, Europe, Japan, and the Middle East.

Other preservation efforts are also being made, such as the joint presentation of Conjunto Heritage Tapes recordings and tapes from the earlier period. These efforts have been successful in preserving and showcasing the music and culture of the conjunto community.

Conjunto has endured many obstacles and attempts to change it. It continues to be a living music for people in the community. Traditional conjunto music must remain for the most part relatively untouched by mainstream American popular culture for it to retain its sincerity, beauty, charm, and, above all, its true meaning, music for the people—music for dancing: música para la gente—música para bailar.
Roan Donkey

[Here it goes, Imelda]

With the clothes you put on
And you see that you are much younger
I become jealous and I begin to think.
"Perhaps now I am too old
And you are going to replace me for another,
Another dummy to take my place."

For some while I've wanted to tell you something
Even though it is certain that because
of grey hair I am dull.

This old donkey never brayed
(2nd never gives up)
You just load this dull donkey.

[Let's give it gas on the way down.]" I do not know where you got the idea
That I look like a roan donkey.
In the end you'll see.
I just want you to know
That age does not matter.
I can pull your cart and many more.

1 EL BURRO PARDO (canción ranchera)
Gilberto Pérez y sus Compadres
Gilberto Pérez, Sr.: accordion; Gilberto Pérez, Jr.: bajo sexto, vocals; José "Pepe" Maldonado: bass guitar, vocals; Javier Pérez: drums; Cande Aguilar, Sr.: vocals; Fred Saenz: M.C.

"Burro Pardo" is a play on words comparing a long-time lover to a tired old donkey. The greyish-red donkey, the burro pardo, is likened to the greyling man in this relationship. The easy-flowing style makes this an excellent dance tune and allows dancers to exert a minimum amount of energy. The bajo sexto is very tight and steady throughout, and the voices and lyrics are sublimated and almost inconsequential to the dance music.

2 LA SICODELICA (polka)
Ernesto Guerra y su Conjunto
Ernesto Guerra: accordion, vocals; Tony "El Hormigón" Torres: bajo sexto, vocals; Mel "El Unico" Villarreal: balas guitar, vocals; Gilberto Smith, Jr.: drums

This original Ernesto Guerra polka contains a prime example of an accordion riff modified for the three-row button accordion by Guerra known as "El Jorgoneo" (gurgle). The riff consists of rapid in-and-out movement of the bellows to create a gurgling sound. The riff has become popular with accordionists who can master it. Guerra uses a lot of full chords in his music, a deviation from the conjunto tradition.

3 EL SINALONENSE (cumbia)
Mingo Saldivar y sus Tremendos Cuatro Espadas
Domingo "Mingo" Saldivar: accordion, vocals; Alex Delgado: bajo sexto; Frank Salazar: bass guitar, vocals; Jesse "El Chivo" Garza: vocalist; Ruben Mendoza: drums

This cumbia demonstrates how much conjunto has changed from its early days. Besides being an atypical tune for the traditionalist, it allows the bajo sexto great liberties in taking the lead. This uniquely urban, San Antonio, "Mingo" style also includes some lyrics in English, which fits his urban and bilingual personality perfectly. Mingo's performance is the incarnation of "feeling the music." Mingo gets into his music so much that he plays notes that "just feel right" but can never be duplicated for recordings.
The Sinaloan

A y Ay, Ay, Oh my God (4 times)

From Navolato I come

They say I was born in El Roble.

They say I am a teamster

Because I whistled and they stop.

Their hats are loosened

Now see how they stop.

Ay, Ay, Ay, Oh my God

Oh my goodness how drunk I come

Let the drum follow me.

Let them play “El Quejte”

And then “El Niño Perdido”

And finally “El Torito”

See how I show off.

Ay, Ay, Ay, Oh my God (2 times)

[That bass, let it be heard, Alejandra]

[Enjoy it, my dark one]

From the county of Novolato

Mexico down in Sinaloa

I’m a cowboy, a cattle driver

Made from good stock and real strong fiber

And in good times, also bad times

Always been a strong survivor.

4 EL PORRÓN (redowa)

Ricardo Guzmán Sr.: accordion, vocals; Juan Ricardo Guzmán Jr.: bajo sexto, vocals; Carlos González: bass guitar, vocals; Higinio Guzmán: vocals; Juan Ricardo Guzmán Ill: drums

This redowa, by Premont, Texas, native Juan López, is representative of the music that dominated the era prior to the 1950s. After World War II conjunto music began a transition that included many more vocals in the form of rancheras set to a conjunto polka rhythm for easier dancing. It is ironic that as conjunto music became more urban, it became increasingly referred to as “ranchera,” a word alluding to ranches and rural life. López is known as “El Rey de la Redoxa” (the King of Redoxa).

5 BAJO SEXTO Y ACCORDION (canción ranchera)

Freddy González y Los Super Unidos

Hipólito “Polo” Contreras, Sr.: accordion, vocals; Freddy González: bajo sexto, vocals; Antonio González, Jr.: bass guitar, vocals; Marcelino González: drums

This ranchera pays homage to conjunto’s signature instruments and the talented individuals who play the music. Without a bajo sexto and an accordion it’s simply not conjunto. The composer speaks of menudo, a regional food that is believed to be good for curing hangovers. Some South Texas bars serve menudo at closing time, hoping to save their customers from the consequences of the evening. The composer reminds musicians that it is their obligation to the community to continue playing this music.

Bajo Sexto and Accordion

So much local talent

Also international

We bring you the message

In a very special form.

We sing our songs

With a lot of heart

It is Tejano music

Bajo sexto and accordion.

The colleagues from that time

Left us a goal

To bring happiness with our music

For our Mixteca race.

From the Pacific to the Gulf

An old accordion is heard

That touches your emotions

And makes your heart beat.

How beautiful are our people

Because they are hard workers

Our music is more beautiful

When it’s heard with a drum.

What a great combination

Let’s lower the high-pitch sounds

Together with my compadre’s bass

Like menudo for someone with a hangover.

That is the way to combine a group

Also with inspiration

The scouoge of my Texas—

Bajo sexto and accordion.

(Verse 4 repeats)
6 JUÁREZ (danzón)
Los Brillantes de Martín Zapata
Martin “El Ace” Zapata: accordion, vocals; Héctor Xavier Guajardo: bajo sexto; José Olalde: bass guitar; Pedro Saldaña: drums, vocals

“Juárez” is one of the most popular of the Mexican danzones. This piece refers to the famed Benito Juárez (president of Mexico on and off from 1855 to 1872. Originally of Cuban origin, the danzón became quite popular in Veracruz and Mexico City during the “danzón fever” of the 1920s–1940s. Danzones did not become popular with conjuntos until the 1950s, when conjunto moved from the fields into pay dance halls. Danzones are requested by more experienced dancers.

Juárez
Juárez should not have died,
Oh should not have died!
Juárez should not have died,
Oh should not have died!
Because if Juárez, had not died...

7 EL CHUECO (polka)
Los Fantasmas del Valle
Mike González: accordion; Julián Figueroa: bajo sexto; vocals; Héctor Barrón: bass guitar, vocals; Cruz González: drums

At age 17 months, composer Ben Valdés was struck with polio. As a young child he sat at the window watching his friends play. Unable to participate in these childhood activities he channeled his energies into music. Valdés is known to his friends as “El Chueco,” a name that originated with his mother’s term of endearment, “Mi Chueco” (My Crooked One).

8 NOCHE DE AMORES (canción ranchera)
Valerio Longoria y su Conjunto
Valerio Longoria, Sr.: accordion, vocals; Valerio Longoria, Jr.: bajo sexto, vocals; Flavio Longoria: bass guitar, vocals; Pedro López: drums

“Noche de Amores” contains a “Valerioism”—accordion riffs recognized as Valerio Longoria Sr.’s signature. They consist of runs on the scales with portions repeated in what sounds like they are sustained too long but then fall into the next verse. Longoria is a stylistically unique and innovative conjunto performer. He began breaking with tradition by standing during performances, singing boleros as a conjunto standard, singing and accompanying himself simultaneously, and using conga drums. He is known as the granddaddy of modern conjunto, a title that seems odd for someone who is constantly freshening up his music. After 60 years of playing, Valerio continues to find new ways to approach conjunto, including listening to short-wave radio from
Columbia and other Latin American countries for new material.

Night of Lovers
My life's illusion has ended
My reason to live has died
Sadness dominates my life
To my life, my love I hindered.
I pass the nights mourning
And crying, crying for you
Waiting for you to return to me
Perhaps you do not even remember me.

Don't leave me, my love, I beg you
Don't leave, don't make me suffer
Now remember the nights of love
And the love you gave me and I gave you.

9 EL SENDERITO (chotis)
Amadeo Flores y su Conjunto
Amadeo Flores: accordion; Juan Antonio "Tony" Tapia: bajo sexto, vocals; José "Pepa" Maldonado: bass guitar, vocals; Jesús Godines, Jr.: drums

Narciso Martínez composed this tune in the 1930s. Schottische was one of the most popular dance styles prior to the introduction of the canción ranchera. Schottische dance steps are intricate and not for the uninitiated. Social dance contestants had to master several varieties of danceable tunes, and schottishes were often used as tie-breakers. Today when these tunes are played, younger audiences watch grey-haired dancers strut their stuff.

10 MALDITO VICIO (canción ranchera)
Joe Ramos y Ellos
Ning: Martínez: accordion; Joe Ramos: accordion, vocals; Fito Valle: bajo sexto, vocals; David Hinojosa: bass guitar; Bejo Martínez: vocalist; Ray Garcia: drums

This ranchera alternates between a ranchera tempo and a valsada or waltz tempo. Joe Ramos y Ellos commonly employ two accordions and three singers, reflecting a 1960s conjunto style that flourished due to the influence of Conjunto Hall of Famer Paulino Bernal. The slower tempo specifically emphasizes the vocals. This group is popular partially because they emphasize romantic tunes that captivate audiences.

Damned Vice
Drink and more drink, that is my life
Damned vice I cannot leave you.
Between drinks, I want more served to me
Because drunk I want to ramble.
I'm a drunk and I want more served to me.
Now more than ever I want to drown myself in liquor.
This vice has dragged down my life
And all for this vain women
That I have loved so much.
Damned vice! You are killing me!
You are taking me away! Just like her!
Just like her! You are taking me to my destruction.
13 CALLE DIEZ Y SIETE (huapango)
Ernesto Guerra y su Conjunto
(see track 2 for instrumentation)
Huapangos originate in the Huasteca region, in
the northeast of Mexico. During the 1930s
-1950s they moved from being a folk genre to
become part of the urban, commercial regional
music that was being played by other ensembles
like mariachis and conjuntos. Each of these
types of musical ensembles stamped its distinc-
tive rhythm on their variety of huapango. Of all
the older genres overshadowed by the polka
rhythm, huapango maintains a significant degree
of popularity. Perhaps this is because there is
great leeway in how they are danced. Teenagers
dance them like a country-western line dance,
and more sophisticated dancers execute compli-
cated-dance steps.

14 BELLOS RECUERDOS (canción ranchera)
Los Fantasmas del Valle
(see track 7 for instrumentation)
This Mercedes, Texas, band plays a great
ranchera with a tempo that typifies the fuauchi-
to dance style. The lyrics detail the experiences
of most Valley residents over the age of 50. This
prolific composer commonly draws from his
experiences in and observations of the Valley. In
"Bellos Recuerdos," Los Fantasmas sing about
nostalgic recollections of a childhood in the cot-
ton fields. Even though these were very trying
times, what remains are fond memories.

Beautiful Memories
I still remember the 40s
When I picked cotton with my parents.
I woke up very early in the morning
To go early to the fields.
With the morning dew
The first weigh-in was the best.
And together we picked three bales
By the time the sun got hot.
I was only six years old
And I could not drag the sack.
But I wanted to help my parents
With a little sack I would pick.
At exactly twelve, my mother would say
Come, my children, let's eat.
Under the truck we'd all eat
Refried beans, potatoes, and coffee.
There in Chapell we picked
Then we went to Robstown.
There in Corpus Christi we tried
Our first hamburger with 7-Up.
From those barracks after dinner
We'd all come out to rest.
Some talked and others sang
With an old bajo just to have some fun.
(verses 4,5,6 repeated)
One day my father and I went to town
We were happy, me and my dad.
With a quarter we went to the movies
And we even brought back some popcorn for mom.
Now I am alone, my parents have gone, but I have them in my heart. The sun and the moon have been witness to when we worked picking cotton. The years of the '40s were the golden age. How I miss them, I want to cry. I am left only with beautiful memories of those moments that will not return.

15 SKOKIE (polka)
Amadeo Flores y su Conjunto
(see track 9 for instrumentation)

This conjunto "dream team" was brought together especially for the 1998 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Amadeo Flores has played bajo sexto and accordion for 50 years with some of the top conjuntos and been a leader of his own band. He is credited with creating bajo sexto riffs that are still used by musicians today. Tony Tapia comes from the musical family of Feliciano Tapia and began his professional career at age five. He is also the leader and accordionist of his own group. Pepe Maldonado has been playing for 40 years as an accordionista and band leader. Jesús Godines is the baby of the group with only 25 years experience. Though not apparent in this tune, each musician defer to the others and often changes instruments in order to get the best possible performance. Composed by Amadeo Flores, this polka is in honor of Skokie, a Chicago suburb, where he found himself on an extended three-year musical tour during the early 1960s. Flores uses chord progressions that offer a fuller style—distinct from the staccato sound of "El Checo," which demonstrates an individual button technique. This is representative of the 1960s conjunto style typified by Conjunto Bernal.

16 TRES FLORES (canción ranchera)
Ricardo Guzmán y Los Tres Aces
(see track 4 for instrumentation)

Tres Flores is an excellent example of the bajo sexto setting the beat for easy dancing. The rhythm lends itself to a taquichito style, and with a slight variation it can be danced with partners standing side by side, as they move forward in large circular motions. The woman is twisted around embellishing the dance as the man keeps a steady tempo in his forward motion. A similar analogy can be made between this dance and a tango relationship and that of the accordion to the bajo sexto. As the bajo sexto keeps the steady tempo, the accordion embellishes the tune with riff flourishes.

Three Flowers
Of three flowers that I cut in the morning
One of them had a bud,
I adore you like the most beautiful angel
Today, I live sadly impassioned for your love.
I've told you, I don't want, I can't
Live without your gaze.
What I want is to see you stabbed to death
Before seeing you in the arms of another traitor.

17 ARRANCATE (redova)
Conjunto Aztlán
Juan Tejeda: accordion; José Flores Peregrino: bajo sexto, vocals; Armando Tejeda: bass guitar, vocals; Darío Mendoza: percussion; Clemericio Zapata: drums

Redows such as "Arrancate" are associated with a very stylish dance. In a recent renewal of dance contests held at Narciso Martínez Cultural Arts Center, the elegant redova was the highlight of the evening. All the members of this San Antonio and Austin-based conjunto are college-educated, and José Flores Peregrino is an English literature professor. This group is known for their excellent renditions of traditional tunes and their progressive original compositions. Here they perform a conjunto standard by Valerio Longoria.

18 LOS LAURELES (canción ranchera)
Los Rieles Express de San Benito
Adrián Jackson Becerra: accordion; Rolando Becerra, Sr.: bajo sexto, vocals; Rodolfo Becerra: bass guitar; Rolando Becerra, Jr.: drums; Martín Sánchez: vocalist

Adapted to a ranchera beat, this traditional mariachi tune is now a conjunto standard. Like many other conjuntos, Los Rieles are a family-based group. Family conjuntos facilitate the transmission of this musical tradition from generation to generation. The accordionist, 16-year-old Adrián Jackson, recently replaced his uncle. He became interested in conjunto after he dreamt that Narciso Martínez spoke to him of the music. Jackson states, "We got the feeling of the music. The more we play it, the more we like it. You feel it in your heart—you can't just sit there and listen to this music."
The Laurels

Oh how green the laurels are!
What blazing flowers!
If you're thinking of leaving me
Better to take away my life.
Lift up your eyes to see me
If you are not betrothed.

You are a Castilian rose
Seen only in May,
I'd like to invite you
But in truth I do not know.
If there is one to prevent it
Better that I should leave.
[Up with San Benito!]
[And throw on firewood!]

You are a cotton plant
That resides in the bud.
How it grieves me so
To see you filled with pride
Upon seeing my heart
Entangled with yours.
So goes the farewell
Little one, for your affections.
The ruin of men
Are the blessed women;
And here we stop singing
The verses of the laurels.

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Related Materials

Selected Readings


TAQUAGNITO NIGHTS

ABOUT THIS COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

This project grew out of a partnership developed for a Smithsonian Folklife Festival program on culture and environment in the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo Basin. The Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage initially approached the Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center in San Benito, Texas, to conduct field research on regional music for the Festival program. During the past year and a half, the two centers shared resources, ideas, and information that allowed us to present conjunto music at the 1998 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, record the Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center's Conjunto Festival, interview musicians, and produce this recording. This collaborative relationship is based on mutual objectives, respect for the tradition bearers, and a sense of responsibility to preserve and present this music.

This recording captures a unique moment in conjunto musical history. We were fortunate to have all of these artists together at one place and time, and even more fortunate to have them share their music with us. They represent a broad overview of regional conjunto music and hundreds of years of combined musical experience. In this recording you will hear music as it is played before a local audience in a local setting.

TECHNICAL PRODUCTION

After it was decided that Smithsonian Folkways Recordings would record the 7th Annual de Septiembre Conjunto Festival in San Benito, Texas, arrangements were made for shipping equipment. I spoke with David Champion, Director of the Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center, and with Robert Richie of the Sound Advice Sound Company to learn what the stage and sound system set-up would be. The recording system consisted of a microphone splitter, a Mackie 8 bus 24-channel mixing console, 16 channels of Tascam DA 38 digital multitrack, a DAT recorder for a reference mix, and near field monitor speakers.

The morning I was scheduled to fly to Harlingen (by way of Houston) was the day after tropical storm Francis let go of its tenacious grip on the Gulf of Mexico and decided to move across Texas. I called the airline to find, surprisingly, that the Houston International Airport was open for business as usual. As we landed in Houston, I could see highways submerged in water nearby. However, I walked off the plane and within an hour was airborne bound for Harlingen. Olivia Cadaval and Cynthia Vidalauri, “las señoritas del huracan,” picked me up at the airport and off we went. The next morning we went to prepare for the two-day event. The stage consisted of a covered flatbed semi-trailer with a 4"-deep extension in front of it set up at Veteran's Park at the end of Rowson Street in San Benito. Mr. Paul Gonzalez was most generous in allowing me to set up a control room in one of the offices of his insurance company. Cynthia and Olivia set up an interview room in the reception area of Paul's office, where they recorded oral histories of
the performers. Microphones were split at the stage separating the recording “studio” from the public address system, but giving each the exact same inputs to work with. No additional microphones were used on the bands. I did bring a “terminator,” which is an instrument cord with built-in electronics, and a power supply which matches the impedance of single-coil instrument pickups to the impedance of instrument amplifiers. This device, developed by Tom Wright of Atlanta, does a great job of helping to eliminate hums and buzzes among other things. All but a couple of the bajo sexto players were willing to use this cord. A couple of microphones were set up to record audience response. This was done with limited success; since I did not use shotgun-type mics, there was considerable “wash” from the sound system into these mics, and the audience stuck to the shady side of the street during the hot daylight hours.

For the next two days the tapes rolled. Everything you hear on this CD is live. There were no second takes and certainly no overdubs. This festival is produced by people in San Benito for the people of San Benito and its surroundings. I hope that local feeling is preserved in these recordings.

We were very fortunate indeed to have had such a wonderful experience, as the weather decided to cooperate for two days. I also feel personally fortunate to have been introduced to the Frito pie, a culinary delight to which I had never before been exposed.

After a preliminary list of selections was made from approximately 17 hours of performances, I mixed the tracks to a 24-bit format using a Ramsa DA 7 digital mixer. The only outboard gear I used here was my Sony R 7 digital reverb unit to add some depth to vocals and accordions. The format I mixed to was an additional Tascam DA 38 connected to a Rane PaqRat. The PaqRat is a bit splitter which allows four tracks on the DA 38 to be used for two stereo tracks but at 24 bit. The 24 bit quantization rate gives better resolution to the sound than 16 bit mixes to DAT.

Editing and mastering were done on a Sonic Solutions workstation with outboard Weiss Equalizer and Limiter/Compressor. The sound was then dithered to 16 bit CD standard.

The selections on this CD were made not only on the basis of quality of sound and performance, but also on the basis of the significance of the music to the people of the Rio Grande Valley as well as how infrequently these songs have been recorded.

We hope you will enjoy!

Cynthia Vidaurri
Pete Reiniger
Co-producers
Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage,
Smithsonian Institution

ABOUT THE NOTE WRITERS

David Champion Jr. lives in Mercedes, Texas, and is the Director of the Narciso Martínez Cultural Arts Center. He is an avid aficionado and plays the accordion and bajo sexto guitar. He is an organizer of community cultural events that showcase this particular music. Champion has conducted field research for the Smithsonian Institution and has presented this art form in Washington, D.C., during the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Ramón de León lives in Harlingen, Texas, where he operates a private dental practice. He is Chair of the Board of Directors of the Narciso Martínez Cultural Arts Center. He has been involved in the music almost all of his life—either by teaching button accordion or the dances that are associated with this music. He is also an amateur historian and ethnomusicologist and has conducted field research for the Smithsonian Institution. He has produced several video works showcasing conjunto legend pioneers.

Cynthia Vidaurri is a South Texas folklorist and coordinator of the Latino Cultural Resource Network of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. She is co-producer of this recording and co-curator of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival program, “Culture and Environment in the Rio Grande /Rio Bravo Basin.”
ABOUT THE NARCISO MARTINEZ CULTURAL ARTS CENTER

The Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center was established in October 1991 as a community-based center dedicated to preservation, promotion, and development of the rich cultural heritage of the Texas Mexican community. Since 1992, the Center has produced an annual Diez y seis de Septiembre Conjunto Festival that features live performances by Texas Mexican conjuntos. The groups performing at the 1998 Festival include musical luminaries who have been instrumental in defining this musical genre and continue to perform the music in its most traditional form.

The Center is named after Narciso Martinez, "El Huracan del Valle," who lived most of his life in La Paloma (near San Benito), Texas. For 64 years he played the accordion up until his death on June 5, 1992. As "the father of modern conjunto music" he played a major role in the region's cultural landscape. He was inducted into the Conjunto Hall of Fame in San Antonio, Texas, and received the National Heritage Award from the National Endowment of the Arts in Washington, D.C. We are honored to name the Center for a man who generously shared his musical talents and Texas-Mexico border experiences.

Call us at 956/361-0110 for more information about the Center or visit us in San Benito.
ENJOY IT LIVE

To enjoy this music in its natural setting, visit the Lower Rio Grande Valley. There you can experience the region's rich history, diverse cultures, and tropical beauty first-hand and savor mouth-watering regional specialties such as pan dulce, menudo, barbacoa, and fajitas. Take your appetite and your dancing shoes and enjoy the sights, sounds, scents, and scenes of deep South Texas. For information on how to get there, what to see and do, where to stay, and other information contact: The Harlingen Area Chamber of Commerce. Visit their Web site at http://www.harlingen.com/, or call toll-free (from U.S.A. and Canada), 1-800-531-7346.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Support for this project was provided by the Harlingen Area Chamber of Commerce. Additional funding was provided by Smithsonian Folklife Records and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage as part of the "Rio Grande/Rio Bravo Basin" program for the 2000 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.
This recording is the result of support and assistance from many people who gave generously to this project. We are especially grateful to the musicians who performed at the Conunto Festival and graciously shared their music with us. We extend special gratitude to the NMCAC volunteer staff: Rogelio and Elma Nuñez, Ray Avila and family, Joe and Alicia Villarreal, Cheto and Raquel Villarreal, Mary Lou Garcia, John Flores, Janie Claudio, Melissa Champion, and many more too numerous to mention. We also want to thank: Dorothy Garza, Levi Strauss; Paul González, Paul González Insurance; Omar Guevera, La Guineta Hotel; Richard Kurin, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage; Cheryl LaBerge, Harlingen Chamber of Commerce; Christine Ortega and staff at Southwest Airlines Marketing-San Antonio, Texas; Robert Richie, Sound Advice Production; Fred and Lupe Saenz; and The South Texas Conunto Association. Special thanks to Olivia Cadaval and Nancy Groce who served on our advisory committee. We want to thank Greg Lukens for technical support.

ABOUT SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS
Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print. The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Moses Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are available on high-quality audio cassettes or by special order on CD. Each recording is packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.
Smithsonian Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes and recordings to accompany published books, and other educational projects.
The Smithsonian Folkways, Folkways, Cook, Parendon, Dyer-Bennet, Fast Folk, and Monitor record labels are administered by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. They are one of the means through which the Center supports the work of traditional artists and expresses its commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.
You can find Smithsonian Folkways Recordings at your local record store. Smithsonian Folkways, Folkways, Cook, Parendon, and Dyer-Bennet recordings are all available through:
Smithsonian Folkways Mail Order 955 L’Enfant Plaza, Suite 7300, Washington, DC 20560-0953 phone (202) 287-7298 fax (202) 287-7299 orders only 1 (800) 410-9815 (Discover, MasterCard, Visa, and American Express accepted)
For further information about all the labels distributed through the Center, please consult our Internet site (www.si.edu/folkways), which includes information about recent releases, our catalogue, and a database of the approximately 35,000 tracks from the more than 2,300 available recordings (click on database search).
Or request a printed catalogue by writing to: Catalogue, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 955 L’Enfant Plaza, SW, Suite 7300, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560-0953, USA. Or use our catalogue request phone: (202) 287-3262, or e-mail folkways@aol.com