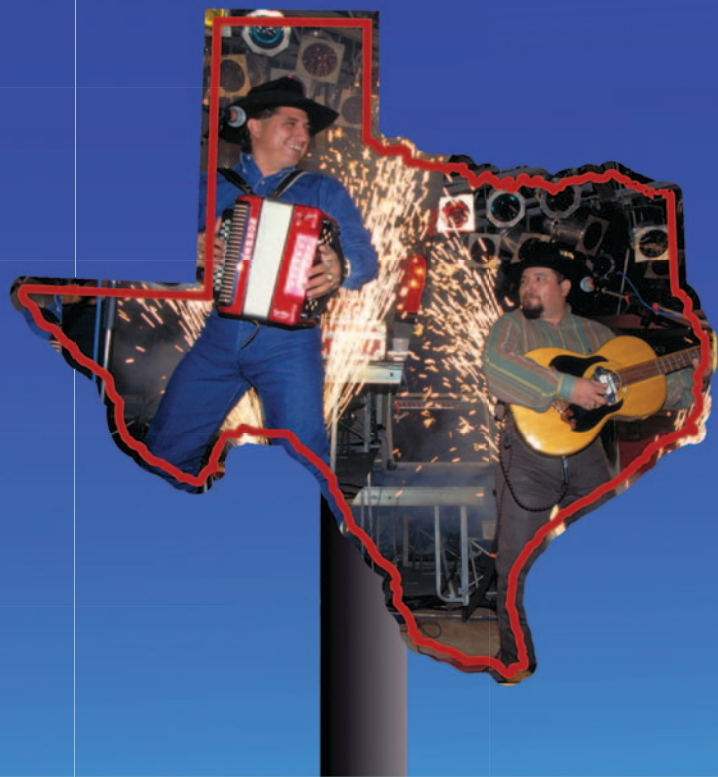


RIDING THE WAVES of TEJANO

BY CHERIE YURCO

■ Tejano is simply the Spanish word for Texan, but the music genre that goes by that name is a joyful and dynamic blend of cultures that has enjoyed several waves of popularity in the past half-century. According to Ramiro Burr, author of *The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Regional Mexican Music*, the world capital of Tejano is San Antonio, Texas. One of the best times to experience this genre is during Fiesta San Antonio, held annually during the last 10 days of April.



FUSION WITH ORQUESTA

Tejano evolved from conjunto, a genre that developed in the countryside near the Texas/Mexico border and combined traditional Mexican instruments and rhythms, with polka influences and accordions that arrived from Europe. Tejano has some of the same influences, but is a modernized, often electrified, dance music.

Isidro “El Indio” López is regarded as the father of Tejano, because he first blended accordion-based conjunto with big band orquesta music popular in the mid-1950s. Born in Bishop, Texas, to a family of farmworkers, López listened to conjunto, norteño, and country music while working the fields. He played guitar and learned saxophone in high school. By age 17, he was playing and recording with top area bandleaders. He began singing after filling in for a vocalist who failed to show up for a recording session.

Twenty-seven-year-old López started his own Isidro Lopez Orchestra in 1956. He recorded with conjuntos and a mariachi, creating a sound he called Texachi. Later, he incorporated two accordions into this orchestra and fused the rhythms of early rock into a Tex-Mex blend that attracted fans of both orquesta and conjunto.

THE FIRST GOLDEN AGE

“The young Tejano sound would arrive as the rock ‘n’ roll of a generation of Mexican-American kids,” explains Burr in his book. In those early days the music was called “música alegre,” and later “la onda Chicana” and “Tex-Mex funk.” (The name Tejano didn’t come into common usage until the Tejano Awards were established in the 1980s.)

The first generation of orquesta Tejano gradually evolved into smaller groups with horn sections, and by the 1960s took on early rock ‘n’ roll influences. The first Tejano hits—Sunny Ozuna’s “Talk to Me,” which reached number 11 on Billboard’s Hot 100, and Freddie Martínez’s “Te Traigo Estas Flores”—were released in that era.

Tejano entered what Burr calls its first “golden age” in the early 1970s, when it was played on radio stations and recorded by many independent labels. Little Joe, from Temple, Texas, was the top Tejano act of the decade. He started out following the rock ‘n’ roll movement as Little Joe and the Latinaires, and ultimately, influenced by the activist movement of the times, updated his tunes, expanded his band with percussion and drums, and eventually became Little Joe y La Familia. In 1976, he recorded the Mexican standard, “Las Nubes,” which became the anthem of Tejano music, and is still a popular tune today. By the late ’70s, newer, flashier

genres like disco emerged and Tejano started to seem stale and dated.

THE SECOND WAVE

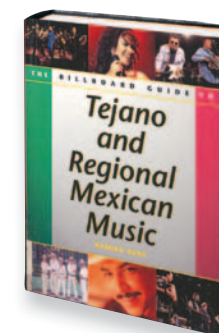
In the ’80s, a new wave of Tejano bands—La Sombra Mazz, Patsy Torres, and La Mafia—adopted flashier shows and outfits to stage a Tejano comeback. San Antonio became the official center for the genre when the Tejano Music Awards and Tejano Conjunto Festival were established early in the decade. Multi-million dollar clubs featuring live Tejano soon opened in the city.

In 1986, just as the country entered an era of political correctness celebrating diversity, Little Joe y La Familia became the first Tejano act signed to a major label. “Music reflects the time it is in,” says Burr. “All of a sudden it was cool for Latinos to bring their ethnicity out of the closet.”

As the genre grew, it diversified into subgenres like Tejano pop, Tejano rap, Tejano R&B, and Tejano country. “Each subgenre took the bare essentials from polka/ranchera repertoire and injected mainstream influences into their music,” explains Burr.

In the mid-1990s Tejano was almost at its peak with acts like Selena, La Mafia, Mazz, and Emilio selling more than 300,000 albums. Then, in 1995, Selena, the unofficial princess of the genre, was shot and killed in Corpus Christi, and the media blitz and movie that followed boosted interest in Tejano music for the next 18 months. But after 1997, the Tejano market flattened and returned to its smaller, more natural state, where it remains today.

“If it is indeed true that—like business, politics, and consumer trends—music comes in cycles, then it is simply a matter of time before Tejano will rise again and make national headlines as one of the coolest music genres on the American landscape,” says Burr.



To learn more about Tejano read *The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Regional Mexican Music* (Watson-Guptill Publications, 1999) by Ramiro Burr or visit his website: www.ramiroburr.com.

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