

Big-band sound helped area stars

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During the "big band era" of Tex-Mex Music paced by Beto Villa, several other orchestras came on the scene, such as Juan Colorado, Balde Gonzalez, Mike Ornelas, Falcon Orchestra and Corpus Christi's "El Indio," Isidro Lopez.

Lopez' style and beat were a little different from Villa's, but the man who is called by many musicians "the granddaddy of them all" had the soul.

His contribution to what later was to become today's "la honda chicana" was significant — he became the first successful band leader whose voice was more responsible for record sales than his arrangements.

"I play simple arrangements. I don't use as much electronic equipment as many of today's groups use," commented Lopez who still plays regularly in Texas and California.

"The idea of an orchestra leader singing was relatively new. Beto was known for his sax playing. I became known for my sax and my singing," Lopez said.

His group grew to 11 musicians in the late 1950s—one trombone, three trumpets, three saxophones, drums, lead and bass guitar and piano.

The former boxer whose band has included the sounds of Henry and Ram Rodriguez, Roy Montelongo and Oscar Martinez, also has played for bands like Little Joe and the Latinaires, Augustin Ramirez, Carlos Campos and Senora Santanera.

Lopez established his own band shortly after recording "Digane" with the Juan Colorado band and went on to record "Sufriendo y Penando" with one of the top "conjuntos" headed by Tony De La Rosa.

His first hits with his own band included "El Nuevo Contrato" and "Emocion Pasajera" in 1956.

In the mid and late 1950s, there was an upsurge of musical talent in the state. Sunny and the Sunliners' recording of "Talk to Me" hit the national charts, and Alfonso Ramos, Roy Montelongo, Augustin Ramirez, Little Joe and the Latinaires and Rudy and the Renobops joined the scene.

For years these groups dominated the chicano music field until the early 1970s, when a local musician cut the beat-time in half and recorded "Necesito Tu Amor."

It was a hit and Freddie Martinez, who had knocked around the state with the same type of music for some 10 years, was on his way to claiming the title of superstar.

He quickly followed with "Botoncito de Carino" and "Te Traigo Estas Flores" which also hit the top in chicano music.

Since that time Martinez has purchased his own recording company, Freddie Records, and continues to turn out winners.

Only one thing surpasses the musical talents of the artist known as "El Rey De La Honda Chicana" — his business sense.

"I have made it a point to study the mistakes of other performers and have made sure I don't make the same mistakes," Martinez said. "I have started to invest in real estate and other things."



Isidro Lopez puts in a little time on saxophone



Freddie Fender gets credit for comeback on accordion
(Photos by Guile Gonzalez)

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He attributes much of his success to hard work arranging his material and promoting his band.

"Some guys just want to cut a record and send out as many as they can. So a lot of times you don't get a winner. I spend a lot of time with my material. It has to be just right for me or I won't record it," he said.

"A lot of times a group will get a hit and start to really charge a promoter for an appearance. You can get away with it if you're hot, but when you aren't riding a hit, times can be tough and promoters you have put the bite on before won't help you out," Martinez said.

"The idea is not to kill them when you're doing good. A lot of guys once they make it big won't appear on television or radio for promotional purposes. When we're on tour I make it a point to make myself available to dance promoters, disc jockeys and television people. You have to help the promoters. In the long run it works out better that way," he said during a break in a recording session recently.

Martinez operates his band on a tight budget.

"I don't believe in spending money on things that aren't necessary. We don't use spotlights, for instance. I could have a 20-piece band, but I only need eight. So I only hire eight musicians."

The music generated by Martinez has affected almost all chicano music.

Music, whether hard rock, chicano or western, is always affected by a successful group, Chavez pointed out.

In the late 1950s the accordion played a dominant role in Tex-Mex music, but in the early 1960s, Sunny Ozuna turned to its alternative — the organ.

The organ still plays a forceful role in chicano music, but the accordion is holding its own and making a comeback.

Many of the orchestras that used the electric organ exclusively have integrated the accordion, though more for background than as a lead instrument.

The use of piano-type accordions has increased the popularity of Los Unicos, Los Clasicos and Conjunto Bernal.

They and Oscar Hernandez are conjuntos in the traditional sense, but each has gone beyond the traditional

arrangements geared for accordions. These groups have been classified as progressive.

Mike Chavez of Kingsville, a longtime observer of the music scene, believes that the accordion may be coming back stronger than because of its use by chicano-western singer Freddie Fender.

"Freddie's new album uses the accordion and I have been getting calls from Nashville people who want to know more about the use of the accordion in country music," he said.

Much of the credit for keeping the traditional accordion popular is given to conjuntos like Tony De La Rosa, Los Hermanos De La Rosa, Los Alegres De Teran, Pedro Ayala and Narciso Martinez.

"Some conjuntos jazz up the accordion music, but we have tried to preserve the traditional sound of the squeeze box accordion," De La Rosa said. "That's our bread and butter. We can't change to the styles of Paulino Bernal or Oscar Hernandez."

He noted that from 15 to 20 top regional conjuntos some 20 years ago the number has dwindled to five or six.

"Besides ourselves and Los Hermanos (De La Rosa) there remains Ruben Vela, Gilberto Perez, Don Pedro Ayala, Los Alegres De Teran and a few others," he said.

De La Rosa, whose musical career covers 32 years including a few in the country and western fields, said conjunto music is "footstomping music. It's dance music at its best."

He recalls introducing the drum into a conjunto. "Everyone laughed at us when we began using drums. It used to be just an accordion player and a bass player. In fact, conjuntos were not very popular up north for many years. Now, they want more of this type of music."

De La Rosa, who plays regularly and recently recorded another album, admits that a conjunto cannot compete with the amplified sounds of orchestras, "but people still dance."

He noted that the accordion has a bright future, "because of the influence of conjuntos from Mexico that use accordions almost exclusively."

Few will argue with the influence of Mexico's conjuntos in the musical culture of Mexican-Americans in the United States.



Freddie Martinez (C) works with band on new song

Groups such as Ramon Ayala y Los Bravos Del Norte, Cornelio Reyna, Los Cachorros, Costa Azul, Los Gavilanes and Los Tigres Del Norte whose recording of "Contrabando y Traicion" has outsold everything in sight during the past two months continue to pack in crowds during their yearly tours of the United States.

One of the native South Texas conjuntos which for many years packed ballrooms throughout the United States is Conjunto Bernal.

The group, started by Paulino Bernal and his "golden accordion," was ahead of its time and has continued to keep up with the times.

Started in the mid 1950s, with the playing style of Paulino, the progressive accordionist, and under the reins of his brother, Eloy, the group is still considered the biggest draw in South Texas and parts of north Texas.

The group has changed instruments and styles, but

through the years has maintained the beat and the vocal trio that have been its trademark.

The voices in the trio have changed, though. In the 1950s, it was Ruben Perez, Eloy and Paulino Bernal. Through the years the trio has included Gerardo Reyes and Manuel Solis.

Today Conjunto Bernal blends the voices of Eloy Bernal, Jose Solis, and Cha Cha Jimenez who has played with the group off and on.

Joe Cisneros, a longtime follower of the group and a former disc jockey who now heads another successful conjunto, La Coneccion Mexicana, says of the band: "You see a lot of groups come and go. They're at the top and then at the bottom. But this is a group that has maintained a high level of music for more than 20 years. And that's because they have changed according to what the people want. In this business, you have to keep up with the times."