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## **MI Música: An Introduction to *Música Tejana* in Michigan**

by Richard Cruz Davila & Laurie Kay Sommers



Farm workers singing with accordion accompaniment. Courtesy Archives of Michigan.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Martin Solis, a vocalist and *bajo sexto* player in the Texas-Mexican *conjunto* tradition, was inducted into the Tejano R.O.O.T.S. Hall of Fame Museum in Alice, TX. The museum is dedicated to “Remembering Our Own Tejano Stars” through the exhibition of artifacts such as musical instruments, stage costumes, photographs, and other materials related to Texas-Mexican music, as well as through the induction of influential musicians and other figures into the Hall of Fame. With his induction, Solis joined the likes of such Texas-Mexican musical legends as Lydia Mendoza, Narciso Martinez, Santiago Jimenez, El Conjunto Bernal, Beto Villa, Flaco Jimenez, Esteban Jordan, Laura Canales, and Selena Quintanilla-Perez. What separates Solis from all the others, however, is that, while born in Texas, his many years as a performer of Texas-Mexican music have been spent mostly in Michigan. Solis first traveled to Michigan with his family in

1942 to work in the sugar beet fields before settling in Detroit. They were part of a migration wave of Mexican Americans from Texas during the 1940s that brought elements of Texas-Mexican regional culture to Michigan. Solis’s induction into the Tejano R.O.O.T.S Hall of Fame Museum, the first of a musician based in Michigan, acknowledges the dispersion of Texas-Mexican people and culture throughout Michigan and the Midwest.

Through examples such as that of Martin Solis, this article considers the flows of people, goods, and ideas that contribute to the evolution in Michigan of musical practices with roots in Texas-Mexican musical styles such as *conjunto*, *orquesta*, and, more recently, “Tejano,” referred to collectively as “*música tejana*.” Though inseparable from musical developments in Texas, the performance of Texas-Mexican music in Michigan will be referred to here as “*música*

*michicana*,” which refers back to *música tejana* while also foregrounding the specific experiences of Mexican Americans, or Chicana/os, in Michigan. This article draws from fieldwork conducted by Laurie Kay Sommers between 1988 and 2014 for the Michigan Traditional Arts Program at the Michigan State University Museum,<sup>1</sup> as well as new interviews conducted by Richard Cruz Davila in 2018.<sup>2</sup>

This work is informed by Marc Simon Rodriguez’s notion of the “Tejano diaspora,” “the permanent dispersion of several hundred thousand Mexican Americans from Texas across the United States” (2011, p. 3). He states,

Thrust into migration by changes in the North American labor market and agricultural economy..., Tejanos fashioned flexible labor, economic, and social networks that functioned for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This ‘Tejano diaspora’ allowed for a near-seamless flow of workers and ideas across the country, linking a variety of people together as ‘Tejanos’ as they engaged the major upheavals in Mexican American politics and culture nationwide (2011, p. 2).

Though the term “Tejano” has historically described Spanish and Mexican colonial settlers of Texas and their descendants, Rodriguez suggests that use of the term became more expansive as Texas-based workers increasingly entered into migratory circuits. He says,

As they established themselves within broader Latino and Latin American neighborhoods in the North and West, they strengthened their Texas-origin identities – their sense of connection to often recently established Texas hometowns. In an unstable world, migrant workers... remade themselves as Tejanos (2011, p. 4).

Rodriguez uses his conception of the Tejano diaspora to detail flows of political activism that accompanied migration of workers between South Texas and Wisconsin. This article takes up the notion of a Tejano diaspora to consider the influence and importance of Texas-based musical practices on musical performance in Michigan’s Mexican American communities. *Música michicana* initially emerged out of the musical practices of Tejana/os who traveled to or settled in Michigan either as migrant farm laborers or as factory workers. The ongoing development of their music remains tied to developments in *música tejana* through continuing patterns of migration, the distribution of sound recordings, and tours by Texas-based musicians. In turn, some Michigan-based musicians travel to Texas to perform or distribute their music through Texas-based labels. This continual musical exchange between Michigan and Texas demonstrates the importance for a large portion of Michigan’s Mexican American community of

a shared identity rooted in Texas.

## **Música Tejana**

According to Manuel Peña (1999), a leading scholar in the study of Texas-Mexican musical cultures, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *música Tejana* took two primary forms: the Texas-Mexican *conjunto* and the *orquesta tejana*. Peña argues that both the *conjunto* and the *orquesta tejana* traditions were expressions of interethnic conflict between Texas-Mexicans and the dominant Anglo-American society, but that each form embodied a different strategy for addressing this conflict. Namely, he positions the *conjunto* form as an expression of a working-class Tejana/o cultural resistance to Anglo domination, whereas he argues that the *orquesta* form represented the more assimilationist stance of an emerging Mexican American middle-class.

Musically, *conjunto* is defined first and foremost by the diatonic button accordion. Peña traces the origins of accordion-based ensembles to the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, although the emergence of the Texas-Mexican *conjunto* as a distinct regional style would only occur around the time of World War II, when the accordion was paired with the *bajo sexto*, a twelve-string bass guitar. Shortly thereafter, the ensemble was rounded out with drums and the *tololoche* (standing bass), although beginning in the latter half of the 1950s the *tololoche* was often replaced with the electric bass. Early *conjuntos* drew their repertoires primarily from various styles of European salon music, including the waltz, schottische, mazurka, redowa, and especially the polka, though the inclusion of the *huapango tamaulipeco*, a regional northeastern Mexican dance contributed significantly to *conjunto*’s regional identity. Initially performing instrumental music played for dancing, *conjuntos* began to add sung lyrics starting in the late-1940s, creating a new style that Peña labels the *polca-ranchera*. These stylistic developments established the “traditional” *conjunto* sound that many still play to this day. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, some ensembles began to add horns or to replace the accordion with synthesizers, leading to a new designation of “progressive” *conjunto*.

Peña likewise traces the origins of *orquesta tejana* to the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, at which time Texas-Mexican *orquestas* were influenced by orchestral ensembles from both the United States and Mexico. The earliest *orquesta* recordings were mostly of string ensembles, although a stylistic shift occurred around 1930, as *orquestas* were increasingly modeled after American big bands comprised primarily of wind instruments. However, like *conjunto*, the emergence of a distinctive *orquesta tejana* would only occur around the end of World War II. It was at this time that Beto Villa, whom Peña dubs the “father” of the modern *orquesta tejana*” (1999, p. 133), established a bicultural, “bimusical” repertoire incorporating

both American and Mexican genres, thereby “inventing a uniquely ‘Tex-Mex’ ranchero style.” Peña argues that the *orquesta tejana* reached its pinnacle with the rise of *la onda chicana* around 1970, during which the emerging Chicana/o Movement inspired a revitalization of Mexican American culture. Groups such as Little Joe y La Familia, Tortilla Factory, and the Latin Breed led a stylistic shift, no longer simply incorporating both American and Mexican musical styles into their repertoires, but codeswitching between styles within the same song, creating what Peña calls a “compound bimusicality” (1999, p. 163). Peña suggests that this era of innovation came to an end by 1980, as groups became smaller and increasingly built around the synthesizer.

With the stagnation of both the *orquesta tejana* and the *conjunto* traditions, up to this point *música tejana*’s two primary forms, in the 1980s and 1990s a new generation of groups emerged under the generic “Tejano” label. Typified by groups/artists such as El Grupo Mazz, Emilio Navaira, La Mafia, and Selena, Peña argues that while there was significant stylistic variation among Tejano groups, for the most part they drew upon three genres: *polcas-rancheras*, *baladas* (romantic ballads), and pan-Latina/o *cumbias*. With the entrance of major recording labels into the Tejano market during this period, Peña suggests that these groups felt a tension between the ethnic/regional character of *música tejana* and the desire to appeal to larger international markets. Thus, while acknowledging a debt to the *conjunto* and *orquesta tejana* traditions, their repertoires often skewed toward *baladas* and *cumbias*, which had more appeal for the larger Latin American market, or genres with potential crossover appeal in the American market, such as country and pop, rather than the limited regional appeal of the *polca-ranchera*.

### **Música Michicana**

The evolution of *música tejana* in Michigan followed the stylistic trends outlined by Peña. As Texas Mexicans migrated to Michigan and the larger Midwest, they brought their musical culture with them. Julio Guerrero, an organizer who hosted Spanish-language radio programs out of Lansing in the late-1960s and early-1970s, identifies three key factors that helped establish an infrastructure for *música michicana*: 1) temporary Spanish-language radio programs established by migrant workers that were targeted primarily to their own work crews; 2) a network of entrepreneurs who booked groups from Texas to perform in local halls, established long-running radio programs, published local newspapers, or opened stores that sold recordings of Texas-Mexican music; and 3) settled-out migrants and their offspring who formed musical groups that carried on Texas-Mexican musical traditions in Michigan.

Commonly, crew leaders would organize work crews of migrant farm laborers by hiring families in Texas and arranging

their travel to Michigan and other Midwestern states during the growing season. To provide entertainment, a crew member would acquire a time slot on a local radio station – typically in the early morning, as these were the only slots available – and would play records from their own collection. These programs were very much temporary and tied to the growing season; as Guerrero states, “When the season ended, they would move on to another area, another state, and the program ended as well. And then they would take that operation wherever they went.”

Additionally, migrants would travel with instruments such as accordions and guitars to provide entertainment in the camps during their limited downtime. Bobby DeLeon of the Saginaw band, Mas Caliente, heard stories from older relatives of Freddy Fender (who would later achieve stardom as a country cross-over artist) working in the fields, and of Texas-based *conjuntos* that would come to Michigan, work, play some dance events, and return home. Recently settled migrants who formed (typically family) bands would also play at migrant camps. Guillermo Martinez, for example – whose family joined the migrant stream from the Rio Grande Valley to southwest Michigan in the 1950s before settling near Fennville – credits music played by his older brothers and other Tejano musicians in the camps as an important part of his early musical training. Perhaps the most vivid memories come from Hilario (Lalo) Perez, who migrated back and forth with his family in 1936-37 to work sugar beets, beans, and cucumbers in the fields near Marlette, Michigan. During the migrant season they would play house dances: “My cousin used to play the fiddle and guitar, and get two or three guitars in the field, and for drums we used to use one of those wash tubs. We used to make people dance. Because it was only house dances, you know, but everybody would go to the dance. We were playing and singing.” Until 1942, when his parents stayed in Michigan permanently, Lalo and his brothers had a guitar trio, performing throughout southeastern Michigan, northern Indiana, and Ohio. Their repertoire was primarily boleros, *huapangos*, and *rancheras* played at restaurants and birthday parties.

This pipeline of musicians from Texas to Michigan was not new. From 1928-1930, the great Texas-Mexican singer, Lydia Mendoza — along with her family group, El Quarteto Blanco—had worked professionally in Detroit. Audiences at that time were primarily Mexican-born, rather than originating in Texas, but they shared a love for Mendoza’s border *corridos* and songs. The musical exchange became far more frequent after World War II, when Tejano/o migration to Michigan began in earnest. Newly formed Michigan *conjuntos* began to arrange their own dance venues. For instance, Francisco Vasquez – whose nine children were born in Texas, Michigan, and at various points along the migrant route in-between – took the



band formed by four of his sons to a local migrant camp and to a little hall he rented in Edmore, Michigan. His son Johnny recalled, “My dad was almost like the manager. He would make the dances and we would play.”

Entrepreneurs such as Francisco Vasquez, located in areas where migrant workers had settled out, played a vital role in establishing an infrastructure for *música tejana* to take root in Michigan. By the late 1960s, a growing network of Michigan-based promoters was bringing bands directly from Texas to perform for local audiences in bars or rented halls. A key player in the Lansing area during this period was San Antonio-born barber Jesse Anguiano. Relying on connections he had in the San Antonio area, he would rent a hall near Lake Lansing and bring bands up from Texas to perform. Anguiano hosted these dances on Fridays, Saturdays, and sometimes Sundays, and Guerrero says the dances were “packed every weekend, because that was the only attraction of that sort.”

Another promoter of Texas-Mexican music in the Lansing area was Juan Beltran (born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York City before moving to Lansing at age 18). Prior to music promotion, Beltran had been screening Mexican films at the Spartan Twin Theater for the Lansing area’s Spanish-speaking community. Beltran then began to organize *caravanas*, in which multiple acts would travel together to perform in multiple locations in Michigan and the Midwest, hitting as many as five cities in a single day. A typical *caravana* might start at noon in Lansing, then travel to Saginaw, down to Flint, on to Detroit, and end the night in Toledo, OH. Other stops on the route might be Luna Pier, as well as Cleveland and Napoleon, OH. On the west side of the state, a *caravana* might hit Grand Rapids or occasionally Kalamazoo, before moving to South Bend and Gary, IN, and then on to Chicago, IL. These events often took place in theaters, rather than dance halls, and might include local acts or Texas-based bands, interspersed with film screenings and performances by *mariachis*, comedians, or Mexican movie stars such as Vicente Fernandez or Antonio Aguilar. Beltran was also involved at various times with dances in Lansing venues such as Dell’s Lounge, El Cielito Lindo, the C.D. Club, and the L.A. Globe, where he would book local artists as well as artists from Texas.

In the 1960s through the 1980s, a growing number of bars and clubs in various Michigan cities catered to the musical tastes of Michigan’s Tejana/o population. In the Detroit area were venues such as the Blue Diamond, Gutierrez Lounge, and El Chaparral in Detroit, El Rey in Lincoln Park, and Ernie’s Lounge in Ecorse. In the Grand Rapids area were Mi Lugar, Cascade Arena, Clasico, and Club Flores. In Lansing, there were Saturday night dances at El Dance Land on North Washington St., and at the Stardust Club, owned and operated by Daniel and Mario Sanchez, formerly members of a musical group called Epoca Band. El Rancho Club in

Charlotte hosted dances on Saturdays and Sundays, as did the Club Latino Americano in Albion. In Saginaw, the Wonder Bar had music and dancing every Friday and Saturday night. In Luna Pier there was the Luna Pier Ballroom, owned by Paul Garza. These and other performance spaces provided the infrastructure for touring bands from Texas to demonstrate stylistic developments in *música tejana* and to support an emerging *música michicana*.

As Guerrero notes, another key factor in the spread of Texas-Mexican music into Michigan was the establishment of local long-running Spanish-language radio programs. An important radio program in Lansing was “Variedades en Español,” a collaboration between Quinto Sol, a Chicana/o communications organization, and WKAR-AM, the public broadcast station at Michigan State University. Launched in 1968, the project was led by Gilberto Martinez, with assistance from Juan Cavazos, Rogelio Guerrero, Lalo Marinez, Justo Trujillo, and Tony “El Chayo” Cervantes. It combined music and news for the Lansing area’s Spanish-speaking community. In addition to the radio program, Quinto Sol also hosted seminars to train others from Michigan and throughout the Midwest to launch Spanish-language radio programs in their own cities. When Quinto Sol dissolved, the radio program was absorbed by WKAR and Guerrero, who had been in charge of Quinto Sol’s training seminars, was hired on as full-time producer and



A flyer for “Variedades en Español” from the July, 1970 issue of *Sol de Aztlan*.

host of the show. In 1974, the program was renamed “Ondas en Español,” and still airs under this name, hosted by Chayo Cervantes, who was hired as host in 1987. Previous hosts also include Rogelio “Roy” Garza and Andres Rivera.

Radio programs playing *música tejana* proliferated in Michigan in the late-1960s and early-1970s, as is evident from browsing issues of *Sol de Aztlan*, a newspaper published by Quinto Sol. For instance, the April, 1970 issue provides a list of “Radio en Español” that includes: “Variedades en Español,” hosted at this point by Garza; “Fiesta Alegre” on WRBJ-AM, hosted by Juve Aldaco; “Fiesta en el Aire” on WOAP out of Owosso, hosted by Chayo Cervantes; “La Hora Latina” on WVIC, hosted by Juve Aldaco’s brother, Gino “Su Parientito” Aldaco; and “La Chicanita,” hosted by Anguiano and Fred Silva, and “Polkas y Canciones,” hosted by Garza and Frank Gamez, both on WCER. In the July, 1971 issue is an advertisement for “Complacencias Musicales” on WSAM-FM out of Saginaw, hosted by Jimmy Ruiz. Over the next two decades, the number of programs grew until, by the early 1990s, at least 21 Spanish-format radio stations served listeners across lower Michigan.

Spanish-language radio programs and stations, along with Spanish-language print media, played an important role in supporting the live performance of Texas-Mexican music in Michigan. For instance, when Beltran brought his *caravanas* to Michigan, Guerrero would often go to the events to interview the musicians or bring them into the studio to record interviews. Likewise, he wrote a column for *El Renacimiento*, a Chicana/o newspaper distributed throughout Michigan, which was largely devoted to music in both Texas and Michigan. Spanish-language radio programs and newspapers were also prime spaces for advertising upcoming dances.

Guerrero argues that the radio programs and dances then created an opening for the emergence of record stores. Roy’s Records on West Vernor Highway in Detroit was one such store that catered to Mexican and Tejana/o listeners, as was the Latin American Record Shop in Saginaw. In Lansing, Anguiano sold records from his barbershop, La Chicanita Record and Barber Shop, housed in the Quinto Sol building on Grand River Avenue (now César E. Chávez Avenue), while Aldaco’s Record Shop was just across the street. Later, Beltran opened a video store that also sold audio cassettes of Texas-Mexican artists, including those who performed at local dances and were played on the local radio programs – and for a time he also operated a club on the floor above the store. Cassettes were also often sold in grocery stores that catered to Mexican American communities.

Eventually local record labels were also established, although not until the 1980s. Aldaco Records, owned by Juve and Gino, released music from numerous groups throughout the Midwest, as did Valencia Records, founded by Ricky

Smith, leader of the band La Movida. Bobby DeLeon, however, believes that Michigan’s Latino musicians were limited by a music business controlled by Anglo and African Americans. This lack of recording infrastructure was a significant issue for the development of *música michicana*. Like Juve Aldaco, several other bands recorded with Texas labels such as Joey Records (often paying them for the privilege), with mixed results; others self-produced 45s, cassettes, or CDs for sale at gigs or record stores. Those who did approach a Midwest recording studio – which the Burciagas, discussed later in this article, tried in the 1960s – ran the risk of recording engineers without knowledge or feel for Texas-Mexican music.

In Guerrero’s formulation, the final phase in the spread of Texas-Mexican music into Michigan was the formation of local groups by settled-out migrants playing in the various traditions of *música tejana*. An early practitioner of the *conjunto* style was Martin Solis, discussed in the introduction to this article, a *bajo sexto* player who began performing with accordionist Manuel Rivera in the mid-1950s. Solis was born in San Antonio in 1929, and moved to Coleman, MI in 1942 when his family was hired to work in the beet fields in the Bay City area, before resettling in Detroit in 1944. Solis’s first instrument was a guitar given to him by his grandfather, who played the violin, and his first foray into music as a profession was as lead voice in a vocal trio modeled after the internationally renowned Trio Los Panchos. Known as Trio Los Primos, the group was hired to perform at weddings, birthday parties, and graduations, most of which were held at people’s homes rather than in rented halls. When WPAG in Ann Arbor hired a Mexican DJ, Solis’s trio was invited to perform on the air. He says that at the time the only other trio in the area, and Trio Los Primos’ primary competition, was the Trio Reyna: “They were superior. They had good voices, they rehearsed a lot, and they played the night clubs and all that. And we [weren’t] there yet.”

In 1951, Solis was drafted into the Army and served for two years at Camp Rucker in Alabama. When he returned to Michigan in 1953, he took an interest in the *conjunto* music coming up from Texas and bought a *bajo sexto*. At this point he began performing with Rivera, hopping from bar to bar playing for tips. Around 1957, he formed his own *conjunto* with his cousin, Willy Huron, a saxophonist, and named the group Los Primos. Solis and Huron recruited Casimiro Zamora on button accordion and rounded out the group with a rotating cast of drummers, depending on who was available to perform on any given weekend: “They [were] all working at Great Lakes... and Great Lakes Steel always had them working on weekends. So I had a couple of drummers, one of them couldn’t, the other one would.” Solis cites Santiago Jimenez as a key influence on the group’s sound and source of their repertoire – “we imitated him” – but also points to the influence of Beto Villa, whom Peña calls the “‘father’ of the modern orquesta tejana,” in



order to explain the inclusion of the saxophone, an instrument typically associated with the *orquesta* tradition and mostly absent from *conjuntos*.

Solis built the repertoire for Los Primos by frequenting jukeboxes and listening to the latest songs coming up from Texas. The songs were mostly recorded in San Antonio, he says, "Then the record shops would have it here, and the people would buy it. But most of the time, the music was bought by the people that owned the jukeboxes. They would have it, move it every time something became famous in Texas, they'd bring it here." Solis would learn the newest songs by playing them on the jukebox several times in a row and taking notes: "I'd go into the bar and take a quarter and play it three times, and I'd write it down and then bring it home in my head and play it." One bar he frequented to keep up with the latest music was the One Thousand Bar, a Mexican hangout on Michigan Avenue in Detroit. In this way, he built a large repertoire that made Los Primos a first choice for those looking to hire a band: "There were other groups trying to form, but they just never made it. What was in our favor, was me and my cousin were always together, and he knew all the tunes I knew because I used to sing 'em."

In 1961, Solis, along with his cousin, moved down to Oklahoma City to work for an uncle who owned a construction company. Solis says that in Oklahoma City at that time, there were no working *conjuntos*, only bars that had *conjunto* records in their jukeboxes. As such, Solis and Huron quickly found themselves performing around the area, and trying to round out the group with accordion and drums. In 1964, Solis moved his family back to Michigan, while his cousin stayed behind in Oklahoma. He quickly found work with other musicians in a market with more opportunities for *conjunto* music.

"As soon as I got here, I had a job. All the *conjuntos* knew I was back. They all wanted me because I was the lead voice and I had a big repertoire... It was a big change from the time we went from here

to Oklahoma, there were more bars opened up, and were more catering toward Mexican people, and there [were] more openings for Mexican music.

Around this time, Solis also found a full time job at the airport working for Pacific Freight (later Airborne), but he was often on the road on weekends, playing at dances in Pontiac, Luna Pier, Saginaw, and Lansing, and sometimes in cities in northeast Ohio such as Toledo and Lorain. Working again with Manuel Rivera, Solis would also often perform on radio station WSAM, which on Saturday and Sunday afternoons broadcasted live from the Las Vegas Bar (most recently called El Zocalo) in Detroit's Mexicantown neighborhood.

Solis continued to perform with Rivera until Rivera's death in 1980. After a short break from music, Solis joined the *conjunto* of his eldest son, Martin S. Solis, Jr., as vocalist until Solis, Jr., also a *bajo sexto* player, passed away in 1993. In his long career as a *conjunto* musician, Solis never had the opportunity to record. He attributes this partially to his own feeling that he was not skilled enough, but his son Frank also says that he never had the time to record due to his full-time job at Airborne. Solis was offered the opportunity to record by Henry Zimmerle, a prominent figure in the San Antonio *conjunto* scene, but, he says, "I just never did go for that." However, he did have occasional opportunity to perform with musicians such as Zimmerle and Flaco Jimenez while on vacation in Texas: "I'd go on vacations and all the groups knew me, because I was a good vocalist, not saying anything out of order. But they'd always invite me to sing a song or two... and I was always ready to comply."

Another musician who first arrived in Michigan in the 1940s was José Burciaga, born in 1906 in San Antonio, TX, and raised on a nearby ranch. As a youngster in Texas he received instruction in violin and performed in various small ensembles on radio and at dance events. From 1936-1943 he picked up *bajo sexto* and other instruments, including accordion, while playing with San Antonio's Orchestra Tipica, one of the ethnic "specialty units" created by the Federal Music Project of the WPA. In 1946 he made his first trip to Michigan to join a brother-in-law working sugar beets in Bay City. Although he brought his *bajo sexto* with him, Burciaga met no other musicians. He eventually settled in Adrian and formed a band with his sons Jesse on *tololoche*, Rudy on saxophone, and Richard on guitar and *bajo sexto*. Augustine, born in 1946 and one of 20 children, was just five years old when Burciaga discovered the boy "playing" his father's lunchbox as if it were an accordion. As he graduated to two- and then three-row Horner accordions, Augustine's skill blossomed.

The initial Burciaga Brothers band – with their father as manager, promoter, and occasional back-up *bajo* player – featured two saxophones, accordion, *bajo sexto*, *tololoche*,



Martin Huron Solis, Jr. with his award from the Tejano R.O.O.T.S. Hall of Fame and Museum and his bajo sexto. Photo by Richard Cruz Davila.



Augustine Burciaga y los Originales, 1989. From left: Joe Faz, and Richard, Augustine, Omar, and Xavier Burciaga. Photo by Laire Kay Sommers, courtesy of Michigan State University Museum.

and drums. Burciaga joked that audiences were so taken with *los chamacos* (“the boys”) that he – now dubbed “the old guy” (*el viejito*) – eased out of performing in public, and for the rest of his life played only at home. When two of Burciaga’s sons married and left the band, the group morphed into a four-piece *conjunto* that was eventually led by Augustine. They played in parks and for weddings, baptisms, and increasingly for dances. Adrian did not have a regular dance hall catering to Tejana/o audiences, but local bands like the Burciagas traveled to northwest Ohio, Indiana, and elsewhere in Michigan. By 1965, the renamed El Conjunto de Augustine Burciaga was forced to disband while Augustine served four years in the Navy at Kingsville, Texas. The city was one of the great centers for *conjunto* music of the period: Conjunto Bernal and Laura Canales, for example, came out of Kingsville, and many other leading *conjuntos* performed there. Augustine began songwriting. A Texas band recorded two of his compositions, and he also recorded a song himself (never released) on the de la Rosa label from Kingsville.

When he returned home, Augustine reactivated the band with his brothers Jesse, Richard, and Rudy, along with Gus Trevino, and Joe Faz. They played from 1969 to 1976, as Augustine cemented his reputation as one of the state’s best *conjunto* accordion players. Then Augustine changed directions, channeling his musical talents to gospel music in church. His brother Henry also had a group that played in solely in church. Both brothers followed in the footsteps of groups like the famous Conjunto Bernal who had also transitioned from secular to religious music. After a decade, however, Augustine “got the hunger to go back and do what you love the most, play music,” and invited the original band members to re-form. Augustine Burciaga and Los Originales continued the Burciaga tradition with Augustine on accordion and vocals, brother Richard on *bajo* and vocals, Joe Faz on vocals, and two of Augustine’s sons (who had shifted from rock to *música tejana* styles) on electric bass and drums.

By the late 1980s, Adrian had become a hotbed of *música tejana*. In addition to dance bands and gospel groups, the community was one of the few places in Michigan that

continued the Mexican and Tejana/o tradition of Mother’s Day *serenatas* (serenades), often playing the traditional “Las Mañanitas.” Adrian’s real musical strength, however, was in the *conjuntos* and *orquestas* that played for dances, events, and family parties throughout the Tri-State region. When José and Concepción Burciaga held their 63<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary at the Tecumseh Union Hall in May of 1988 (a locale where the Burciaga bands had played many events in the past), two Adrian ensembles played for the event in addition to Augustine’s group: La Sorpresa (a *conjunto* featuring George and Efraim Atkinson, George Chavez and Oscar Cavasos); and Gilberto Atkinson y su Orquesta Brava (one of the few true *orquestas* in Michigan at the time, with Gilberto Atkinson on bass and vocals, Rudy Burciaga on sax and vocals, Junior Atkinson and Joey Vargas on trumpet, Tom Boyd on bass, Jesse Gallardo on keyboard and Oscar Cavasos on bass). A third Adrian musician, Rufus de la Cruz (a fine lead singer and *bajo sexto* player then fronting another Adrian band, Los Conocidos, but not present at the anniversary event), had been mentored in music as a boy by José Burciaga.

As befitting a musical legacy, the next generations of musicians also participated in the evening’s entertainment. In addition to Augustine’s sons, his nephew Gabe Burciaga — a promising teen accordion player — sat in with Gilberto Atkinson’s band. Gabe and his younger siblings were part of a new band formed by David Burciaga (the youngest of José’s children). David had played with yet another Adrian band, La Fuerza, but had been working in the family basement with sons Gabe and Isaiah (drum), and daughter Nicole (vocals), in order to pass on the family’s musical heritage. The young Burciagas so charmed their audiences that Lansing’s veteran band leader, Juve Aldaco, suggested a new name: David Burciaga and Grupo Almiración (a play on the Spanish words for admire or look at with awe). The Burciaga legacy continues in 2018 with Gabe, now in his 40s and a worthy heir to his Uncle Augustine, fronting Gabriel Burciaga and Los Bad Boyz, and Nicolina embarking on a solo career.

Another early practitioner of *conjunto* music in Michigan was accordionist Juvencio “Juve” Aldaco, known to some as “El Orgullo de Michigan” (“the pride of Michigan”). Born in Encinal, TX in 1933, Aldaco initially migrated to Jackson, MI to work in the onion fields and then settled in Lansing after an acquaintance who worked at Fisher Body encouraged him to apply. Aldaco had no musicians in his family and did not become involved with music until around age 21 or 22 when he moved to Lansing. During a layoff from Fisher Body, Aldaco visited the home of a man who played guitar and accordion and started playing music with him. In the early 1960s he joined the *conjunto* Rey Gonzales y Los Voladores as accordionist. At this time, there were few clubs in the area so the group mostly performed at weddings, *quinceañeras*, and



dances in rented halls. Outside of Lansing, the band performed in towns such as Lake Odessa and Capac, MI; that these were very small, rural towns would suggest that the audiences for these events were comprised primarily of migrant laborers working on nearby farms.

In 1964, Aldaco formed his own group, Juve Aldaco y Los Rayos del Norte, after Rey Gonzales moved to California. The arrangement of the group at this time was the standard *conjunto* lineup of accordion, *bajo sexto*, bass, and drums. Over the years, several of Aldaco's children joined the group, beginning with his son, Jr., who joined as drummer at age 13 when, after frequently listening in on practice sessions, he impressed his father by sitting in on drums while the regular drummer was out of town; as Aldaco says, "One day later the drummer came, and [Aldaco Jr.] was better than him." Aldaco's group retained a strong focus on the accordion as lead instrument through the mid-1970s, which made it difficult to accommodate increasing requests for English-language music, particularly at *quinceañeras*, at which they performed often. By 1977, Aldaco's sons Danny and Ernie had also joined the band, and their backgrounds in R&B and pop enabled the group to diversify their repertoire. At the same time, Aldaco's sons, who had grown up primarily speaking English, learned Spanish through playing in the band. The group began performing under the name Juve Aldaco y Grupo Variedad.



Juvencio Aldaco Sr. in performance, Lansing, 1992.

Photo by Laurie Kay Sommers, courtesy of Michigan State University Museum.

By 1989, the lineup had expanded to include saxophone – played by Ricky Levarios, brother of Joe Levarios of the Saginaw band Mas Caliente – and African American vocalist Tina Lewis (stage name Tina Marie). The combination of accordion, saxophone, and keyboard allowed the group to draw from both the *conjunto* and *orquesta* traditions, as well as to incorporate pop and rap influences. This stylistic diversity gave the group broader audience appeal, as they could tailor their set to the specific tastes of any given crowd. Older crowds, for instance, preferred polkas and boleros, whereas for younger crowds the group would play more cumbias and English-language songs, as well as songs in the *onda chicana* style. Thanks to this diversity in their repertoire, the group was awarded the Ritchie Valens Award for Best Cross-Over Band at the first Midwest Hispanic Music Awards in 1988. In 1990, the band was renamed Grupo Aldaco, and under this name shifted back toward *conjunto* and *onda chicana* styles. Professionally, Aldaco largely shifted his attention from music to his restaurant business in the mid-1990s, but his son Danny continued the band under the Grupo Aldaco name.

Aldaco is notable both for the longevity of his musical career and for his impact as a songwriter and recording artist. One of Aldaco's earliest songwriting efforts was a cumbia written around 1974 called "Maria Luisa," named after his wife, which he copyrighted by sending in a cassette recording and \$10 fee to the copyright office in Washington, D.C. The song was then recorded in a local studio and released on a 45 rpm record distributed by Freddie Records, a Corpus Christi, TX-based label, for which Aldaco received \$75. Aldaco says that he only received this money because he had copyrighted the song, and that he has never received the royalties to which he is entitled. Though Aldaco's comment that, "If you record with Freddie you don't get nothing [sic]," suggests frustration with the lack of compensation for the sale of his copyrighted works, he does see value in the exposure that comes along with writing and recording original compositions: "The more you record your own music, or music that [has] never been recorded before, the better you're off. Because then the other groups play your music. Like a lot of groups from here play our music." "Maria Luisa," for instance, was rerecorded by other artists such as Los Truenos de Texas, which released a version of *Linda Muñequita* on their album. In 1989, Carlos Miranda, a star of *la onda chicana* with whom Aldaco had formed a working relationship, planned to record two songs written by Aldaco, as well as two songs written by Aldaco's son Ernie. Having recorded numerous singles and albums, in 1990 Aldaco achieved national distribution when he was signed to CBS/Sony Records by producer Manny Guerra. This in turn led to a June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1991 appearance on *The Johnny Canales Show*, which showcased up-and-coming Tejano and *norteño* artists, a rare feat for a group based in Michigan.



Johnny Vasquez of Lansing's Tejano Sound Band also started playing *conjunto* music in the late 1950s, when he joined his first band at the age of eight. Vasquez, whose family had migrated from Texas to Michigan, formed his first band, Los Hermanos Vasquez, with his older brothers Richard, Fred, and Frank Jr., learning the songs of foundational *conjunto* artists such as Tony de la Rosa, Paulino Bernal, and Ruben Vela: "If I'd get paid for playing, I'd take all that money and go buy records. We'd take that song and learn it, sometimes add new music to it, sometimes take it just like it was." Vasquez initially started out as drummer but was drawn to the sound of the diatonic button accordion that defined *conjunto* music and eventually replaced Fred as accordionist. The group performed at dances and family gatherings, but were too young to perform in bars or clubs. In the mid-1960s, the group dissolved when the eldest brothers took jobs working with their father at General Motors in Lansing. Vasquez stayed in *conjunto* music, playing accordion for a time with Juve Aldaco's band, as well as Los Capitolinos – of which the long-time radio announcer Chayo Cervantes was also a member – and Latin Sounds Orchestra.

In 1994, Johnny and Richard Vasquez reunited to form Tejano Sound Band, along with their brother-in-law Frank Medellin. The incorporation of "Tejano" into the group's name is telling, as this was the label given to newer Texas-Mexican groups in the late 1980s and 1990s with roots in the *conjunto* and *orquesta* traditions, but with repertoires that included Pan-Latin, pop, and country influences that gave them greater crossover appeal. While Tejano Sound Band retained the accordion and *bajo sexto* sounds that originally defined *conjunto* music, they also added keyboards, electric guitar, and sometimes saxophone, and they built a diverse repertoire that mixed traditional elements with jazz influences and included *cumbias*, *merengue*, country, and *norteño*, the Mexican-regional style that initially developed in tandem with the Texas-Mexican *conjunto* and had grown increasingly popular in Texas in the 1990s and onward. Tejano Sound Band has since released several albums and continues to perform regularly. They, too, have gained recognition in Texas. The band's latest release, "Cierra Los Ojos," charted in the top 10 on the Tejano Magazine Top 40 (a Texas-based online publication featuring Tejano and *conjunto* bands, artists, and subject matter). In 2013, the band won the Tejano Music Award for "Vocal Duo of The Year" for their collaboration with Tejano star Ricky Valenz.

Raymond Bobby DeLeon, founder of Saginaw's Mas Caliente band, was born in San Marcos, TX into a family that had been migrating to the fields of Michigan. In 1963, the family permanently moved from Lubbock to Saginaw, MI where young Bobby found a very different musical culture than the one he left behind in Texas. While his family, one of the largest Mexican families in Saginaw, continued weekend family



Guillermo Martinez and Rene Meave perform after receiving a 2011 Michigan Heritage Award from the Michigan Traditional Arts Program. Photo by Laire Kay Sommers, courtesy of Michigan State University Museum.

parties where his uncle often invited musicians from Texas, the Mexican American teenagers were dancing more to English-language rock. In Saginaw, DeLeon recalled, the closest thing to "Spanish music" — as he termed it — were popular hits by Latino artists, such as "La Bamba" (Richie Valens) and "Tequila" (Daniel Flores). The DeLeon family was familiar with Lubbock's vibrant *orquesta* scene, and Bobby's mother loaned her records to Saginaw DJs. His uncles Juan Rosas and Fred Teneyuque had a series of *orquestas* featuring the typical instrumentation of trumpet, sax, keyboard, drums, bass, and vocals. Bobby taught himself guitar and keyboard in hopes of playing with his uncles. Eventually, as musical styles changed, Bobby switched to vocals. By the early 1970s, groups were becoming smaller, and combos with accordion increasingly replaced the *orquesta* sound. Bobby had been introduced to *conjunto* music by his friends Henry Hernandez and Joe Levarios, with whom he formed his first band in the early 1970s. Their five-piece ensemble followed the newer *onda chicana* style with keyboard and accordion instead of brass. By the late 1970s, Mas Caliente was a staple of the Saginaw and larger Michigan scene with "a fast *ranchera* beat that makes you *alegre*, that gives you energy." DeLeon observed that, for his audiences, the class distinctions originally associated with the *conjunto* and *orquesta* styles were disappearing.

Los Bandits de Michigan exemplify the entrepreneurial spirit of *música michicana*, self-producing two original cassette recordings by the early 1990s (and three more by 2011). Founded in 1991 by former migrant workers René Meave and Guillermo Martinez, Los Bandits performed a distinctive blend of Texas-Mexican *conjunto* music shaped by influences from blues, zydeco, country rock, gospel, rock 'n' roll, and reggae, all set to original, often bilingual, lyrics. As Meave explained in Dhera Strauss' 2006 documentary *Los Bandits: More Than a Tex-Mex Band*, "We were attempting to take the music we were familiar with, Tejano music, and incorporate it into the experiences we were having here." The band most recently included Meave (guitar and vocals); Martinez (vocals, accordion, keyboard); Ernesto Ortiz (bass guitar and vocals); and Esteban Ortiz (drums and vocals).

Unlike other groups that seek to duplicate the classic and current hits of the Texas-Mexican border, Los Bandits consciously tried to create a sound that reflects the heritage of, as Martinez puts it, “a Mexican born in Texas and raised in Michigan.” Los Bandits also composed specifically for Midwest audiences, as opposed to those *música michicana* bands that may write songs but whose goal is to break into the Texas market. Although other musicians share their migrant farmworker roots, Meave and Martinez used their music to create a traveling program titled “Cultural Sensitivity through Humor and Music” that has been used by social service providers, clinicians, community centers and schools across the Midwest to awaken sensitivity to the migrant farmworker experience.

Guillermo Martinez was the youngest of 14 children and began migrating to Michigan with his family in the 1950s. His father dabbled with violin and harmonica, but it was really his mother who instilled his love of singing: “She would get me to sing when we were picking in the field.” By the early 1960s, his elder brothers Alejo on accordion and Lorenzo on *bajo sexto* had formed a little group called Conjunto Martinez that drew on migrant workers and other musicians in the area around Hartford in southwest Michigan. Lorenzo had a radio program, paid for by soliciting ads from businesses that sold to farmworkers, and the young Guillermo rode with him to the migrant camps where they would play music with musicians who came up from Texas. A succession of southwest Michigan bands followed: Los Cinco Magnificos (the first Guillermo had on his own), Sam Garcia and the Outsiders, the Lowrider Band, and Karizma.

René Meave, a self-taught guitarist, also came from a musical family. The richly diverse musical culture of his native South Texas would shape his future as a musician; as Meave explained, “In Texas you have to learn everything: blues, mariachi, country, Cajun, zydeco.” Early on, he recognized the similarities between *conjunto* and the accordion-based genres of Cajun and zydeco music. He also “learned a lot about crossing over from Freddy Fender. He’d do any song in Spanish, cross back and forth.” In 1970, after coming to the Berrien Springs area to work strawberries, Meave decided to stay, lured by two of Michigan’s musical icons: Motown Records in Detroit and the Gibson guitar factory in Kalamazoo. His plan was to get a job at Gibson, work on songwriting, and move on to Motown. Meave had started writing songs at age 13, creating lyrics and melodies in his head while working in the fields. Although he never made it to Motown, his life would include plenty of music and composing.

Until meeting and playing with Martinez, Meave had done little with the *música tejana* he heard as a boy. They named their band Los Bandits as a deliberate play on stereotypes. Meave by this time was an established songwriter and in 1982 had recorded his own solo album, *A Man in Love*. Martinez

was the consummate entertainer, singing and playing with great passion and engaging audiences with his banter. They wrote bilingual songs (an example of Peña’s “compound bimusicality”) and, at times, deliberately political. Their social consciousness grew out of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Martinez’ topical “Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun” – a riff on Daniel Valdez’s classic protest song transferred to Michigan’s fruit belt – and the song-poem “*En Michigan*,” illustrate Los Bandits’ musical commitment to migrant farmworker issues. One verse of “*En Michigan*” reads: “Took a shower in the field one day, filled my body and my head with spray; kept on snapping all them spears [asparagus], and I, fighting back the tears, *en Michigan*.”

Los Bandits were unusual among *michicana* bands in their ability to play for diverse audiences in varied settings: from in-group community gatherings and dances to public ethnic festivals; from large multi-genre popular music events such as Lansing’s Common Ground and Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids to intimate family celebrations; and from college campuses to programs dealing with farmworker issues. Their stylistic flexibility facilitated sharing the stage with an eclectic mix of performers, among them Buckwheat Zydeco, Terry Clark, Little Joe y La Familia, Los Lobos, Patty Loveless, the Texas Tornadoes, Junior Brown, and Kenny Wayne Shepherd. Although they have received several awards both for their musical contributions and their role in public education about migrant farmworkers, perhaps most significant is their impact on *michicana* audiences. As one woman told the makers of the 2006 documentary, *Los Bandits; More Than a Tex-Mex Band*, “They express how we really feel. They sing from the heart.” These sentiments attest to the power of *música tejana* for Michigan’s Tejana/o diaspora.


## Conclusion

As is made clear above, what started as a small number of Tejana/o migrants operating short-lived radio programs or performing music in the fields and in migrant camps eventually flourished into an entire industry of radio programs, dance halls, record stores, and local musicians catering to the tastes of Michigan’s Tejana/o communities. As Julio Guerrero states,

That was pretty much the way the culture... was carried from *Tejas* to the Midwest. This happened in rural areas of Wisconsin, and Iowa, and Illinois, and Minnesota, because I lived in most of those states as an organizer, and in every state they had the same thing: somebody had the dance hall, somebody had the record shop, and somebody had a radio program... So the whole music industry proliferated from something the migrant workers initiated.



Though a small local music industry emerged, *música michicana* remained closely tied to the music industry in Texas. Indeed, many of the musicians discussed in this article built their repertoires on songs that were popular in Texas at the time. They might have learned these songs by hearing them on jukeboxes at local bars, listening to records they bought in local record stores, or having friends and family in Texas mail them copies of the most recent hits. Further, musicians in Michigan often released their music through Texas-based labels, sometimes even paying the labels to distribute their music, hoping to have hit songs in Texas. Musicians traveling from Texas to Michigan and the Midwest also brought with them the latest trends and stylistic shifts in *música tejana* that influenced stylistic developments in Michigan. *Música michicana* was thus continually renewed through the movement of people and goods between Texas and Michigan, which helped maintain strong cultural ties to Texas among Tejana/o migrants who had settled out in Michigan, as well as their descendants.

As Guerrero suggests, similar developments of local music industries were likely happening in other Midwestern states where Tejana/os migrated to work the fields and where some eventually settled out. Michigan-based musicians regularly traveled elsewhere in the Midwest to perform. Broadening the scope of the study to include the dispersion of *música tejana* throughout the Midwest is one area for future research. Recent trends in *música michicana* also merit further study. While the research presented here focuses on developments through the early 1990s, for a large portion of Michigan's Mexican American population, the rich legacy of *música tejana* remains an integral part of their cultural identity. 

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sommers' fieldwork files are housed in the museum's Folklife and Cultural Heritage Collections. Their research includes fieldwork on Mexican American Music (1988, 1989); Latino Radio and Latino Music (1992); research for the Michigan Heritage Award nomination of Guillermo Martinez and René Meave, founders of Los Bandits de Michigan (2011); fieldwork on Tejano Sound Band (2014); and oral interviews with Bobby DeLeon (1988), Hilario Perez (1988 for a Michigan Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program site visit), Juve Aldaco (1989), José Burciaga (1989), Augustine Burciaga (1989), Tony "El Chayo" Cervantes (1992), Guillermo Martinez and René Meave (2011 as part of Michigan Heritage Award nomination), and Johnny Vasquez (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Davila's interviewees include Martin Solis (2018), Julio Guerrero (2018), Juan Beltran (2018), and Tony "El Chayo" Cervantes (2018). Interview transcripts are held by JSRI.