

Review

The Mexican American Orquesta: Music, Culture, and the Dialectic of Conflict

Manuel Peña
Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1999
350 pp.

Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation

Manuel Peña
College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1999
University of Houston Series in Mexican American Studies
239 pp.

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Manuel Peña's landmark first book, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, is the first extended scholarly treatment of its subject, and since its publication in 1985, relatively little has been written about the rich musical culture of ethnic Mexicans in Texas. In the *Conjunto* book, Peña advanced a staunchly Marxist interpretation of the process by which the accordion-based ensemble called the "conjunto" became a strong symbol of Texas Mexican working-class identity. The conjunto, he argued, was defined in opposition to the *orquesta*, an ensemble which blended greater Mexican brass and string band traditions with those of the American big band. In his first book, Peña portrayed the *orquesta* as the symbolic baggage of an assimilated Mexican American middle class that sought to put on airs and distinguish itself from the common people. Now, in two recently published works, he has not only revised his view of the *orquesta* but also extended the reach of his scholarship to include almost every important genre of Texas Mexican music from the nineteenth century to the 1990s.

The Mexican American Orquesta from the University of Texas Press covers the history of that ensemble from the *bailes* and *fandangos* of the nineteenth century to the form's decline in the early 1980s, including accounts of the orquesta tradition in Los Angeles and an intriguing ethnographic chapter describing the author's own experiences as a musician in Fresno, California. *Música Tejana*, the inaugural volume of the University of Houston's new Series in Mexican American studies, begins once again in the nineteenth century, and traces the history of Texas Mexican music, examining in turn vocal music, the conjunto, the orquesta, and contemporary Tejano music. As might be expected, there is considerable thematic, theoretical, and historical overlap between the two books. Those already familiar with Peña's published work to date will find the most new material in *The Mexican American Orquesta*. Those who are not will find in *Música Tejana* a good general overview of Texas Mexican musical history which brings various threads of Peña's work together in a single narrative.

Peña's recent works both revolve around three key theoretical armatures. The first and most important of these, which is most fully developed in *Orquesta*, is a Marxist/Hegelian interpretation of Chicano history as driven by a "dialectic of conflict." In this process, overt ethnic conflict between Anglo-Americans and Mexicans in the southwestern United States converges with latent class struggle to produce an ideology in which oppositions between capitalist and proletarian, dominant and subordinate, and "Anglo" and "Mexican" line up neatly. In practice, however, these dichotomies erode, forcing Anglos and Mexicans to continuously redefine their identities with respect to one another and to work toward more progressive social relations. One result of this process is the contradictory 'dual consciousness' of the Mexican American middle-class that emerged most prominently after World War II. This group, by many accounts, has felt caught between class-inflected ethnic loyalties and subtly racialized class identities. Peña argues that the orquesta created a fictive solution to this problem, by combining "ranchero" musical styles that evoked the culture of greater Mexico's rural poor with "jaitón" ("high-toned"), jazz-inflected styles evocative of American high-society. In an intriguing chapter of the *Orquesta* book and in sections of *Música Tejana*, Peña posits a homology between the switching between *ranchero* and jazz styles in the orquesta and the English-Spanish code-switching that is so common among Mexican Americans in Texas. The former, he calls an

aesthetic of “compound bimusicality,” arguing that in spite of its vitality, the aesthetic did not truly solve the underlying class and racial tensions that generated it. Thus, the synthesis that occurred in the final, most developed stage of the *orquesta* was ultimately unstable, falling victim to changes in the cultural economy of music in late capitalism. In this analysis, Peña sometimes seems to owe as much to Lévi-Strauss as he does to Marx.

The second theoretical armature of Peña’s work, which is also most fully developed in the *Orquesta* book, is a theory of Mexican American political generations advanced by Rodolfo Alvarez and further developed by Mario T. García. This theory sees Chicano political history as a succession of political generations, cohorts of leaders and intellectuals who share common historical experiences and outlooks. In some versions of this schema, the “Chicano generation” of leadership, though its ethnic revivalism, brings Mexican America into full political subjecthood, replacing its assimilationist predecessor, the “Mexican American generation.” Utilizing this schema, Peña argues that the music of Little Joe and others who created the “Onda Chicana” in the late 1960s and 1970s helped to forge the Chicano generation’s ideological synthesis of the contradictions driving the dialectic of conflict. However, Peña introduces a pessimistic note at the end of the usually optimistic generational narrative when he discusses the 1980s and 1990s, which he sees as a time of both political and musical decline for ethnic Mexicans in the United States.

This brings us to the third theoretical concern of Peña’s work, namely the relationship between Mexican American music and commodification, and especially the contradiction between that music’s functions as use- and exchange-values. This theoretical concern informs both books, but is most completely elaborated in *Música Tejana*. Peña places a high value on the “organic,” face-to-face ties between performer and audience that resulted initially from the relative commercial isolation of Texas Mexican music. Although he acknowledges the importance of major record labels in the formation of all of these musical styles, he argues that it was not until the 1980s that the major labels began to corrupt the communal ties surrounding these musics. He argues that the newer crop of Tejano musicians has been lured by the major labels into abandoning their local *raza* base and vainly seeking crossover success in either the U.S. country market or the international Latin American market. The result has been a bland,

“superorganic” musical spectacle, a symbol of the newfound political impotence of what Peña provocatively calls the “post-Chicano” generation. In the *Orquesta* book, this argument appears in a final chapter. In *Música Tejana*, Peña also devotes a final chapter to the 1980s and 1990s, this time describing the careers of four prominent Tejano groups in greater detail.

Both books suffer from the author’s reluctance to engage contemporary Tejano music fully. Both of Peña’s discussions of Texas Mexican music after 1980 seem a little thin, especially in comparison to the loving thickness of his descriptions of conjunto and orquesta. It is understandable, perhaps, that the Tejano phenomenon should be an afterthought to the *Orquesta* book. But *Música Tejana* disappoints in not giving a more detailed and analytical account of the speculative bubble that grew up around Tejano music in the 1980s and early 1990s. These developments could provide a fascinating case study for someone interested in the critical ethnography of consumer capitalism, but Peña’s heart seems not to be in this phase of the project, partly because he doesn’t like the music. In spite of this missed opportunity, Peña’s new work represents a significant advance in the study of Mexican American music and will be a necessary starting point for future discussions of the topic.