

Regional Hybridity in Texas Music The case of the Texas Tornados

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In 1989, musician Doug Sahm approached Cameron Randle of Arista Records with the idea of forming a Tex-Mex supergroup, a regional version of the then-popular Traveling Wilburys.¹ Whereas the collaboration of Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, George Harrison, and Roy Orbison brought to market a distinctly boomer-inflected, unrooted version of American roots music, however, the Texas Tornados would showcase the careers of four artists very much tied to the history of a regional expressive culture. The quartet of Flaco Jiménez, Doug Sahm, Augie Meyers, and Freddy Fender represented a lifetime of careers interwoven in the performance of a “Tex-Mex” music that deflated the dominant Anglo-Mexican binary in South-Central Texas. Their musical journeys over the latter half of the 20th century narrate the original hybridity of ethnocultural traditions often understood as essentially separate. In their own popular-cultural way, the Texas Tornados suggest an alternative to the history of rigid, reified divisions between Anglo and Mexican communities.

South Texas may seem a strange ground on which to make such an argument. Models of conflict have continually trumped those of convergence in a borderland where the history of early, overt violence between the two groups has long been a matter of celebration for

The careers of Texas musicians Flaco Jiménez, Doug Sahm and Freddy Fender suggest greater exchange between supposedly disparate musical genres (and ethnicities) than many students of Texas music assume. This exchange manifests itself most clearly in the artists' collaboration as the band known as the Texas Tornados, whose oeuvre reveals a high degree of cross-cultural influence in Anglo and Mexican American music.

the Anglo colonizer. From the revolt of 1836 through the Mexican War of the 1840s to the later insurgencies of Juan Cortina and the Plan de San Diego, a dominant Anglo class fought to secure a superordinate position over a tractable workforce of exploited Mexican Americans. Early on, Anglo historians fitted this protracted ethnoracial warfare to a triumphalist narrative of hearty settlers seizing the land from its irresponsible Mexican stewards.² Even ostensibly liberal scholars like J. Frank Dobie evinced ambivalence over the nature of *lo Mexicano* in Texas life, addressing the Mexican cultural heritage of South Texas in a patronizing way that took essential cultural differences for granted.³

When Chicano scholars began wrestling with these questions through scholarship, these received, experientially salient models of conflict and cultural difference persevered. In a setting of overtly racist power structures, essentialist and conflictual analyses served the progressive purposes of political mobilization. Américo Paredes issued an opening salvo with his classic volume treating the songcraft surrounding the figure of Gregorio Cortez, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad & Its Hero* (1958). From this initial text, Chicano students associated with the University of Texas' Mexican American Studies program in the following years expanded and refined the scholarly representation of a tejano community preserving its distinctive culture in the face of Anglo domination. In this view, the Mexicans of South Texas constitute an isolated, embattled community. Anglo and Mexican existed in binary opposition.

These theses ably describe the social reality of South Texas, but they leave another set of possibilities unexplored, as South Texans have long recognized cultural flows between the two communities that subvert the notion of discrete, bounded cultures. In the last decade or so, a group of scholars who came of age in the Chicano moment in South Central Texas have begun to theorize such flows, recognizing the possibilities of deep cultural convergence in the midst of the region's age-old conflict. Among these, the work of Jose Limón and Manuel H. Peña, both scholars very much interested in popular music, will figure largely in the story to follow. Limón (1998) draws parallels between the Southern US and Mexican experiences and explores the ways in which those historical parallels have been played out in the intellec-

tual, artistic, pop cultural, and political life of Texas. His strategy involves pairing Mexican American and Anglo American public figures whom he sees as having something in common and divulging the connections in their thoughts and lives.

This project of teasing commonalities from culture stands worlds apart from that which Manuel Peña first set for himself in *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto* (1985). The book, still the definitive treatment of conjunto, stands very much in the conflictual mode, and Peña goes to great lengths to assert the essential autonomy of Mexican culture in South Texas, its fundamental refusal to borrow from Anglo cultural formations.⁴ However, in his subsequent books, *The Mexican-American Orchestra* (1999a) and *Música Tejana* (1999b), Peña shows an evolution comparable to that of Limón. Their late 20th-century agreement seems to mark a moment. The convergence thesis finds a number of voices in both texts, but I shall choose one of the simpler formulations as an anchor for my own argument concerning the Texas Tornos. As Peña states, describing how music serves as a field demonstrating cultural affinities, “in their own dialectical fashion, Anglos and Mexican Americans were transforming difference into identity” (1999b:169). The divisive binary fades in significance with the practical recognition that coherent clusters of cultural traits potentially form a regional Tex-Mex identity.

Of course, this argument can easily be misread, mistaken, or taken too far. I do not propose replacing conflictual models with convergent ones, so much as I argue for a recognition of the latter in the interests of working to manage the former in thoughtful, egalitarian, and socially just ways. In discussing the transformation of Anglo-Mexican “difference into identity,” a literal “sameness” should not be read as the sought-after goal. Rather than erasing cultural difference, a nuanced theory of Anglo-Mexican convergence might complicate and enrich it. Limón, Peña and others document this deep, continuing cultural exchange, sometimes conscious and transgressive, sometimes hidden and unrecognized even by the actors involved, a sharing between communities that occurs in the face of prolonged, violent struggle.

Flaco Jiménez: El Rey de Texas

Music creates subjects in the context of sociality, and so it is with the musical genre of conjunto, which means “assembly” or “group,” its root word meaning “together.” In South Texas, conjunto gathers to itself the status of the traditional, from-the-earth, autonomous production of folk music. As such, it provides the most useful starting point in our archaeology of the Texas Tornados’ careers. Conjunto is a regional adaptation of Central European polka musics by the Mexican American working class in South Texas. Its instrumentation and tempo have evolved over time, but the most common marker of the conjunto has been the accordion. These basic definitions, placing Central Europe in South Texas and making of the accordion a Mexican instrument, seem to beg more questions than they answer.

The accordion may be the Rosetta Stone for myriad questions regarding ethnic musics in the United States. As the central symbol and instrument of conjunto, it has attracted contentious scholarly debate. Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records and ethnomusicologist Manuel Peña articulated the two main arguments regarding its history in tejano life. Strachwitz first asserted the commonsensical position that the Mexicans’ appropriation of accordion music owed to the large German and Czech communities of Central Texas.⁵ Manuel Peña took issue with the Strachwitz thesis, pointing to the 19th-century vogue for polka musics in Monterrey and northern Mexico prior to the bulk of Mexican or Central European immigration to Texas (1985:36). With ample evidence in hand, Peña takes this contrarian path to uphold his argument concerning the purity of conjunto as a native expression of the tejano working class. In this view, Mexicans used the memory of popular imported polkas in Monterrey to make something new in their new home of Texas. The narrative holds up, but it does not entirely explain away Strachwitz’s position. In fact, it ignores substantive testimony that supports Strachwitz and blinds us to the potential multivalence of cultural forms.

Thomas Scruggs splits the difference between the polar positions of Strachwitz and Peña:

The exact history of interaction between Mexican and European American populations in South Texas has yet to be documented. Yet it seems certain that the arrival of such a strong musical tradition with a community that grew to be as large and influential as the new European immigrants became could not have helped but stimulate and influence the already existing musics of a similar nature. [Scruggs 1985:16]

Scruggs' argument that the German, Czech, and Polish communities in Central Texas reinforced the existing Mexican use of the accordion seems to be borne out by the testimony of the musicians themselves, including Flaco Jiménez's father.. Santiago Jiménez, Sr., the original "Flaco" and one of conjunto's first commercially popular artists, created his music in the multiethnic, urban locale of San Antonio. Santiago Jiménez, Sr. claims that his father, Patricio Jiménez, first learned to play the accordion from German friends in New Braunfels. Santiago performed at German and Czech dances, and Germans and Czechs occasionally attended Mexican gatherings to hear him play. Santiago's son Flaco had little early, direct contact with either of these "white ethnic" communities, but he listened avidly to German and German American accordionists on the radio (Scruggs 1985:15-18). So, the urban conjunto of Flaco Jiménez was far from a pure ethnic-folk form. However, these examples also serve to validate something of Peña's intuitions regarding cultural distance. Patricio Jiménez had German friends, his son Santiago had German spectators, and his grandson Flaco began by experiencing German musics primarily through mediated, mass-cultural contact. The increasing distance points to the absorption of Germans, Czechs, and Poles into the dominant "Anglo" community rather than any historical changes in the racialized status of Mexicans in San Antonio.

So, conjunto spoke to hybridity, cultural borrowings, and convergence prior to its canonization as a pure tejano form. An evolving white-nonwhite binary explains something of this shift, but the establishment of conjunto as a ghettoized genre, as a "folk" music, ironically owes a great deal to its commercialization. In the 1920s, when record companies ventured into the hinterlands in search of product,

they did not simply record “music.” Their designation of African American blues as “race records” might be carried over to describe the entirety of their provincial projects to create niche marketing through the tool of genre. If audiences were somewhat self-segregated in the 1920s, they did not necessarily see themselves as listening to racially segregated musics. Record executives classed their product as “race,” “hillbilly,” and “Latin” as a means of ordering markets even as they solicited each ethnic genre’s artists at a single time and locale. A daily session at a San Antonio hotel, for example, might find accordionist Bruno Villareal, W. Lee O’Daniel and his Light Crust Doughboys, and bluesman Texas Alexander all waiting their turn at the microphone (Sonnichsen and Strachwitz 1975:30). If early country music was actually a “white blues,” or conjunto a “Mexican polka,” then commercial recording obscured these affinities through codified racial-musical genres.

As with segregated institutions, however, this development was not without its benefits. The first wave of conjunto recording artists, Bruno Villareal, Narciso Martínez, and Santiago Jiménez, Sr., became household names, stars within “their” communities, and the recognized arbiters of a distinct musical style. Up-and-coming artists would still attend each others’ performances to learn new songs, but now they could listen to each other repeatedly, privately, through the commodifying magic of the phonograph. Between German American broadcasts and his father’s lessons, however, Flaco Jiménez did not pay so much attention to his peers’ recordings. In a sense, Flaco was born to the style, but his rise to fame was not without its snags. When the traditional, authenticated young Flaco finally decided to follow in his father’s footsteps, for example, and showed up for his first public performance in 1955, the Mexican American operator of the dance hall canceled it and sent Flaco home because of his “pachuco” appearance (Scruggs 1985:19).

Flaco kept at it, and he developed his father’s music into a distinctive San Antonio sound that, despite Peña’s objections, was marked by its overt allusions to German, Czech, and Polish accordion styles. Central European forms thus “crossed over” to a Mexican American audience, and Flaco cultivated this cultural exchange. At

the prime of his career, in the 1970s, Flaco returned the favor, as it were, crossing conjunto back to Euro-American audiences. A number of macro-cultural trends made this crossover possible and profitable. The folk revival of the 1960s, replete with countercultural primitivism, paved the way for the 1970s' early gestures towards a trans-genre "world music." These romantic countercultural and commercial incorporations of the Other, strangely enough, dovetailed with the newsworthiness of the radical Chicano movement to open the American market for another round in its recurrent, frequently patronizing, infatuation with all things "Latin." Jiménez had performed and recorded with Anglo artists for some time, most notably San Antonio's Tex-Mex Anglo *par excellence*, Doug Sahm, but it seems that official "crossover" requires hype. The "crossover process" does not denote grass-roots cultural exchange so much as the attempts of the recording industry to reconstruct, in partial fashion, the fluid nature of musical production they fractured through genre codification.

Because of the ghettoizing of conjunto from mainstream musical trends, even such a roots music luminary as Ry Cooder could remain ignorant of it until the mid-1970s. At this time, Cooder "discovered" Flaco for his *Chicken Skin Music* project (1977). A documentary about the album made for the *Reflejos del barrio* series recounts the journey that brought the curious Cooder to what he perceived as the "authentic" untapped talent of San Antonio conjunto. In a device Cooder and Wim Wenders would later deploy in the filming of *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), the movie begins with Ry Cooder driving into San Antonio, listening to conjunto, and describing the personal journey whereby he "discovered" this music (Bruni and Bryant 1977). Once, while driving around Los Angeles, Cooder tuned in to a conjunto song on the radio. It struck him so profoundly, Cooder recalls, that he had to pull the car to the side of the road to let the rapture engulf him. He went straight to Chris Strachwitz, who lent him some old 78s, and soon took a trip to San Antonio with Strachwitz to meet Flaco Jiménez, the source, and arrange to record with him.⁶ "He had already played with Doug Sahm, and so I figured, well, he can play with that gringo, he can play with me, too" (Bruni and Bryant 1977). For someone as into roots as Cooder, his comments seem to show little

knowledge of the mezclado origins of conjunto.

It's obvious that conjunto music is one of the last strong musical styles that's distinctive, you know, that's kind of different and really is what it is. It isn't a weird mixture of things. Like what soul music kind of has become, you know, sort of pop and r & b and jazz all mixed together. I don't think much of that. That's just money to me. Business. Big, big business. But Flaco is playing a traditional conjunto. [Bruni and Bryant 1977]

Jiménez brought a very different approach to their collaboration than Cooder. Whereas Cooder worked in a preservationist vein, Jiménez, as a musician, took the opportunity to expand his musical register. Ironically, Thomas Scruggs traces the blues notes that have increasingly entered Flaco's improvisations to this period when Cooder capitalized on Flaco's supposed traditionalism (1985:56). This represents an interesting wrinkle in the Anglo-Mexican-African American triad, where a California Anglo carries African American cultural registers into what he sees as a purely Mexican American form. Of course, Scruggs' connection of Jiménez to Cooder through the blues may be a little too simple. As we shall see, numerous venues existed in San Antonio since at least the late 1950s where Anglo, African American, and Mexican American musics met and blended. Flaco had already recorded with several of the stars of this proto-rock scene prior to *Chicken Skin Music*. Doug Sahm, for example, "that gringo" with whom Cooder equated himself, had invited Flaco to New York to participate in one of Sahm's first attempts, in 1973, to create a Tex-Mex supergroup. Jiménez could have learned the blues from Cooder a few years later, but it is more likely that he learned it in these Atlantic sessions or before from such San Antonio Tex-Mex figures as Sahm, Augie Meyers, Jack Barber, Rocky Morales, or Sunny Ozuna. But we're picking up the story of "that gringo" in midstream. Let us back up to ask: What gringo is this?

Doug Sahm: The Texas Tornado

Like Ry Cooder, Doug Sahm enjoyed the music of Flaco Jiménez, but his relationship with Tex-Mex musics differs fundamentally from that of Cooder. For one thing, Doug Sahm was a native of San Antonio. For another, he had been playing Tex-Mex musics of varying stripes since at least the age of fourteen. In fact, he had been playing an Anglo ethnic music even prior to that, as he had become a local country-western celebrity by the age of nine. Like Flaco Jiménez, then, Sahm grew up, became an individuated subject, in and through music. As “Little Doug Sahm,” Doug Sahm performed with the greats in central Texas country music. In one of the iconic moments of local pop-cultural history, Sahm performed on Hank Williams’ knee during the country-western martyr’s last concert in Texas, just weeks before his death on New Years’ Day, 1953 (Patoski 2000).

As a child prodigy, the young star stood poised for meteoric ascent when the Grand Ole Opry invited Little Doug Sahm to Nashville to become a regular, but his mother decided he should finish junior high instead. It’s best that Mama Sahm kept Little Doug in town for his education. The country-western citadel of Nashville could not offer him anything like the Eastwood Country Club or the Tiffany or Ebony or Blue Note Lounges, African American blues clubs or mixed Mexican-Anglo venues he began frequenting and performing in from around the age of twelve (Patoski 2000). It is a stock narrative of white musical performance, these visits to the “other side of the tracks” in search of authenticity. We could brand Sahm as a pre-teen race rebel, but it might be worthwhile to remember, too, that Sahm’s crossings to the “other side of the tracks” were by and large metaphorical. These clubs he visited were, after all, in his own neighborhoods, a part of his own community.

Soon, Sahm became a fixture in the mixed clubs and a featured performer at the Tiffany Lounge where the first wave of Tex-Mex rock-and-roll bands held court. Sahm performed with or for groups like the Markays, the Dell Kings, the Spot Barnett Band, and ? and the Mysterians, and several of them recorded on a label called Harlem Records (Sahm 2000). These interracial groups in San Antonio in the

mid- to late 1950s complicate the narrative of rock-and-roll's origins as a synthesis of a white-black binary. White-black convergence (or theft) works as a trope for Memphis and Sun Records, but out West, the marginal subcultures surrounding early rock consisted of Mexican American youth in addition to whites and blacks. The Tennessee story takes us through Elvis Presley and Howlin' Wolf, Jerry Lee Lewis and Otis Redding, but makes people like Buddy Holly and Richie Valens look like bizarre, *sui generis* regional isolates.

However, if we shift the focus of rock history to Texas, we see that Tex-Mex groups played a significant role in establishing the insurgent genre. The Tex-Mexness of it all is so easily forgotten because the Mexican-ness of the artists was invariably obscured in the interests of commercial propriety. For example, ? and the Mysterians ("96 Tears") erased their lead singer's Hispanic surname with a question mark.⁷ Similarly, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs ("Wooly Bully," "Little Red Riding Hood") explained away their lead singer Domingo Samudio's complexion through headdresses, staffs, and other Egyptian exotica. Further, both ? and Sam the Sham left Texas to achieve fame, Sam for the music capital of Memphis, ? for the unlikely rock center of Flint, Michigan. By the early 1960s, Sahm, too, had formed a mixed Anglo-Mexican rock-and-roll band, a group that concocted the most elaborate ruse to erase the Mex-ness of Central Texas rock. The Sir Douglas Quintet ventured furthest from Texas to achieve fame without ever leaving home (Koster 1998:94-95).

To set matters straight, the erasure was not Sahm's idea. This may be an appropriately elliptical juncture to introduce the curious author of this ruse, Huey "Crazy Cajun" Meaux, the sort of shady huckster deeply involved in the origins of the rock-and-roll business. Born into a family of Cajun sharecroppers, Meaux claims to be as musical in his origins as Jiménez and Sahm. As a child, he played drums in a band for which his father Pappy Te-Tan played lead accordion (Patoski 1996). Early on, his family relocated from Louisiana to the Port Arthur-Beaumont area, where Meaux became a disc jockey, sock hop promoter, and barber before he began recording r&b, soul, conjunto, and Cajun musics in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Meaux enjoyed some regional success capitalizing on the music of local communities, but

then came the British musical invasion of 1964. Meaux's success evaporated as the Beatles and their copycats knocked Meaux's productions off the charts. With a head for business, he realized that something had to be done.

So I took a little Philips phonograph, bought all the Beatles LPs, went to a motel with a case of Thunderbird wine and sat down to figure out what these cats were into. After two days of drinking and listening, I got it. They were playing the beat on the beat. So I called Doug Sahm and had him come over and played the stuff. I told him to write me a song like that and start growing his hair, and he came back in a few weeks with "She's About a Mover." [Kirsch 1975]

Meaux went so far as to release the single on a "London Records" label and dressed the newly christened "Sir Douglas Quintet" in mod suits, boots, and mop tops. Press materials furthered the impression that the Quintet was a bunch of lovable English lads.

The charade worked well enough, insofar as its goal was to attract consumers. The Quintet's second single, "She's About a Mover," went to the top of the charts and earned them an appearance on the televised teen dance program "Hullabaloo." "Hullabaloo" is about as far as the English charade got. As Meaux recounts, "we did the 'Hullabaloo' show and the host was Trini Lopez, who knew us all. Trini just fell on the floor laughing when he saw us and introduced us as the Sir Douglas Quintet from Manchester via San Antonio" (Kirsch 1975). Doug Sahm's heavy Texas accent during the interview portion of the show did not help matters. It was an interesting image coup. Three of the five members of the quintet were Mexican Americans, now rendered literally as Anglos for the American public. In a sense, Sahm became doubly English-Anglo by means of this maneuver, perhaps some cosmic retribution for his earlier divestment from whiteness.

The ruse is even more interesting when we notice that musically, what producer Meaux claims to be the key to the Quintet's success as Beatles clones (playing the beat on the beat) is exactly the element of their music that other authors point to as the lesson that the Quintet learned from conjunto and imported into rock and roll. Tho-

mas Scruggs demonstrates the Tex-Mex referent of “She’s About a Mover” by looking at a conjunto cover of the song by Carlos Guzman (1985:33). Guzman “plays the beat on the beat,” as any conjunto artist would, but replaces Augie Meyers’ Farfisa organ with the traditional accordion. This accordion-Farfisa conflation gets at the defining feature of the Quintet’s sound, Polish American Augie Meyers’ pounding oompah organ. The association of this Farfisa sound with Mexican music extended to the Quintet’s demasking on “Hullabaloo.” As a journalist remembers watching the program, “It was supposed to be an English band, but I was pretty sure there weren’t any large Mexican organ players in the UK” (Marsh 2002). Meyers may have been playing “Mexican organ,” but he was no Mexican organ player. In this instance, the Quintet’s Tex-Mex music blew the cover of their English-Angloness while simultaneously masking the fact that Meyers *really* was Anglo, in the Texas scheme of things. Perhaps the Polish American Meyers can be seen as unstably Anglo because he and his music came out of the aforementioned ethnically mixed polka performances by Santiago and Flaco Jiménez (Scruggs 1985:31-32).

The Sir Douglas Quintet, with national name recognition, a successful producer, a string of hits in 1965, and an identifiable Tex-Mex-cum-English-Anglo sound, stood poised for larger successes, but within a year, police busted Doug Sahn for possession of marijuana in Corpus Christi. With their long hair, rock and roll lifestyle, and racial liberalism, the Quintet was already halfway hippie, after all, and so most of the group took the bust as a sign that they should move to the more liberal environs of San Francisco. A reconfigured Quintet became charter members of the Haight-Ashbury scene. While Jerry Garcia and his circle were just discovering and incorporating roots musics into psychedelia, Sahn brought years of experience in blues clubs, honky-tonks, and polka dance halls to the music he performed for the new counterculture. Sahn never felt quite at home there, though, and a large number of his compositions from this period, on albums such as *Honkey Blues* (1968) and *Mendocino* (1969), concerned his nostalgia for San Antonio and Texas (Flippo 1974). As he queries in one song, “Whatever happened to the man inside/ the real old Texas me?” “Texas Me” contrasts Sahn’s memories of a real, authentic Texas against the

hollow quest for that very same notion of authenticity in the northern California counterculture (Sahm 1992).

Nevertheless, Sahm remained in northern California off and on until 1971. By then, the call of home seemed to be too much to bear, and Sahm returned to Central Texas. He even recorded a homecoming album, the curiously titled *The Return of Doug Saldaña* (1971). Part and parcel of Sahm's return to Texas was a return to what he sees as his own participation in Mexican-ness. When asked about the pseudonymic album title, Sahm said, "Saldaña is the name the Mexicans gave me. They said I had so much Mexican in me that I needed a Mexican name" (Levy 2002). Sahm's forays into theories of ethnic relations are often clumsy from an academic perspective. Nevertheless, an artist's unwillingness or inability to address deep levels of cultural exchange on a formal, discursive level does not necessarily interfere with his or her ability to communicate that exchange through artistic practice.

Sahm's claims to possession of the cultural markers of Mexican-ness, however, were not completely without merit. Sahm frequently revisioned himself affirmatively as Chicano in song, and these compositions often enjoyed success among Mexican American audiences. "Chicano," one of the most well-known of these songs, contains the telling chorus:

Chicano, soy Chicano
 all the brothers come together right now
 and all across the USA
 jump up and say
 Chicano, soy Chicano, right on [Sahm 1992]

As Alan Wald writes of cultural cross-dressing, "it may be true that the position of being 'outside' a culture can never be transcended. However, all outside positions are not the same" (1994:159). Though not of Mexican American parentage, Sahm's upbringing suggests a partial "insider" position with regards to Mexican American heritage.

Central Texas in the early 1970s was a different place than the one Sahm's "real old Texas" self had left five years earlier. The nation-

alism of the Chicano movement and changing economic realities meant that the scenes that had been reaching towards integration in San Antonio in the late 1950s and early 1960s were falling into a reaffirmation of the traditionally asserted Anglo-Mexican binary. “Doug doesn’t go back to San Antone much anymore; the cops in Balcones Heights are after him; the younger Chicanos who never heard ‘Mover’ don’t know who he is; and the brown and black clubs don’t favor white faces” (Flippo 1973a). Consequently, Sahn chose Austin as his new home and became a central figure in the progressive country circles then putting the city on the nation’s cultural map. If somewhat estranged from his hometown, he continued working in a Tex-Mex vein and brought a number of San Antonio artists to town. He was involved in the Soap Creek Saloon’s “Tex-Mex Extravaganzas” that introduced Freddy Fender, Flaco Jiménez, Rocky Morales, and Esteban Jordan to young Anglo audiences (Soap Creek Saloon Archives 1977). In fact, Freddy Fender’s appearance at the Soap Creek Saloon in 1974 represents the culmination of Sahn’s attempts to nurse Fender’s career back to health while he was toiling away as a mechanic in the Valley (Cf. Patoski 1974b).

When Sahn covered Fender’s big 1959 hit, “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights,” on *The Return of Doug Saldaña*, he began it with the dedication, “Now a song written by the great Freddy Fender. Freddy this is for you, wherever you are.” In 1971, that “wherever you are” was no mere rhetorical flourish. Few people knew where the former rock star Freddy Fender was at the time. A little over a year after Fender’s appearance at Soap Creek with Sahn, Fender received the most promising male vocalist award for 1975 from the Country Music Association in Nashville. This was not simply Sahn’s doing. There was some Huey Meaux gimmickry in the meantime, but Sahn supported the Mexican American artists whom he considered to be his mentors and peers. As with Fender, so with Flaco Jiménez and Rocky Morales, on whom he insisted for his aforementioned Atlantic sessions in New York in 1973. There, Sahn brought a San Antonio Tex-Mex supergroup (Jiménez, Morales, Meyers, himself) together with Dallas jazzman “Fathead” Newman, New Orleans eccentric Dr. John, and future Traveling Wilbury Bob Dylan, all under the guidance of legendary

producer Jerry Wexler.

Sahm produced a great body of work in the 1970s. He delighted in the honors bestowed upon his collaborators Flaco Jiménez and Freddy Fender. He became somewhat disenchanted, however, with the posturing he sensed in Austin once the “cosmic cowboys” (Hall N.d.) of the early 1970s morphed into the macho-marketable “outlaws” (Flippo 1973b) of the decade’s later years. Sahm had served as a poster boy for Austin’s countercultural confluence. As Joe Nick Patoski remembers, “The back-to-the-roots album *The Return of Doug Saldaña* — whose cover featured longhaired Doug in cowboy hat, a bottle of Big Red in hand — signaled to Texans in exile that it was okay to come back home, that we wouldn’t get our asses kicked for looking or being different” (2000). He supported that community so long as it remained open and experimental, but once the self-described “outlaws” like David Allan Coe began revaluing redneck stereotypes and behavior, Sahm decided to remove himself from the scene. Fed up by the early 1980s, Doug Sahm reformed a version of the Sir Douglas Quintet with his old friend Augie Meyers and moved to Stockholm. There, he recorded one of Scandinavia’s biggest regional singles of all time, “Meet Me in Stockholm” and basked in the glory of northern European fame. Doug Sahm had continually reinvented and renamed himself to refit the Texas scene, as Little Doug Sahm, Sir Douglas, the Texas Tornado, Doug Saldaña, or simply Doug Sahm, but by the early 1980s, he felt he needed to do something more if he was to reconcile with his South Texas roots.

Freddy Fender: El Bebop Kid

Another musician who might have something to say about the complicated subjects of renaming and refitting is Baldemar Huerta, known to most as Freddy Fender. Fender’s musical story reads as conventionally as does Sahm’s. Whereas Little Doug Sahm lived the “child prodigy” and “other side of the tracks” narratives, Fender hearkened back to an even older convention in American music history. A native of San Benito, near the Tex-Mex border, he claims that “his earliest recollections of singing occurred in the cotton fields around Texas. The Valley, Conroe, Plainview, Bryan, Lufkin — wherever the Huerta fam-

ily had jobs. He sang along with others in the fields — Anglos, Blacks, Latins. And today he attributes this group singing as one of the things that kept his spirit up while his back was breaking” (Chenier 1976). Huerta did grow up as an itinerant worker in the cotton fields in the 1940s. Whether or not his musical interest started there, music was not the first avenue that Huerta pursued in order to escape that life. As soon as he was eligible, Huerta joined the Marines. He saw military service as an exit from fieldwork, but the job obviously did not fit his demeanor. By his own account, he spent more time in the brig than on duty, often for drinking and fighting, and had a number of run-ins with arrogant gringo officers (Hance 1976).

After leaving the Marines, Fender took up his first love of music. He began by playing conjunto, but soon carved out a niche as “El Elvis del Valle,” performing r&b numbers for Rio Grande Valley teenyboppers. He was a regional sensation, known for his 1959 classic “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights” and a Spanish-language version of “Don’t Be Cruel.” Record executives came by to capitalize on his success, wanting to make him more than a mere regional star. One, Wayne Morgan, made him change his name from Baldemar Huerta to Freddy Fender to render him more jukebox-friendly. When others infringed further on his perceived markers of Mexican-ness, however, he balked. When Imperial Records offered him a contract, for example, there was a hitch. As Fender recalls, “They saw me and they said, ‘My God, he looks so Mexican.’ They thought they could cut my sideburns and make me a gringo” (Dew 1976). Fender kept his sideburns, in many circles a Southern or working-class signifier as much as a “Mexican” one, and went elsewhere with his talent.

Like Sahn, a drug bust derailed Fender’s modest success. However, whereas Sahn’s bust bought a slap on the wrist and an exodus to California, Fender’s possession of two marijuana cigarettes in Baton Rouge in 1960 earned him three years in Angola State Penitentiary. Though Sahn’s countercultural stylings made him a target of legal harassment, Sahn’s and Fender’s divergent sentences underscore the much greater, systemic weight of race in mid-century Southern jurisprudence. Upon his release in 1963, Fender performed around New Orleans for a few years before returning to the Rio Grande Valley. Once

back home, he played music on the weekends, but his celebrity had largely evaporated. He divided the week between his day job as a mechanic and sociology classes at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, hoping to work in the field of prison reform after his unsavory experience in Louisiana. By the early 1970s, the “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights” of his rock-and-roll youth seemed well behind him (Claypool 1975).

Enter Huey “Crazy Cajun” Meaux. Like Sahm and Fender, Meaux’s career in the intervening years had been set back substantially by run-ins with the law.⁸ The common experience of incarceration led Fender to seek Meaux out as he made a last stab at stardom. According to the Crazy Cajun, when Fender turned up at Sugar Hill Studios in Houston, “I asked him, ‘Why you come to me?’ He said, ‘Because you done been to jail where I been. You’ll understand me’” (Patoski 1975). Meaux engineered a comeback for Freddy Fender that he narrates much as he does the story of the Sir Douglas Quintet. Meaux became convinced that the challenge facing Fender was one of genre, finding the proper ethno-musical channel for this particular artist to find his most profitable audience. After failed attempts that included such gimmicks as Spanish-language reggae, Meaux convinced Fender to record the country-western standard “Before the Next Teardrop Falls” (Bruni and Bryant 1975). It was an explosive hit with country audiences.

Fender entered the Anglo-typed country field reluctantly, but he came to rationalize genre-bending by recognizing country-western’s continuity with the blues, r&b, and rock numbers he had been playing for years. As he summed up their thematic unity: “Here I am getting drunk because you left me and as soon as I get out of here I’m gonna go kill the guy who’s in love with you. You know, songs that are really down to earth” (Bruni and Bryant 1975). Meaux and Fender followed up “Before the Next Teardrop Falls” with a re-recording of Fender’s 1959 hit “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights.” Fender took the opportunity to return the favor Doug Sahm extended with his 1971 cover of the song. Fender’s 1974 “Wasted Days” opens with Fender intoning, “I’d like to dedicate this to my partner, my soul partner, Mr. Doug Sahm, better known as Sir Douglas Quintet, from San Antonio, wherever you are, brother” (Bruni and Bryant 1975). Fender would also make Sahm’s

“She’s About a Mover” a staple of his own performances.

Freddy Fender’s hook in the country market, his trademark, was alternating between English and Spanish lyrics in the course of the same song. He had been doing this for years in front of bilingual audiences in the Valley. Such code-switching was second nature in San Benito, but garnered a great deal of attention when it hit Anglo country audiences. Disc jockey Speedy Perez saw it as a cultural-political opening:

When a stone cold redneck who doesn’t like Chicanos or blacks hears a song like “Before the Next Teardrop Falls,” that just erases, it don’t even enter into his mind that at some juncture in the song the guy starts singing in Spanish, he doesn’t flash on that until later and then he goes “well, that’s beautiful,” and that makes him stop and think about things a little differently. [Bruni and Bryant 1975]

This seems a rather idealistic reading and goes against Fender’s own assumptions regarding his place as a Chicano celebrity in an Anglo genre:

If they’re still racists, they keep it under control. You see, to them I’m not Mexican anymore. Now I’m something they hear on the radio and see on TV. They want to see what I can do, and hide whatever feelings they have, if they do have any. [Sherwood 1975]

If Perez speaks a bit too idealistically, then Fender exaggerates the degree to which his ethnicity is frozen by his performance in country music.

Nevertheless, Fender used his position in political, transformative ways. When he says “I’ve done more for the cause of Mexican-Americans with my music than carrying a protest sign ever did,” he is not being quite so cynical as he sounds. Fender often employed his celebrity as a soapbox. Some celebrities look hard for a cause, but Fender already had a favorite, the prison reform he had sought ever since spending three years in a Louisiana prison for a minor drug offense. Fender performed on variety programs hosted by such enter-

tainment stalwarts as Bob Hope, Dean Martin, and Johnny Carson and could occasionally slip some sort of political appeal into his appearance. This is evident from a letter by Steven Wegner of Abilene to “Hughie Moe,” Fender’s producer, which states that “Freddie’s comments [on a televised variety program] concerning the Mexican National Citizen who is still in prison at age 79 after fifty years there were unbelievable.” Mr. Wegner was kind enough to include a check for five dollars and high praise for Fender’s efforts in the letter (Wegner N.d.).

Fender’s very position as a proud Chicano (“I am not a patriotic American. I am a patriotic Mexican-American.”) singing to conservative country-western audiences could be read as political action (Hance 1976). Fender himself was not one to respect genre and took his newfound status as a country-western singer in stride:

My roots are in Chicano music, black music, and a lot of that old rock and roll. But I had the good fortune of recording a country song and all of a sudden I’m a country western entertainer. If that’s what puts beans on the table, that’s what I’m gonna stick with. I’d be an idiot if I didn’t. I’d always thought I was a real groovy pachuco dude with all this jive — long hair, sideburns, chain hanging from my pocket. I was a San Benito city slicker and here I come to find out I’m Freddy Fender, country-western singer. [Patoski N.d.]

By singing in Spanish, Freddy Fender introduced a minor, but still potentially radical, variant of “compound bimusicality” into one of the most conservative commercial genres of popular music (Peña 1999b:163-170). Manuel Peña coined the term to describe the code-switching he reads into the Onda Chicana movement of the early 1970s, when groups like Little Joe y la Familia joined *orquestra tejana*, jazz and funk musics in new ways that ignored the generic conventions of musical essentialism.⁹ Compound bimusicality consists of alternating musical “languages,” such as the Mexican *ranchera* and American jazz within the same piece to “form new and hitherto unimaginable musical gestalts” (1999b:163). While the alternation of English and Spanish lyrics presents a more serial, less constitutive example of compound

bimusicality than, say, the rhythms of an old Sir Douglas Quintet number, it still joins cultural languages assumed to be mutually exclusive.

As employed by Freddy Fender, Johnny Rodriguez, and others, lyrical code-switching within a song often seems to consist of speaking first to one audience, then another, rather than singing to a mixed, bilingual audience.¹⁰ Of course, there is also the possibility that this compound nature can be contained within the lyrics of either language, border Spanglish being the most lyrically bimusical language of all. Discussing his early hit “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights” with a reporter from the *Chicano Times*, Fender meditates on the many grammatical errors he made in writing the song. It begins “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights/ I have left for you behind.” “Qué clase inglés es eso? I only had an eighth grade education. No podía hablar el inglés correcto. But they bought it anyway. I guess they knew what I meant” (*Chicano Times* 1974).

The pocho bimusicality of Freddy Fender looks to be a decent model for further experiments, as Fender is always willing to bring together traditions commonly understood as disparate. He exhibits, in artistic practice, the *mezclado* cultural understanding that Limón and Peña explore in theory. Reflecting on regional genres, Fender says, “Polka is very much related to country music — especially in Texas, where there’s two cultures slowly merging into one. I’ve got all different kinds of people in my audience right now. People who like country and people who like pop — gringos and Chicanos” (Patoski 1975). Here, Fender addresses the Limón-Peña convergence thesis decades before the intellectual moment of my introduction. Freddy Fender recognizes the creative complication, and possible deflation, of the Anglo-Mexican binary, and brought this recognition to the collaborative practice with which this paper concludes: the Texas Tornado.

The Texas Tornado

Sahm and Meyers tired of Sweden rather quickly, and headed home to Texas. Shortly thereafter, in 1989, while Sahm and Flaco Jiménez were touring together at Clifford Antone’s behest, Augie Meyers and Freddy Fender joined the two on stage for an improvisa-

tional performance at Slim's 303 Club in San Francisco. With this, Sahm revived his old idea of a Tex-Mex supergroup and formed the Texas Tornados. The four musicians had played together in various permutations over the years, but this particular combination and this particular time served as a fruitful punctuation to the careers of four grizzled Tex-Mex veterans. They released their first album in 1990, reinvigorating their old hits by stamping them with the "compound bimusical" abilities of four giants in Tex-Mex music.

Their self-titled debut album became a "crossover" success akin to the vogue experienced by Cooder's *Buena Vista Social Club* project; unlike that album, this production connected with the communities it nostalgically evoked. Reprise Records simultaneously issued a successful Spanish-language version of the album (Graff and Mansfield 1997:431). Over the next decade, this album was joined by four others and a greatest-hits compilation. The group received many accolades, including a Grammy.

Interestingly, although the songs that Sahm, Meyers, Jiménez, and Fender recorded over the years evinced a tremendous variety of themes, those they chose to re-record as the Tornados centered on romantic desire and jealousy. At first hearing, such songs as "Who Were You Thinkin' Of?" and "Hey Baby (Que Pasó)?" suggest that these particular Tex-Mex convergences rest on a shared notion of patriarchy. This notion is debatable, but an alternate reading re-centers our attention on the codes through which popular music marks structural commonalities of status. As Manuel Peña queries,

Is the presence of the treacherous woman in the blues, the ranchera, and honky-tonk songs simply the result of commercial diffusion, a popular theme inevitably crossing market boundaries? Or is there a structural correspondence among the three groups that in some way predisposed them toward a common goal in symbolically articulating a shared status? Although the first alternative is plausible, the latter seems more compelling. [Peña 1999b:57]

Again, Fender beats Peña to the punch with his summation of the commonalties in these genres: "Here I am getting drunk because you left me and as soon as I get out of here I'm gonna go kill the guy

who's in love with you.”

These fantasies, then, trace submerged class unity in the face of the same elite who asserted racial essentialism as a means to secure their own dominance in South Texas. In their choice of themes common to the “native” genres of Anglo-country and Mexican-conjunto, the Tornados cheat race-as-false-consciousness even as they value the ethnocultural textures of South Texas life. And, they make fun music to dance to in the process. Doug Sahm's untimely death, at age 58, in 1999 disrupted their cultural production, but these careers stand as a repository of symbolic power for future artists and scholars who wish to destabilize the regional Anglo-Mexican binary that continues to buttress structural inequalities in the state of Texas.

ENDNOTES

1. Clifford Antone has brought to my attention the fact that the quartet had performed together with his guidance, though not under the Texas Tornados name, prior to the involvement of Cameron Randle.

2. This history speaks to the process of racialization explored by Theodore Allen in *The Invention of the White Race* (1994).

3. A decent introduction to the subject of Dobie's representation of Mexicans in Texas can be found in Limón 1994. Viewing the historiography of Anglo-Mexican relations in Texas through the lineage of Webb, Dobie, Paredes, Limón, and Peña is, of course, a simplification, but one that should serve our purposes here.

4. The politics behind Peña's early works are no mystery. His argument concerning conjunto's cultural autonomy stems from his participation in the Chicano nationalist movement.

5. Strachwitz outlines his thesis in a series of liner notes for albums in his *Texas-Mexican Border Music* between 1974 and 1976.

6. These same 78s are now safely preserved in the Chris Strachwitz Collection at the Center for American History.

7. It remains unclear just who “?” is. Most theorists identify him as either Reeto Rodriguez or Rudy Martinez, but ? is now his legal name. His own pronouncements reveal little. According to the music reference website All Music Guide, ? “frequently claimed he had been born on Mars and lived among the dinosaurs in a past life, and that voices from the future had revealed he would be performing ‘96 Tears’ in the year 10,000.”

8. Meaux had been convicted under the Mann Act in the late 1960s for transporting a prostitute across state lines to a disc jockey convention.

While Sahm and Fender would steer more or less straight in the ensuing years, Meaux would eventually be convicted for child pornography in the mid-1990s, stunning the Texas music community. He remains in Huntsville today. Cf. Patoski 1996.

9. It is an interesting and useful concept, but I would argue, and have been over the course of this paper, that compound bimusicality in South Texas has much deeper roots than La Onda Chicana. After all, *orquestra tejana* itself, of which Peña is the preeminent historian, is a melding of Mexican *norteño* music and “Anglo” big band swing. Cf. Peña 1999b:163;174.

10. Johnny Rodriguez hit the country-western charts concurrently with Freddy Fender. He, too, played with the prospect of re-naming over the course of his career. Born Juan Rodriguez, he went by a number of Anglo names in his youth before settling on the hybrid Johnny Rodriguez as his professional name following his “discovery” in the Texas Hill Country. His desire to foreground his ethnicity would seem to owe much to the fact that he entered popular music in the mid-1970s, following the crest of the Chicano movement, as opposed to Freddy Fender’s original heyday in the 1950s.

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