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Music in the 21st century

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ABSTRACT

Mexican-American Conjunto music of South Texas is taught outside of the modalities of traditional community cultural transfer in newly created Conjunto ensemble programmes in regional colleges and universities as well as in emerging lower school programmes. This article argues that these new efforts to teach Conjunto music in local ensemble programmes are a model for how regional culture in the United States can be simultaneously preserved as well as taught in community-embedded ways in the absence of state music programmes. They signal the creation of sustainability in culture and in local institutions. Conjunto ensemble programmes bridge the divide between rich folk cultural forms and the incompletely realised or implemented concepts of intangible heritage in the United States, where regional music is fast disappearing or losing coherence and culture, and is often reshaped into something closer to a commodity. Fostering sustainability in Conjunto music and culture through ensembles remains explicitly a locally-sourced and politically committed approach.

Keywords

Conjunto music, sustainable music, ensemble programmes, Mexican-American music and culture, American regional music

The word *Conjunto* means 'group' in Spanish, but in Texas the name refers to a specific musical genre with a defined structure, repertoire, style, and social context. Conjunto is a virtuoso form of music featuring a fast and heavily ornamented diatonic button accordion played in

conjunction with a unique, twelve-string acoustic bass called a *bajo sexto*. The music is fast, lively and driving, played for dancing and often described as *musica alegre*, or 'happy music'. Among the most distinctive regional musical styles developed in the United States, Conjunto

music stands as an enduring symbol of musical artistry, of working class culture and of community life, and of *Tejano* (Mexican-Texan) identity.¹ Conjunto has been studied by academics and the broad outlines of its origins are well known. The music and the dance culture that evolved alongside it had a unique, syncretic development in the early 1920s in the Mexican-American communities of San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley, and has been danced to and played by the generations of people who produced the distinct cultural geography of South Texas.²

The origins of Conjunto music in Texas date to the end of the nineteenth century, when European instruments began to be imported into southern Texas and traditional Mexican *Orquestas Típicas* adopted accordions, violins, and especially new musical structures like the polka. This area of the state had significant communities of German, Polish, and Czech immigrants who brought their music with them, most importantly the polka. Mexican-Americans, though socially and politically isolated from these immigrant groups, absorbed their music and combined it with the sensibilities and a distinctly regional appeal to working class audiences. Conjunto was first recorded in the 1930s by a group of innovators like Narciso Martínez, Santiago Almeida, Pedro Ayala, and Santiago Jiménez, Sr., and continued to evolve as a distinct style throughout the

1950s. Though rooted in tradition, the music remains open to stylistic developments and has incorporated many new sounds since the formative era. Discernable important sub-regional variants emerged in San Antonio, Houston, Corpus Christi, and the Rio Grande Valley. Musicians and bands like Conjunto Bernal, Tony de la Rosa, Valerio Longoria, Flaco Jiménez (Santiago Jiménez's son), Esteban Jordan, Joel Guzman and others have added further elements of *cumbia*, country, rock, blues, R&B, three part harmony, and even Latin jazz to the Mexicanized polka core without diminishing the music's original *Tejano* identity.³ Modern Conjunto bands now almost always amplify the *bajo sexto* and include electric bass and drums, and sometimes other instruments, but the emphasis in Conjunto remains on the accordion and *bajo*. The lyrical content of the songs tends to cover many topics from lost love to drinking, but danceable rhythms are always at the heart of the music.

Traditionally, Conjunto musicians learned to play the music at a young age from their families or from accomplished musicians in their communities. Historically there have been no formal institutions or structures in place to teach the music, and certainly no written materials. The Mexican-American communities in the Rio Grande Valley were in fact often migrant workers in the early years of Conjunto, and the



Figure 1
Father and son jam with *bajo sexto* and accordion at the *Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio*, May, 2007.
Photo. Skye Ochsner Margolies



Figure 2
Boy trying out a new accordion at the *Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio*, May, 2010.
Photo. Daniel S. Margolies

institutionalisation of life and culture there was slow to develop. As a result, the tradition was handcrafted, localised, and idiosyncratic. Recorded music came largely from newly emerging regional record labels in South Texas such as *Ideal*, *Del Valle Records*, and *Hacienda Records*, and from small radio stations in the region. Today a major source for traditional recordings of the music is *Arhoolie Records*. The Arhoolie Foundation created the Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings, an online digital archive of recordings and information hosted by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.⁴ The music, instruments, and other artifacts are housed and honoured at the Texas Conjunto Music Hall of Fame and Museum and at the Narciso Martinez Cultural Arts Center in San Benito.

Conjunto is principally dance music with an emphasis on the polka. Older style dances like *huapangos*, waltzes, *redovas*, and schottisches that were a key part of the early repertoire are no longer as popular, though they are still played. Conjunto was popular in early 'public for-pay dances' called *bailes de negocio*, which were often held on a temporary wooden platform near where workers lived and where men paid for the opportunity to dance. New dance styles such as *el taquachito* (the opossum) have emerged in the music and have come to characterise the music and its culture. The diverse social roles and especially the association with dance have meant that

Conjunto has come to be viewed as rough, lower class music associated with drinking and loose morals. Conjunto music was frequently heard at dance halls and cantinas in the Rio Grande Valley and in the towns and cities of South Texas. It was the music of choice at important events in Mexican-American life such as weddings, anniversaries, *quinceañeras*, and other celebrations and informal gatherings. In the contemporary era, Conjunto is played in dance halls, at icehouses (unique Texas institutions), nightclubs, and at regional festivals such as the Narciso Martinez Festival in San Benito, Texas and the Tejano Conjunto Festival in San Antonio. Yet this sense that Conjunto is a soundtrack to marginal, rougher, or even more vulgar lives has persisted even as dance styles and venues have shifted since the 1930s. Some argue that the commercialised styles of Mexican-American music, like the smoother and more middle-class variant of *Tejano* music called *conjunto orquestal*, have emerged as competitors precisely because of the persistent lower-class associations of Conjunto.⁵ These linkages have produced a complicated and contested image which has limited the inclusion of Conjunto in school programmes until recently.

Conjunto stands among what are largely better-known American styles that also came to similar commercial prominence alongside social unease in the first three decades of the twentieth century, such as Cajun, blues, bluegrass, Appalachian (termed 'old time'),

and *zydeco*. These styles, all hybrids of people, sound and place, together stand as America's distinctive contributions to the cultural heritage of the world. There has been a sharp and belaboured contest about race and the politics of culture in old time and blues, and the hybrid nature of the music has been denied as a result.⁶ Yet the concept of Conjunto music as a hybrid of European and Mexican forms has always formed part of its core identity as a genre. As ensemble originator, Juan Tejeda of Palo Alto College and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center (GCAC) in San Antonio, puts it –

*That's just who we are, we are a mestizo, hybrid culture, and our music reflects that. That is what makes our music so important in world culture... Conjunto music shows this diversity and expresses its importance on a world level... our music and culture expresses openness in a unique way, and this understanding and appreciation of world culture brings us toward a loving and peaceful world.*⁷

The United States does not have a unified national policy regarding the safeguarding and teaching of ICH for regional music cultures. Of course, elsewhere in the world such programmes have developed in the wake of

the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. ICH issues have been elevated as central concerns in global cultural circles at the level of state policy and have become the objects of intense focus in anthropology, ethnomusicology, and folklife, as well as in specialised fields like heritage and museum studies within the United States.⁸ Yet even though it harbours rich and diverse sets of regional micro-cultures as well as having comparatively deep pockets, the US has failed to develop a coherent, systematic, national approach. In contrast, Conjunto has been defined, sustained, and taught entirely within the subculture of South Texas where it maintains a central role. Elsewhere it remains a largely unknown, if not entirely foreign, aspect of American culture. The locally-sourced and politically committed approach to fostering Conjunto music and culture enshrines a sustainable method of teaching culture directly to a new generation.

The concept of sustainability in traditional music-making builds upon ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon's model. He argues against *the cultural heritage concept* because it pushes *cultural managers into a defensive posture of safeguarding property assets*, turns these assets into *tourist commerce* and thus ensures that even well-intentioned *heritage management is doomed to the*



Figure 3
Two musicians informally jamming at the *Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio*, May, 2010.
Photo. Daniel S. Margolies

paradox of constructing staged authenticities. Titon offers a really compelling ecological analogy wherein *cultural heritage sites managed for tourists run the risk of being like chemical fertilizers, artificial stimuli that feed the plant but starve the soil*.⁹

Titon believes that instead, music cultures should be approached sustainably by drawing from the four basic ecological concepts of diversity, limits to growth, connectedness, and stewardship. In particular, he outlines the need for community-based partnerships rooted locally and drawing from the examples and expertise of local people with local, first-hand knowledge of the region, people, culture, and music. This article argues that the Conjunto ensemble programmes have indeed helped to foster a *musicultural ecosystem* in which the music not only survives but flourishes.

Conjunto has steadily moved into the college classroom in the past decade. Reflecting a great deal of effort on the part of *Chicano* activist, musician, and academic Juan Tejeda, Conjunto music emerged as the focus of formal instruction within institutional settings with the creation of the Palo Alto College Conjunto Music Program in San Antonio in 2002. The Tex-Mex Conjunto Ensemble was established in the Butler School of Music

at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) in 2006. Nearer to the Mexican border, on October 2, 2010, the South Texas College of Weslaco created a new event called the *Tejano Conjunto/Norteño Music Convening* which featured discussions about the history of the music, styles, and considered the emerging Conjunto education programmes in Rio Grande Valley school districts such as La Joya, Edcouch/Elsa, and San Benito. The day ended with performances by two young bands, Conteño of Brownsville and Retoño of San Benito.¹⁰

The UT ensemble is overseen by Robin Moore, an ethno-musicologist who specialises in Cuban music, and is taught by Grammy award-winning Conjunto accordionist, Joel Guzmán. Ensembles are a standard part of ethno-musicology programmes, and the UT ensemble reflects this mission. It has no auditions, welcomes musicians of all levels and provides instruments. The website explains that *students learn how to play melodies, rhythms, and instrumentals from a variety of Tex-Mex traditions*.¹¹ Interestingly, it was launched not out of a specific interest in teaching and preserving Conjunto culture itself, but out of a diversity initiated at university level. According to Moore, the nearby Palo Alto College programme in San Antonio was not an influence. The website for the Ensemble indicates



Figure 4
Juan Tejeda shows off the annual institution he created, at the *Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio*, May, 2010.
Photo. Daniel S. Margolies

that the repertoire includes *the following Tejano (Texan) conjunto dance rhythms: polkas, waltzes, redovas, mazurkas, schottizes, danzones, paso dobles, boleros, cumbias and huapangos*. But, perhaps reflecting Guzmán's wide range or the university's great diversity and inclusiveness, the webpage also notes that

*it is possible, based upon student interest, that other traditional working class music such as zydeco, Cajun, country western, blues, rock n' roll, and swamp pop may also be explored.*¹²

Alternatively, the Palo Alto College Conjunto music programme emphasises *Puro Conjunto*. Juan Tejeda is the first director. In order to earn the Conjunto Performance Local Certificate, students must learn both *general music theory and conjunto knowledge and skills*. The programme includes courses in accordion, *bajo sexto*, Conjunto ensemble, keyboard, and also *American Music/Tejano Appreciation*. There is one course on Tejano/Conjunto music history. The aim of the programme is both to immerse students in the music and music theory while *prepar[ing] them for performance-based job opportunities*. Thus, it presents a more formal technical and musicological background than the UT programme, as well as giving a practical emphasis which reflects the mission of the college. Tejeda uses Conjunto Hall of Fame accordion player and female pioneer artist Eva Ybarra as well as Jesús 'Chucho' Perales to teach bajo sexto. This expanding music programme boasts a Valerio Longoria Memorial Scholarship Fund (named after the major stylist), a Conjunto Residency Programme for masters, and the opportunity to earn an associate's degree in Mexican-American Studies. The public face of the programme is called *Conjunto Palo Alto*, an ensemble which plays in the community, at other colleges and at festivals. In 2008 they released a CD, and in 2009 the college announced scholarships *to musicians who successfully pass an audition, enroll at PAC, and join the program's performing ensemble*. This type of scholarship for Conjunto music (and the programme which supports it) is unique.¹³ Though the Palo Alto College Conjunto Music Program apparently did not serve as a model for UT-Austin, it does stand as a model for one way to introduce the teaching of American regional music culture at the university level.

Tejeda's efforts have begun to have a broader pedagogical impact, especially in the lower grades in San

Antonio. At the *Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio* in May, 2010, the Saturday morning, two-hour, student showcase included not just Conjunto Palo and the UT Ensemble but groups from Conjunto classes at the GCAC, the local Conjunto Heritage *Taller* (workshop), and the ensemble from the La Joya Independent School District. Targeting teachers below university level, Amanda C. Soto has recently written a guide in the *Music Educators' Journal* describing lesson plans for bringing *Conjunto into the Classroom*. Soto answers her own question - *why should music educators include conjunto music in the curriculum anyway?* - by arguing that -

*...the constitution of American music classrooms is quickly changing, be they urban, rural, or suburban....With our classrooms changing at a remarkable rate, music educators need to address the changing population and, through music, aspire to meet the goals of multicultural education.*¹⁴

Soto argues that *the introduction of conjunto (and other) music into the classroom is a validation of multiculturalism*. She argues for teaching Conjunto music because it counteracts the misunderstanding that mariachi is the *only music that is representative of Mexico*, though, in fact, the music is representative of Mexican-American culture in Texas and should be considered a regional American music with diverse ethnic roots. Interestingly, Soto's model for bringing Conjunto music into the classroom draws from Tejeda's practice and programme and incorporates the kind of community based approaches Titon stresses. She encourages the showing of videos of traditional players and the playing of recorded music in addition to inviting musicians in to play so the students can *experience conjunto music in a classroom setting* and learn songs and dance. Soto provides precise examples of how to teach students to dance a cumbia, and exalts teachers not to *exclude it from the curriculum* just because they *may not feel comfortable or knowledgeable of a genre*.¹⁵ Though she does not stress her call to draw upon what she calls the *music bearers*, it is precisely these musicians who are celebrated and highlighted in the ensembles. In this way the bearers of musical heritage are incorporated into a formal didactic setting with institutional support and clearly articulated lesson plans. The exposure and early lessons in the newly-emerging secondary school programmes should provide a critical basis for the more advanced involvement of university-level music appreciation

and technique programmes and ensemble efforts.

The key to the sustainability of regional musical cultures within US schools at all levels lies, quite simply, in the willingness of people to step out of their self-created ruts, in Soto's terms, to create new structures at all levels and to become engaged and passionate, as Tejeda urges. He sees Conjunto music as providing a model for global community. With roots in the -

Spanish—African and white, Moors, union of red and yellow, we [Mexicans] are a cosmic race,

especially in this global community. And with all of the wars, we need to be the people who can bridge these cultures. Music shows this diversity and expresses its importance on a world level, some people are closed off, our music and culture expresses it in a unique way, an understanding and appreciation of world cultures which can bring us toward a loving and peaceful world.¹⁶ 🇺🇸

NOTES

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