

Introduction

During the summer of 1996, Roberto M., a Tejano (Texas-Mexican) friend who was an arts presenter in San Antonio, asked me to take him to a dance featuring *norteña* (northern Mexican) music. Having grown up in the city, he told me about the many *tardeadas* (afternoon dances, usually held on Sundays), weddings, and community festivals, where he often danced to local Texas-Mexican conjunto groups. But he had never been to a norteña dance and had paid relatively little attention to the music. Tejano conjunto and norteña groups feature the same instrumentation: a three-row button accordion; a bajo sexto, which has twelve strings with six double courses; an electric bass; and drums. Despite the similarity in instruments, the communities who listen to these genres in South Texas are very distinct. Roberto, a fourth-generation Texas-Mexican who had worked for over twelve years promoting “Mexican American” culture and arts in the city, told me he felt somewhat guilty that he knew very little about the Mexican immigrant population, which seemed more connected with its Mexican roots than he was and spoke better Spanish than he did. “What do I really know about Mexico?” I remember him saying to me as we drove to the outskirts of the city. “My family, my heritage is from there, but I’m a Texan.”

I took Roberto to Mi Ranchito (My Little Ranch), a run-down club with a small dance floor on the outskirts of the city. It was across from a flea market that I frequented because it had more Mexican goods than most. Shoppers could find cheap cassettes and CDs of Mexican music (almost all

pirated), great homemade tamales and tacos, a variety of leather goods, and live chickens and goats; moreover, there was always a norteña group playing for shoppers, dancers, and beer drinkers. I knew that after the flea market closed on Saturdays and Sundays the party moved across the street to Mi Ranchito, which featured norteña bands that drove in from just across the border. When we walked into the club, Roberto immediately noticed how distorted the sound system was. “It’s so loud, and the bass is overpowering everything,” he said. “The sound is so messy.” The dance floor was crowded, and there was no air-conditioning, which seemed to bother no one but us.

The band played one song after another without stopping, and the bajo sexto player talked rapidly over the brief accordion introductions to read dedications and acknowledge as many people at the dance as possible. Roberto noted that it seemed unusual to him that the bajo sexto player appeared to be the bandleader and lead singer. In tejano conjunto, the accordionist is always the bandleader and is expected to take many solos and show off his virtuosic playing skill. Many popular tejano conjunto groups are known by their accordionists’ names, such as Santiago Jiménez Jr. y Su Conjunto, Flaco Jiménez y Su Conjunto, Esteban Jordán y Su Conjunto, Mingo Saldivar y Sus Tremendos Cuatro Espadas (Four Tremendous Swords), and Eva Ybarra y Su Conjunto. I explained that in norteña, the focus is on the lyrics, on the story being told, and the accordion is merely an accompanying instrument, given an occasional solo only between stanzas.

As we danced, Roberto, who is one of the best conjunto dancers I know, had trouble with the rhythm. “It’s too fast,” he said, “too jumpy. I can’t glide across the floor and do all of the turns I’m used to doing.” As we left the club, Roberto said that, though he was not sure that he really liked norteña all that much, he wondered why these two musical genres, which share the same origin in the Texas-Mexican border region, now exhibit such different stylistic features and have come to represent different Mexican American communities.

Some years later, while researching norteña music and interviewing musicians in northeastern Mexico, I often brought up the issue of the stylistic and identity-based distinctions made between tejano and norteña music. In an interview I conducted with Miguel Luna of the pioneering norteña group *El Palomo y el Gorrión* (The Dove and the Sparrow), which he had formed with his brother when they were teenagers in the 1950s, the accordionist and songwriter readily pointed out stylistic distinctions and poignantly ascribed them to economic disadvantages and class-based divisions. For Luna, tejano music is associated with advances in technology and virtuosity, while norteña is more closely connected to the sentiments of its listeners and is clearly more working-class:

Tejano music is more refined, more delicate, more difficult to play, but rhythmically it is steadier. I attribute this to the fact that in the United States, the musicians have more devices and better sound and this gives them the advantage of being more prepared and perfecting their sound.

There [in the United States] is where they first used drums and electric bass, in a complete group. Norteña music is rougher, but with more feeling, and it is simpler. The people feel it more. In northern Mexico, and among the immigrants in the United States, are the people who work “sunup to sundown” and practice [music] only during the evenings, but with feeling and nostalgia. (personal communication)

Over the years since my last conversation with Luna, norteña and tejano music (also *música tejana*) have absorbed influences from each other as well as from North American¹ and Latino popular music genres. Nevertheless, the two genres have remained relatively separated by geographical, experiential, economic, and class-based divisions within the ethnic Mexican communities in the United States. Among the North American population at large, there is a tendency to conceive of the Spanish- and Mexican-origin population, particularly in the Southwest (which once belonged to Spain), as a homogeneous group (Gutiérrez 1987, 81). Similarly, the U.S. Latino and North American mainstream music industry tends to lump tejano and norteña (and their listening audiences) together.

Differentiating Cultures and Their Music

Despite outsiders’ perceptions of homogeneity, however, historical, racial, and economic boundaries have contributed to the fragmentation of Mexican American identity in the United States. Increased migration and new patterns of travel have produced multiple collective identities based on regional associations, rural versus urban origins, indigenous identity, immigration status, and economic integration. For example, a *Tejano* is a person of Mexican heritage, typically born and living in Texas. The term was initially used in the early 1800s to distinguish between the Anglo-American settlers in the state and the Mexican Americans. On the other hand, many people of Mexican heritage living in the United States use *Chicano*. The term became popular in the late 1960s among Mexican Americans involved in the civil rights movement who sought to create an autonomous cultural reality in the United States. Today, the term is used primarily in the Southwest as a general description for Mexican Americans. Tejanos and Chicanos—who benefited from the civil rights and Chicano movements—gained political

¹I use the term *North American* here and throughout this book to refer to inhabitants of the United States only. I have purposely avoided use of the term *American* to refer to people and places in the United States, because this use of the term has been debated in recent years and many people believe that it disregards other nations throughout the Americas. Throughout the Spanish-speaking world, use of the term *estadounidense* (literally, “United Statesian”) is growing. Some consider the term more appropriate than the common term *norteamericano* (North American). While *North American* can and does include inhabitants of Canada and northern Mexico, I have chosen it over *American* for lack of a more appropriate term at this time.

and economic power, implemented equal education reforms, and elevated the region's Spanish and Mexican social and cultural visibility. However, these benefits did not extend across the continental United States, where new Mexican immigrants were traveling and working.

Tejano music has remained predominantly regional and has embraced elements of North American popular music genres, particularly Texas swing and country and western, and its listening public is made up of individuals claiming a combination of Spanish, Tejano, and Mexican American roots and having a relatively distant relationship with Mexico. Norteña music—which synthesizes a Mexican border ballad tradition with updated lyrics that merge themes of border crossing, experiences of migration, sociopolitical commentary, and the real and imagined exploits of modern-day bandit heroes, drug smugglers, and undocumented travelers—evolved and became popular among Mexican immigrants living and working in locales throughout the United States, as well as among their families and community members back in Mexico. The norteña music industry and the subgenres that have emerged in its wake (e.g., *onda grupera*, *banda/technobanda*, *sonidero*, *música duranguense*) have been shaped (and reshaped) by fluid notions of ethnic and regional identity, national affiliation, home space, and sociopolitical associations in both countries. Throughout the Mexican diaspora, this loose-knit community has been continually impacted by growing numbers of undocumented migrants, its lower-class status, increased limitations on work and economic improvement, and racial tension. Norteña music embodies these tensions and other factors that marginalize this community, offering both an escape and the opportunity to be heard.

A long history of border-crossing themes is one of the primary elements that distinguish norteña from both tejano and other popular Latino genres. In this case *Latino* refers to Latin American popular music genres that have become popular initially (or only) in the U.S. market (see Pacini Hernández 2001). And while the narrative ballad (*corrido*)—one of the primary song forms of the norteña genre—has been studied by linguists, sociologists, folklorists, and historians on its own, it has received little attention in the context of popular music and cultural studies. Though norteña is popular in Mexico, primarily among rural and working-class audiences, it is often excluded from being seriously considered “Mexican” popular music, largely because the bulk of its audience and recording activity is located in the United States and the northernmost region of Mexico, which has a historically estranged relationship with the government and cultural center of Mexico (Ramírez-Pimienta 2004).

Since the early 1990s, diasporas and the dynamic communities that are created by travel and migration have been the subjects of research, both in general theoretical writings (e.g., Appadurai 1990; Clifford 1994; and Kaplan 1996) and in specific case studies. This research has explored the profound impact migrating and displaced communities have had on the music, culture, economics, and politics that have shaped the world and, in particular, North American society.

These communities have effected a blurring of the boundaries that once defined “home” and “abroad” and a merging of cultures and identities, causing a reconsideration of many traditional ideas about society. Still, the word *community* suggests a place of belonging. It is based, as the sociologist Amitai Etzioni writes, on the notion that “free individuals require a community, which backs them up against encroachment by the state and sustains morality by drawing on the gentle prodding of kin, friends, neighbors, and other members, rather than building on government controls or fear of authorities” (1993, 15). The border folklorist and novelist Américo Paredes asserts that the redefinition of the Rio Grande from river to “dividing line” disrupted the traditional sense of community in the border region, thus making former relatives and neighbors suddenly “foreigners in a foreign land” (1958, 15). However, corrido composers and musicians responded with songs documenting this disruption, invasion of territory, and loss of traditional border life, thus instilling a sense of solidarity through shared experience. The maintenance of the corrido in modern norteña today reminds the Mexican listener of this “tradition of community” that so defined border life (and inspired uprisings that led to the Mexican Revolution) and helps to extend that experience across the Mexican diaspora.

Historical Patterns of Migration

The migration of Mexican laborers into the United States dates back to the mid-1800s, after the signing of the Treaty of Hidalgo and the conclusion of the U.S.-Mexico War. From 1942 to 1964, the Bracero Program, which was first negotiated by the United States and Mexico as an emergency measure during World War II, encouraged large migrations of Mexicans to the United States to work on building railroads throughout the Southwest. Under the program’s terms, American agricultural enterprises could also legally bring in Mexican contract laborers for seasonal work. However, in the off-season many did not return home but settled on the border instead, adding to the swelling population of the region and often locating where people from their home state were already established. Many of these migrants came from areas other than the northeastern Mexican border states (Galarza 1978, 197, 107–115). After 1964, there was a significant increase in undocumented workers coming into the United States.

Since the mid-1960s, increased militarization of the border as a result of border crossing has paralleled a steady rise in immigration, resulting in heated controversy among politicians and impacting social and economic interests within the United States at large. Norteña has emerged as a veritable soundtrack of the circular, back-and-forth migratory experiences of the Mexican migrant and immigrant laborer community. It is, perhaps, the single most popular music style throughout Mexico, flourishing in its regional heartland (northeastern Mexico) and as the favored genre of migrant laborers. As a hybrid music form that combines European dance rhythms, primarily the polka and waltz, with the

corrido, norteña has a history located in the geographical space of the U.S.-Mexico border region. However, its modern-day audience is spread over multiple sites throughout the United States and Mexico.

Research into and documentation of a Mexican popular music phenomenon that is expressly tied to globalization, migration, displacement, and economic necessity speak to a plethora of multidisciplinary issues in ethnomusicology and the social sciences. The migration of Mexican working-class laborers since the turn of the twentieth century, growing to mass proportions since the 1960s, has perpetuated the development of a Mexican American culture (traditionally defined by a “distinct” border community and, later, by the Chicano experience) into a postmodern community that lives and works in multiple sites and within expanding borders. Música norteña not only represents a means by which this community can have a voice and speak out about its experiences; it is also a uniquely rich poetic oral tradition, an eloquent record of the past that spills over into the present. It is not only a history of the Mexican migrant experience in the United States but one that is intimately shared and understood by families, friends, and neighbors in Mexico as well. Taken collectively, the songs describe the making of a nation between nations. Everything about norteña reflects not only how life is lived within this community but also how it is both remembered and imagined. Tracked alongside changes in immigration legislation, the ebbs and flows of U.S. and Mexican political change and economic struggles, complex ethnic and cultural allegiances, increases in violence and criminal activity, and critical public opinion from both sides of the border, the modern evolution of norteña embodies it all, offering a fascinating opportunity for exploration and study.