The West Side Sound is a remarkable amalgamation of different ethnic musical influences found in and around San Antonio in South-Central Texas. It includes blues, conjuntos, country, rhythm and blues, polka, swamp pop, rock and roll, and other seemingly disparate styles. All of these have somehow been woven together into a sound that has captured the attention of fans worldwide. In a sense, the very eclectic nature of the West Side Sound reflects the larger musical environment of Texas, in which a number of ethnic communities over the centuries have exchanged musical traditions in a prolific “cross-pollination” of cultures. The result has been the development of a rich and complex regional musical style, of which the West Side Sound has become an integral part.

Some of the musicians who helped develop San Antonio’s West Side Sound in its various forms are well known to both Texans and others across the country and around the world. The style was first brought to national prominence with Sunny Omania’s 1965 hit, “Talk to Me.” “She’s About A Mover,” the 1965 Top Twenty hit by the Sir Douglas Quintet soon brought additional recognition to the Alamo City’s music scene. Two musicians who were part of that band, Augie Meyers and the late Doug Sahm, went on to build nationally and internationally successful careers. Also famous around the world is the ubiquitous Flaco Jiménez, who has five Grammy Awards, and has recorded with such prominent artists as Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and Dwight Yoakam.

Sahm, Meyers, and Jiménez, along with Freddy Fender, once again brought the West Side Sound to a global audience during the 1990s with their musically eclectic super group, the Texas Tornados. The late Randy Garibay was a less-well-known but also very influential member of the West Side Sound. His passing in early 2002 has been difficult for musicians and fans throughout the state.

However, most of the other musicians involved in the development of the West Side Sound are not as well known, but they all played an important role in shaping this genre, beginning as early as the 1950s. Charlie Alvarado, Armando Almendarez (better known as Mando Cavallero), Frank Rodarte, Sonny Ace, Clifford Scott, and Vernon “Spor” Barnett all contributed to the creation of the West Side Sound in one way or another. Alvarado’s band, Charlie and the Jives, had such regional hits in 1959 as “For the Rest of My Life” and “My Angel of Love.” Cavallero had an influential conjunto group called San Antonio Allegre that played live every Sunday morning on Radio KFWX.

Almendarez formed several groups, including the popular rock and roll band Mando and the Chili Peppers. Rodarte led a group called the Del Kings, which formed in San Antonio during the late 1950s, and brought the West Side Sound to Los Vegas as the house band for the Sahara Club, where they remained for nearly ten years. Sonny Ace had a number of different groups during this period, including Sonny and the Rhythm Rockers, Sonny and the Montclair’s, and Sonny Ace and the Twisters. Regional hits included covers of the Louis Prima songs “Just a Gigolo” and “Oh, Marie.” Ace’s own compositions included “Take My Love,” “You Tear My Dreams... It is a rare privilege indeed when a scholar has the opportunity to bring to the public’s attention a musical genre that has been largely unstudied in the past. The understanding of our nation’s musical heritage is enhanced whenever these less-well-known genres are recognized and examined, especially those that have a rich history steeped in multi-ethnic traditions. San Antonio’s West Side Sound is just such a genre, having drawn from a broad array of regional influences to become a truly distinct musical style. Outside of South-Central Texas, however, the West Side Sound is a largely unknown phenomenon. Even within San Antonio itself, there are many who would have difficulty defining the West Side Sound. The goal of this article is to explain what the West Side Sound is and to examine its origins and development as a unique component of Texas music.
The West Side Sound is a remarkable amalgamation of different ethnic musical influences found in and around San Antonio in South-Central Texas. It includes blues, conjuntos, country, rhythm and blues, polka, swamp pop, rock and roll, and other seemingly disparate styles. All of these have somehow been woven together into a sound that has captured the attention of fans worldwide. In a sense, the very eclectic nature of the West Side Sound reflects the larger musical environment of Texas, in which a number of ethnic communities over the centuries have exchanged musical traditions in a prolific “cross-pollination” of cultures. The result has been the development of a rich and complex regional musical style, of which the West Side Sound has become an integral part.

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Apart, and “Darling of Mine.”

Clifford Scott is best known for his song “Honky Tonk,” from which the unique saxophone solo became a model for San Antonio sax players for years. Scott and Spot Barnett also served as mentors for many younger Mexican-American saxophone players, including Charlie Alvarado, Rocky Morales, and Frank Rodarte. Scott and Barnett certainly were a source of inspiration for Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers. Barnett’s band, The Spot Barnett Combo, was the saxophone at San Antonio’s legendary Ebony Club, and he also played regularly at the famous Eastwood Country Club on the north side of town. Barnett’s recording, “The Ebony Shuffle,” became a regional hit. Later, Barnett had a combo called the Twentieth Century Orchestra, in which a fifteen-year-old Doug Sahm sat in when members of the group were unable to make a gig. In its present form, the West Side Sound is a multifaceted musical entity. At its core are the influences of rock and roll, blues, country, conjunto, swamp pop, and rhythm and blues (also known as R&B). To that end, a key component is the role of the horn section and its relationship to the guitar. Texas music historian Alan Govenar has noted that Mexican-American musicians, as well as Anglos, admired Barnett and Clifford Scott during this early formative period.

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The orchestra is a key element in the West Side Sound. Perhaps more than any other San Antonio musician, Randy Garibay contributed to the voicing of the guitar as a rhythm and solo instrument for the West Side Sound during the last decade. Garibay’s signature song, “Barbacoa Blues,” is an example of that interplay between guitar and horns. The guitar never completely replaces the horns, however. According to Garibay, the contribution of the horns in San Antonio’s West Side Sound is the voicing. Barnett says that, “From the musicians’ point of view, we have a voicing. The trumpet player basically took the lead note in the chord, and depending on how much power, whether we wanted the chords to lean high or lean low, is whether we put the tenor on the third.” Barnett further clarifies: “The voicing, I would say, is the intervals. All right, say for instance we wanted to have a big, round full C chord. Okay, on the bottom, we would put [an] E, and a B♭…Then, on the top of the chord, we would put D, G, and C on top. Now, that’s our sound there.”

Over the years, the West Side Sound absorbed Mexican-American, African-American, and Anglo-American influences, such as conjunto, country, swamp pop, and rock and roll. This happened largely through the contributions of Doug Sahm, Augie Meyers, Flaco Jiminez, Sonny Ootuna, and Randy Garibay, Jiminez, Ootuna, and Meyers often included polkas and boleros in their musical repertoires. Sahm and Meyers, close friends since they were 11 or 12 years old, were influenced by black music, but they also were big fans of Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, Jimmie Rodgers, and other country artists. Sahm and Meyers would more fully express their own individual identities can be seen among the young musicians of the West Side Sound. Charlie Alvarado, founder of the premier West Side Sound band, the West Side Horns, has been called the “United Nations Band,” because it featured musicians from several ethnic backgrounds. As Alvarado says, “I had James Kelley, Irish, and I had Pineapple, Hawaiian music, and I had Jitterbug. We’d play, ‘Black Bingo.’” Rodarte Easly, black, and myself, Chicano. They said ‘You got a United Nations band there.’”

What is particularly intriguing about the multi-ethnic origins of the West Side Sound is that this music is rooted in the 1950s, at a time when much of the rest of the Deep South was undergoing violent upheaval in the struggle over civil rights and racial equality. For a better understanding of how these musicians overcame contemporary social barriers and cultural differences to create this unique musical form, it may be helpful to look briefly at some case studies involving inter-ethnic human relationships.

Elisabeth Gareis’s case study of five German exchange students in the United States suggests that there are six key factors contributing to successful inter-ethnic relationships: culture, personality, homophily, an adjustment state, communicative competence, and proximity. Of these six, homophily and proximity are most relevant to our discussion. Homophily is the similarity between friends, certainly, was an important factor in how West Side Sound musicians from different ethnic groups developed a love and respect for each other and for a broad range of ethnic musical genres.

Rocks Morales, an original member of the premier West Side Sound band, the West Side Horns, and a long-time sax player for Doug Sahm, commented on the level of admiration and affection he and others had for fellow African-American band leader Spot Barnett. “He was the greatest influence for everybody at that time [in the 1950s].” Morales and other Mexican-American musicians, as well as Anglos, admired Barnett and Clifford Scott during this early formative period. Garibay, Meyers, Sahm, Rodarte, Barnett, and others all shared a passion for what they called “soul music.” When Frank Rodrarte was asked how it was that Chicanos can play the blues, he replied, “The good Lord has control over that. He knows how he distributes his talent. He gives it to whites, to blacks, to everybody, he gives it to soul.”

Rodarte is also important in understanding how these musicians got along so well musically. Sahm, Rodarte, and Meyers all grew up on the East Side of San Antonio. That neighborhood was predominantly African-American, so the Chicano Rodarte, as well as the Anglos Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers, were nurtured in a multi-ethnic environment. For example, as little boys, Sahm and Meyers listened to African-American bands at San Antonio’s Eastwood Country Club. This was possible, because the club’s owner, John Phillips, was a friend who shopped at the Meyer’s family store, and he allowed the youngsters to hang around the club and watch the musicians. Another factor in this willingness to exchange musical influences may be related to what some researchers have called “elusive culture.” Elusive culture has to do with how young people define their own sense of identity, in part, by borrowing, or choosing not to borrow, from surrounding cultural influences. In a study of adolescent adjustment carried out in a community, children who defined themselves as “elusive culture…greatly toward a culture of going-on processes…implicated in the ambivalence and contradictions of social life and cultural practices rather than serving as a counter force to them.” According to the idea of “elusive culture,” young people have difficulty identifying themselves within a particular group. They can overcome this, however “when the desire to know’ cultures is made rigid.” In order to do this, young people must be able to explore their personal identities in relation to the identities and cultures of others. A number of examples of this inter-cultural quest to formulate their own individual identities can be seen among the young musicians of the West Side Sound. Charlie Alvarado, founder of the Jives, formed his sense of self-awareness playing in orchestras as a teenager in the multi-cultural setting of San Antonio.

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To that end, a key component is the role of the horn section and its relationship to the guitar. Texas music historian Alan Govenar has noted that Texas musicians Eddie Durham and Charlie Christian pioneered this interplay between the guitar and the saxophone in the state's jazz scene. Both established the guitar as a rhythmic instrument to underlie the voice and horn sections. According to Govenar, another Texan, T-Bone Walker, was responsible for furthering the role of the electric guitar, a role that would "supersede" the saxophone. Walker transformed the relationship between the horns and the guitar as the "rhythm and blues band sound became tighter and depended more on the interplay of the electric guitar with the horn section, piano, and drums." This orchestration is a key element in the West Side Sound. Perhaps more than any other San Antonio musician, Randy Garibay contributed to the voicing of the guitar as a rhythm and solo instrument for the West Side Sound during the last decade. Garibay's signature song, "Barbacoa Blues," is an example of that interplay between guitar and horns. The guitar never completely replaces the horns, however. According to Spot Barnett, the contribution of the horns in San Antonio's West Side Sound is the voicing. Barnett says that, "From the musician's point of view, we have a voicing. The trumpet player basically took the lead note in the chord, and depending on how much power, whether we wanted the chords to lean high or lean low, is whether we put the tenor on the third." Barnett further clarifies the length of intervals. "All right, say for instance we wanted to have a big, round full C chord. Okay, on the bottom, we would put [an] E, and a Bb...Then, on the top of the chord, we would put D, G, and C on top. Now, that's our sound there." Over the years, the West Side Sound absorbed Mexican-American, African-American, and Anglo-American influences, such as conjunto, country, swamp pop, and rock and roll. This happened largely through the contributions of Doug Sahm, Augie Meyers, Flaco Jiménez, Sonny Oznata, and Randy Garibay, Jiménez, Oznata, and Morales and other Mexican-American musicians, as well as Anglos, admired Barnett and Clifford Scott during this early formative period. Another factor in this willingness to exchange musical influences may be related to what some researchers have called "elusive culture." Elusive culture has to do with how young people define their own sense of identity, in part, by borrowing, or choosing not to borrow, from surrounding cultural influences. In a study of adolescent adjustment carried out in a Townsville, England, high school, Daniel A. Von argues that "elusive culture...grients towards a view of culture as ongoing processes...implicated in the ambivalence and contradictions of social life and cultural practices rather than serving as a counter force to them." According to the idea of "elusive culture," young people have difficulty identifying themselves within a particular group. They can overcome this, however, "when the desire to know cultures is made rigid." In order to do this, young people must be able to explore their personal identities in relation to the identities and cultures of others. A number of examples of this inter-cultural quest to formulate their own individual identities can be seen among the young musicians of the West Side Sound. Charlie Alvarado, founder of the Jives, formed his sense of self-awareness playing in orchestras as a teenager in the multi-cultural setting of San Antonio. They developed much of their musical identity listening to various acts that played the Eastwood Club, the Ebony Club, and other venues. Perhaps most revealing are the observations on this subject by West Side Sound Chicano pioneer and bassist extraordinaire Jack Barber: There are some Chicanos that are raised in San Antonio, and they just stay San Antonio. They stay Mexican, or Chicano, or whatever you want to call it. They stay that way. "There are a lot of black people that just stay black on the east side, you know, they don't play anything more progressive than what they're doing...I think it's a chosen few that want to know more." Thus, the conditions were in place to make this "elusive culture" more attainable for these young San Antonio students in the United States suggests that there are six key factors contributing to successful inter-ethnic relationships: culture, personality, homophily, an adjustment state, communicative competence, and proximity. Of these six, homophily and proximity are most relevant to our discussion. Homophily, or the similarity between friends, was certainly an important factor in how West Side Sound musicians from different ethnic groups developed a love and respect for each other and for a broad range of ethnic musical genres. Rocky Morales, an original member of the premier West Side Sound band, the West Side Horns, and a long-time sax player for Doug Sahm, commented on the level of admiration and affection he and others had for fellow African-American band leader Spot Barnett. "He was the greatest influence for everybody at that time [in the 1950s]." Morales and other Mexican-American musicians, as well as Anglos, admired Barnett and Clifford Scott during this early formative period. Garibay, Meyers, Sahm, Rodarte, Barnett, and others all shared a passion for what they called "soul music." When Frank Robinson was asked how it was that Chicano can play the blues, he replied, "The good Lord has control over that. He knows how he distributes his talent. He gives it to whites, to blacks, to everybody, he gives it to soul."
Harry Burns, a leader of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), characterized San Antonio as “heaven on earth” when compared to other southern cities.13

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Perhaps the most popular musical genre in San Antonio during the 1950s and 1960s was country music. The relatively small size of the black community (7% of the overall population) and minimal contact between whites and blacks, due to African Americans being relegated primarily to the east side of the city, the existence of a large Mexican-American population (approximately 40% of the overall population), which helped to obscure color lines in the city, and the existence of several large music desegregated military bases in and around San Antonio; and the leading role played by certain religious leaders, who worked to “weed away the community consensus and prepare the ground for racial peace and cooperation.”

In regard to the last point, it should be noted that, while most Texas communities resisted the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling to desegregate all public schools, many of San Antonio’s public school districts had integrated by the fall of 1955, far more quickly than most other southern cities.

As can be seen both in the intercultural studies and historical environment of San Antonio. Because of the unusual ethno-cultural situation of San Antonio as experienced by these young musicians, Peña’s thesis also can be challenged. When asked if Anglos or Chicanos had the right to play the blues, African-American Spot Barnett responded by saying “music is music. You take the same notes to play the same everything... we might write in prejudices, and add in prejudices, but that’s not how God gave it out. He gave us twelve different sounds and let us figure it out scientifically; how to, you know, how to look at it. See, God puts the puzzle there, and then he leaves it to us to figure it out.”

All of the musicians interviewed for this article stated that bigotry was not a major factor in their lives in San Antonio during the 1950s. Indeed segregation did exist de facto in the city, but, according to Spot Barnett, the police often looked the other way when individual African Americans segregated themselves. The station that broadcast music was KFXX in Fort Worth, WFAA in Dallas, KPRC in Houston, and WOAI, merged under the supervision of the new Texas Quality Group Network. It should be noted that, while most Texas communities resisted the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling to desegregate all public schools, many of San Antonio’s public school districts had integrated by the fall of 1955, far more quickly than most other southern cities.

Perhaps the most popular musical genre in San Antonio during the 1950s and 1960s was country music. There were dozens of San Antonio radio stations by the 1950s. The city’s leading station, WOAI, went on the air in 1922. Founded by G.A.C. Hoff, the station upgraded from 500 to 5,000 watts in 1925, and in 1928, the station joined the first national radio network, NBC. In 1934, the station’s four largest affiliates were WFAA in Dallas, KFRC in Houston, and WOAI, merged under the supervision of the new Texas Quality Group Network.

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One of the remarkable things about San Antonio during the 1950s is that it was one of the city's smallest ethnic groups, African Americans, seemed to have a disproportionately strong influence on the local music scene. Jazz and R&B were especially prevalent. In 1944, Don Albert opened the original Keyhole Club at the intersection of Iowa and Pine. Albert, a great jazz musician in his own right, was one of the first local club owners to allow integrated audiences. He brought a number of jazz giants, such as Louis Jordan, Nat “King” Cole, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, and the Ink Spots, to his establishment for the enjoyment of Anglos, Hispanics, and African-American customers.

During the 1940s and 1950s, these great jazz players, along with many prominent R&B artists, appeared at the Seven Oaks Country Club on Austin Highway, at the Library Auditorium at 210 West Market, and at the Municipal Auditorium. The Ebony Club on Nebraska Street (now Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard) hosted some of the most popular African-American touring acts of the day and, as previously mentioned, featured prominent R&B artists, including Spot Barnett’s Twentieth Century Orchestra as its house band by the middle of the 1950s. As important as these different venues were, the club that served as the main seedbed for the emerging West Side Sound was the Eastwood Country Club, far out on Nebraska Street in the town of St. Hedwig. As Texas music historian Karl Peterson points out, “The club owned by Johnnie Phillips, was instrumental in helping young up-and-comers to practice their music, as well as giving well-known black performers a place to play.” Here locally influential musicians, such as Burnett, a regular, and Clifford Scott, who sat in when Lionel Hampton’s Orchestra was on vacation, mingled freely. Sometimes, Phillips called on Doug Sahm, Rocky Morales, Frank Rodarte, and Randy Garibay to back up Bobby Bland, Bo Diddley, and other touring acts that played the Eastwood. This gave these younger artists a chance to work with nationally prominent acts and to further synthesize their eclectic musical influences. The Eastwood Club was thoroughly integrated from its inception in 1954. Phillips once pointed out that “The Eastwood was one of the few places where people, no matter what color they were, were always welcome.”

The final factor that solidified the early West Side Sound was the emergence of rock and roll in the mid-1950s. San Antonio Express News columnist Jim Beal, Jr., wrote that, “The Alamo City’s love affair with rock music started about 15 seconds after the genre had a name.” This may be a bit of an overstatement, but several early West Side Sound musicians did quickly embrace rock and roll and began reforming their bands to accommodate the new rock and roll market. Armando Armendárez broke ranks with San Antonio Allege in 1956 and formed Mando and the Chilli Peppers. In 1958, Charlie Alvarado started Charlie and the Jives. Denny Esmond soon formed a group called The Goddess, which featured Augie Meyers. Sahm had a band called Doug Sahm and the Markays that recorded regional hits, such as “Crazy, Crazy Daisy” and “Two Hearts in Love.” In 1959, Frank Rodarte became the bandleader of the Del Kings and later moved the group to Las Vegas. Even Flaco Jiménez began to mix rock and roll into his polka repertoire.

These artists and others played at such clubs as the Fiesta on Commerce Street, the Cabaret on Houston Street, and the Las Vegas on Dolorosa Street. Although Mexican Americans made up the majority of these night clubs’ clientele, all of these venues were integrated by the late 1950s. Many of these musicians also played in the officer’s clubs and NCO clubs on the desegregated military bases around the city. While these young artists continued to mature musically, they were conscious of the transformation they were undergoing, as they blended their blues, jazz, country, and conjunto influences with the new genre of rock and roll. One of the elder statements of the West Side Sound, Charlie Alvarado, commented on the difference in the musicians’ approach to rock and roll as compared to earlier styles:

> The big difference was that it was more like a job (before). It was more like a job to me. I had to have my eyes peeled on the charts to get the right notes and everything. When rock and roll came along, you already knew the instrumentation and the chord progressions. Of course blues is just the first, the fourth, and the fifth depending on what key you are in. And you go from there. Once you know how to play that, then your improvisation comes in. You just stay within the change. And it was just in a way different way. I was involved with the crowd while I was playing instead of just having my head down in the notes.

In the end, it was this hybridization of Chicano, Black, and Anglo influences coming from a variety of musical and cultural traditions that blended with rock and roll and gave birth to the West Side Sound by the late 1950s.

The West Side Sound exploded onto the national stage during the mid-1960s. In 1963, Sunny Ozuna’s San Antonio group, Sunny and the Sunflowers, had a national hit with “Talk to Me,” which earned the band an appearance on Dick Clark’s American Bandstand. In the meantime, Augie Meyers teamed up to form the Sir Douglas Quintet. Houston producer and promoter, Huey Meaux, suggested they form the band and give it a British sounding name and appearance as part of an effort to capitalize on the success of the Beatles and other groups who were part of the so-called “British Invasion” of the mid-1960s. A year later, the Sir Douglas Quintet had its first hit with “She’s About A Mover.”

> “Talk to Me” and “She’s About a Mover” are very representative of the West Side Sound of the early 1960s. The former song is a slow R&B number that utilizes horns, which are spaced in intervals of major thirds, much like those used in mariachi, corrido, and bolero styles. In “She’s About a Mover,” a song that seems to be influenced by Ray Charles, Doug Sahm yells out “Oh yeah, what I say!” at the end of several verses. There is also evidence of a Mexican-American polka styling in the song. The bass drum strikes resoundingly on the first and third beats while the main rhythms follow on the second and fourth. In addition, Augie Meyers intentionally works to make his Vox organ sound like a conjunto-styled accordion.

Several years passed before the musicians who created the West Side Sound had success again at the national or international level. In the meantime, these pioneers of the West Side Sound took the genre in a number of new directions before they converged again musically in the 1990s. Within San Antonio itself, the West Side Sound became chiefly Latin-influenced during the 1970s. Although not from San Antonio himself, Joe Hernandez, of Little Joe y La Familia, based in Temple, Texas, frequented the Alamo City during his tours of South Texas. Hernandez’s band had originated as Little Joe and the Latianes in 1959, wearing tailor-made suits and playing mostly pop music. By the early 1970s, however, the group was caught up in the burgeoning Chicano movement. They traveled in their suits and middle-class upmarket image in favor of a more “hippie” look and began to mix polkas, corridos, rock and roll, and jazz into their repertoire, which also included songs with overt political messages. According to the band’s keyboard player, Sauce Gonzalez, the abandonment of the suits was a performance decision that reflected their blending of the hippie counter-culture with the growing Chicano movement. Hernandez and the group frequently appeared in San Antonio at such venues as the downtown Market Square.

Of those musicians who had an impact on the West Side Sound, Joe Hernandez certainly was one of the most politically-oriented. At times, he spoke openly about police mistreatment of Mexican Americans in Texas cities, such as Dallas and Houston. San Antonio native Frank Rodarte commented on Hernandez’s political activism and willingness to use his musical career to address social issues. “He was writing more about the things that were happening at the time in the city like the abuse of police brutality, about abuse of the citizens... Abuse of the brown people by the white establishment. And sometimes even brown police officers abusing the [Mexican] people, too.”

Frank Rodarte was one West Side Sound pioneer that continued to draw heavily from African-American musical influences throughout the 1970s. Most of the founding bands, such as Charlie and the Jives, actually broke up during this time, but Rodarte remained very active. Documentary movie producer Jeremy Mette filmed Rodarte during a 1978 performance with his Jalapeño Blues Band at the Bexar County Jail in San Antonio. In the film, Rodarte and his band are playing an upbeat blues shuffle called “Last Meal,” and the narrator mistakenly reports that the song is a comment on the brutality of prison life. Rodarte refutes that claim. He insists that the song is not political but, instead, is intended to be humorous. “See, the song is called ‘Last Meal,’ and they’re [the prisoners] getting a kick out of it, because he’s requesting all
One of the remarkable things about San Antonio during the 1950s is that one of the city’s smallest ethnic groups, African Americans, seemed to have a disproportionately strong influence on the local music scene. Jazz and R&B were especially prevalent. In 1944, Don Albert opened the original Keyhole Club at the intersection of Iowa and Pine. Albert, a great jazz musician in his own right, was one of the first local club owners to allow integrated audiences. He brought a number of jazz giants, such as Louis Jordan, Nat “King” Cole, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, and the Ink Spots, to his establishment for the enjoyment of Anglos, Hispanics, and African-American customers.

During the 1940s and 1950s, these great jazz players, along with many prominent R&B artists, appeared at the Seven Oaks Country Club on Austin Highway, at the Library Auditorium at 210 West Market, and at the Municipal Auditorium. The Ebony Club on Nebraska Street (now Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard) hosted some of the most popular African-American touring acts of the day and, as previously mentioned, featured spots for visiting African-American touring acts to perform for the enjoyment of Anglos, Hispanics, and African-Americans.

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college students, and other disparate groups seemed to set aside their socio-economic and ideological differences and revel in this new musical hybrid that celebrated blues, country, folk, rock and roll, R&B, and even reggae. In his book, *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*, Jan Reid discusses the fact that Willie Nelson and many other musicians relocated to Austin in the early 1970s, because they were disillusioned with the state of the music industry in Nashville, New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. Nelson and others who moved to the Capitol City combined their diverse musical influences to spawn Progressive Country, sometimes called “Redneck Rock.” Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers also were part of the 1970s migration to Austin. Both had grown weary of the San Francisco “hippie” scene, in which the Quintet had played for years. As Reid points out, “Sahm got extremely tired of the routine with the Sir Douglas

It is somewhat ironic that Meyers and Sahm were steeped in the unique musical environment of San Antonio, yet they were thought of by many fans as being an integral part of the Austin music community. In reality, Meyers and Sahm had simply brought the West Side Sound to Austin and made it part of the evolving musical environment there. Veteran Austin musician, Danny Ray Young, believes that much of the Austin music scene developed as it did because of Doug Sahm’s presence there.

Quintet, lapsed into semi-retirement for a while, then, in 1973, enlisted a superstar array of sidemen that included Bob Dylan and Dr. John and resurrected with a country-rock-blues album. That album, of course, is the Doug Sahm and Band record, which also features Flaco Jiménez.

Soon after Sahm moved to Austin, Augie Meyers arrived with his group, the Western Head Band. During the group’s first performance there, Meyers quickly recognized the tremendous growth of the Austin music scene. Between songs, he turned to the audience and said, “Austin just keeps growing, don’t it?”

Joe Nick Patoski, who later wrote Selena’s biography, commented on The Western Head Band two years after Meyers started playing in Austin:

Their loose, easy going type of dance music definitely has a countrified flavor to it and the group first made their reputation here in Austin two years ago before they began extensive touring throughout the Southwest. Which is kind of amusing considering all the Tex-Mex originals, polkas, and Dixieland they play in comparison to pure country. And which gets real funny because every member of the high time octet is a San Antonio product.

It is somewhat ironic that Meyers and Sahm helped introduce him to the larger music world. “Doug told me you’re not supposed to play just that simple, traditional conjunto music.” There are so many players who stayed in the same crater like my papa did. Doug showed me there were other worlds out there.”

Ry Cooder also brought Flaco Jiménez out into “other worlds” even more. Cooder, a musician and a musicologist, greatly appreciated the Tex-Mex style of Jiménez and his accordion. Jiménez recalls that Cooder “checked out conjunto and found out my history. He tracked me down. I never heard of him, but then he opened my eyes” and that meeting of the minds would prompt Jiménez to play for the first time in the larger international arena. Since working with Dylan and Cooder, Jiménez has played with Dwight Yoakam, Charlie Musslewhite, and, on the Rolling Stones’ “Sweethearts Together,” from their 1994 CD *Voodoo Lounge*.

The West Side Sound also migrated northward up I-35 to Austin during the early 1970s. Austin was the epicenter of the Progressive Country movement, in which hippies, rednecks, and rock and roll, sung in both English and Spanish.

Young says that the Progressive Country movement, lauded so publicly by *Rolling Stone*, “Started developing…in large part because of Doug, and all the players, all the hippies, and all the artists all started coming up [from San Antonio and South Texas] to this part of the country…This was giving us something different; it had this great creative energy, and a huge part of it was that San Antonio sound. It was that great, great, Tex-Mex background…it was that conjunto/country, etc.”

Los Tornados, courtesy of White Boy Records & Tapes

*The Texas Tornados CD* featured a mix of ballads, country, R&B, conjunto, and rock and roll, sung in both English and Spanish.
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That album, of course, is the Doug Sahm and Band record, which also features Flaco Jiménez. It was around this time, in the early 1970s, that Doug Sahm began spending more time in Austin. Reid acknowledges Sahm’s contribution to the Austin scene, saying that “his music was... but he also contributed significantly to the eclecticsound that has become a hallmark of the Austin music scene. Soon after Sahm moved to Austin, Augie Meyers arrived with his group, the Western Head Band. During the group’s first performance there, Meyers quickly recognized the tremendous growth of the Austin music scene. Between songs, he turned to the audience and said, “Austin just keeps growing, don’t it?”

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The most recent phase in the evolution of the West Side Sound occurred during the 1990s, with an unprecedented national and international groundswell in popularity of Latin music and culture. According to San Antonio Express-News columnist Ramiro Burr, one reason for this upswing in interest, especially among young Latinos, is that it became “OK, that it is uniquely American, to celebrate one’s own culture, and that of our neighbors as well.” This celebration of collective culture had always been an essential part of the development of the West Side Sound. During the explosion of interest in Latino music during the 1990s, Meyers and Sahm came together once again, this time with Flaco Jiménez and Freddy Fender (born Baldemar Huerta), to create the super group, the Texas Tornados. Meyers, Sahm, Jiménez, and Fender actually formed the Texas Tornados (The Texas Tornados CD) featured a mix of ballads, country, R&B, conjunto, and rock and roll, sung in both English and Spanish.

Young says that the Progressive Country movement, launched so publicly by *Rolling Stone*, “Started developing...in large part because of Doug, and all the players, all the hipsters, and all the artists all started coming up [from San Antonio and South Texas] to this part of the country...This was giving us something different; it had this great creative energy, and a huge part of it was that San Antonio sound. It was that great, great, Tex-Mex background...it was that conjunto/country, etc.”

Augie Meyers, courtesy of White Boy Records & Tapes
Texas Tornados in 1989. The following year, they released their first album, Texas Tornados. The CD was very much a reflection of those earlier influences from San Antonio’s unique West Side Sound. It featured a mix of ballads, country, R&B, conjunto, and rock and roll, sung in both English and Spanish. In 1991, they charted on Billboard’s rock, Latin, and country charts, and also won a Grammy. The West Side Horns, a horn section formed by several veteran San Antonio musicians, often commented that, one of the two CDs they produced, Jade Box Music, included some of his favorite musicians. “We had George Raines from [Austin] on drums, and Jack Barber [on bass], as well as one of Antone’s favorite San Antonio vocalists, Randy Garibay. Following the recordings, Antone and his record label helped sponsor a tour of the group that included Los Angeles and New York.” Sahn’s second release on the Antone’s label, The Last Real Texas Blues Band, came in 1994 and included the West Side Horns. It featured covers by Lowell Fulson, T-Bone Walker, and several Louisana “Swamp Pop” tunes, such as “Bad Boy” and “I’m A Fool to Care.” The CD was recorded live at Antone’s in Austin. Although it did not win, the record was nominated for a Grammy in 1995. Sahn had developed a large international fan base long before he joined the Texas Tornados, and his worldwide popularity continued to grow throughout the 1990s. Deborah Hanson, Sahn’s personal manager during the final years of his life, recalls how popular he was in Europe. At a concert in Lucerne, Switzerland, in 1998, Sahn and his Last Real Texas Blues Band played at a casino in which the proprietors opened several doors to let the large crowd in. Hanson remembers that it was “wail to wall people. You couldn’t get through the crowd, it was that tight.” Perhaps, because of poor planning on the part of the casino’s management, the musicians were brought into the building at the opposite end of the room from the stage and had to force their way through the massive crowd to get to the front of the hall. The band’s normal routine was to start without Sahn to get the crowd warmed up and then bring him out on stage. When the time came for Sahn to appear, however, Hanson had to push people out of the way, so that Sahn could finally reach the stage. A similar situation occurred after the show, as hundreds of adoring fans tried to get close enough to touch Sahn. In Belgium, during the same tour, Sahn and the band were being transported in a van to and from the stage area at an outdoor festival. After the show, Hanson ushered the musicians into the van in an attempt to leave quickly. According to Hanson, when Sahn got into the van, “The fans were literally coming in sight behind Doug.” Hanson told the driver to “Drive on,” but he would not move, because the frenzied fans were still trying to come through the door. Finally, in desperation, Hanson had to push her way to the front of the van. Crawling over a startled Rocky Morales, she shut and locked the door and insisted that the driver “get going.” The driver finally began moving. Flaco Jiménez also gained further national and international recognition during the 1980s and 1990s. In addition to the Grammy he won with the Tornados, he received one for Best Mexican-American Music Performance in 1987 with Ay Ti Deja en San Antonio, another for Best Mexican-American Music Performance in 1995 with Flaco Jiménez, in 1996 as Best Mexican-American/Texano Music Performance with the same recording from the previous year, and yet another Grammy in 1998 for the Tejano category with Said and Done. Jiménez says that, what works best for him is to play a combination of polkas, boleros, country, and even rock and roll. Jiménez, and most conjunto musicians, also have drawn from the musical traditions of the large German-American population around San Antonio. In fact, the accordion and the polka tradition probably entered the Mexican-American musical repertoire in the mid-1800s, as a result of the large influx of German immigrants into Central Texas around that time. As Jiménez describes it, “I, mean, you know, sharing cultures, sharing music, blending different kinds of music together man, it’s just fun, fun, and having a good time. It’s the main thing.” Before he passed away, Garibay teamed up with Ricardo Montalban and Cheech Marin in an ongoing effort to make Chicano more “visible,” as he put it, to mainstream America. Garibay called it the “Power of visibility for Chicanos.” To that end, he wrote the title track for his 2001 CD, Invisible Society. It is a hard rocking tune that carries a strong political message: I fought your wars, washed your cars I even showered your shoes I cooked your meals, worked your fields But me you still refuse Invisible society – it is what you want to see Invisible society – won’t even look at me… Garibay’s songs represented how far some parts of Texas society had progressed, in terms of cross-cultural interaction, but they also reflected the persistent barriers to true social equality. For generations, Mexican Americans had faced widespread discrimination in employment, education, and other areas. This began to slowly change in the latter half of the twentieth century, but only after Mexican-American activists, including such musicians as Randy Garibay and Joe Hernandez, convinced other Americans to recognize the social, political, and economic significance of Mexican Americans. Another pioneer of the West Side Sound who has left an indelible mark on Texas music is Clifford Scott. Before his death in 1993, the man who was known by his friends as “Scotty,” played throughout San Antonio. He did release one record, “Mr. Honky Tonk Is Back in Town,” on the New Rose label in 1992. “He was a master at the harmonica,” said Robert Barrientos, Scott’s former bandmate. “He started playing at a very early age.” In addition to the great respect he earned from fellow musicians, Clifford Scott’s legacy is his unique tenor saxophone style, which is still celebrated by Rodarte, Charlie Alvarado, Spot Barnett, Rocky Morales, Al Gomez, and Louis Bustos, of which...
I went down Nogalitos, looking for barbacoa and Big Red;
Yes, I went down Nogalitos, looking for barbacoa and Big Red;
I could have had some menudo, but I had some cabeza instead!

Texas Tornados in 1989. The following year, they released their first album, Texas Tornados. The CD was very much a reflection of those earlier influences from San Antonio's unique West Side Sound. It featured a mix of ballads, country, R&B, conjunto, and rock and roll, sung in both English and Spanish. In 1991, the album charted on Billboard's rock, Latin, and country charts, and also won a Grammy.1 The West Side Horns, a horn section formed by several veteran San Antonio musicians, often backed up the Tornados when they toured nationally and internationally. Spot Barnett, a founding member of the Horns, recalls that the group was the “icing” on the cake when they played behind the popular Tornados:

Now, this is what we did all through Europe. And I'm talkin' about London, Paris, Germany, Holland, Switzerland. They would put the light on us when we were actively playing... Yeah, we gave the show class. We gave it the icing.2

Other members of the West Side Horns include Rocky Morales, Louis Bustos, Al Gomez, and Susie Gonzalez, who played keyboards with Sunny Chirina on American Bandstand in 1963 and with Joe Hernandez during his heyday in the 1970s. Having the West Side Horns join the Texas Tornados to perform a variety of musical styles was perhaps the ultimate way of bringing the West Side Sound. Because of the band's tremendous popularity worldwide, the unique musical amalgamation born in San Antonio in the 1950s was finally making its way out to nearly every corner of the globe during the 1990s. Sadly, this marriage of diverse musical talents did not last long. Dough Sahm died suddenly in 1999, and the Texas Tornados have remained largely inactive ever since.

Sahm also had been quite active as a solo artist at the same time that the Texas Tornados were becoming so internationally popular. He went back to his West Side Sound roots with two releases, Juice Box Music and Last Real Texas Blues Band, both released on Antone's Records. These CDs reflect a variety of regional influences, including Guitar Slim, T-Bone Walker, and several Louisiana “Swamp Pop” tunes, such as “Bad Boy” and “I'm a Fool to Care.” The CD was recorded live at Antone's in Austin. Although it did not win, the record was nominated for a Grammy in 1995.

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Hugo Jiménez also gained further national and international recognition during the 1980s and 1990s. In addition to the Grammy he won with the Tornados, he received one for Best Mexican-American Music Performance in 1987 with Ay Ti Dejo en San Antonio, another for Best Mexican-American Music Performance in 1995 with Flaco Jiménez, in 1996 as Best Mexican-American/Texano Music Performance with the same recording from the previous year, and yet another Grammy in 1998 for the Tejano category with Said and Done. Jiménez says that, what works best for him is to play a combination of polkas, boleros, country, and even rock and roll. Jiménez, and most conjunto musicians, also have drawn from the musical traditions of the large German-American population around San Antonio. In fact, the accordion and the polka tradition probably entered the Mexican-American musical repertoire in the mid-1800s, as a result of the large influx of German immigrants into Central Texas around that time. As Jiménez describes it, “I, me, you know, short cultural sharing, sharing music, blending different kinds of music together, it’s just fun, fun, fun, and having a good time. It’s the main thing.”

Garibay’s songs represented how far some parts of Texas society had progressed, in terms of cross-cultural interaction, but they also reflected the persistent barriers to true social equality. For generations, Mexican Americans had faced widespread discrimination in employment, education, and other areas. This began to slowly change in the latter half of the twentieth century, but only after Mexican-American activists, including such musicians as Randy Garibay and Joe Hernandez, convinced other Americans to recognize the social, political, and economic significance of Mexican Americans.

Another pioneer of the West Side Sound who has left an indelible mark on Texas music is Clifford Scott. Before his death in 1993, the man who was known by his friends as “Scotty,” played throughout San Antonio. He did release one record, “Mr. Honky Tonk is Back in Town,” on the New Rose label in 1992.5 Frank Rodarte has referred to Scott as his “mentor,” and, along with Randy Garibay, San Antonio jazz bassist George Prado, and others, Rodarte had the honor of playing for the late Charlie Alvarado’s funeral. Rodarte recalled, “His sister requested that I play at his funeral... I did ‘Honky Tonk’ at the open casket... We played all of Clifford’s favorite songs, such as ‘There Is No Greater Love’ and ‘As Time Goes By.’” Such in addition to the great respect he earned from fellow musicians, Clifford Scott’s legacy is his unique tenor saxophone style, which is still celebrated by Rodarte, Charlie Alvarado, Spot Barnett, Rocky Morales, Al Gomez, and Louis Bustos, of which

References

1. San Antonio’s West Side Sound

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San Antonio's West Side Sound


As a topic of scholarly research, the West Side Sound phenomenon deserves more attention. It should be recognized as a distinctively Texas genre that blends African-American, Mexican-American, Anglo-American, and even German-American musical influences in a new style. In a very real sense, the West Side Sound reflects the rich and diverse cultural influences that have made Texas music so unique and dynamic. As historian Gary Hartman notes, “Partly because of the militancy of the city’s Catholic archdiocese and partly because of the decision to transcend the borders of the western frontier necessitated cooperation among traditionally disparate groups, people of different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds interacted somewhat more freely in Texas than in later parts of the South, engaging musical ideas and influences in the process.” The West Side Sound represents the open acceptance of such diverse cultural backgrounds and goes beyond simple tolerance to actually embracing the best that each of these ethnic groups has to offer.

Notes

1. See Jim Beal Jr., “Rockin’ S.A.: Local Scene Always had a Touch of Texas,” San Antonio Express-News, February 4, 2004, A2. See also, “More San Antonio School Districts Integrate,” San Antonio Express-News, June 10, 1955, 7; and September 23, 1955, 7. The city had never passed a segregation ordinance, but they tried to enforce the rules in order to maintain the existing order with more assertive methods that often were used elsewhere throughout the Deep South during this period.

2. Goldberg, “Integration in the West Side Sound,” Journal of Southern History, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Aug., 1983), 349-374. On page 351, Goldberg says “The city had never passed a segregation ordinance, ... and the annual policeman’s ball. What is striking is that these issues were settled peacefully and without much incident.

3. Honesty is a characteristic that is valued in Mexican culture. Juanita Estrada, author of Tejano Music: An Introduction to the History of a Beltline Sound, says that he and Sahm, at the ages of 12 and 13, were able to sit in at the Eastwood Country Club and listen to such famous musicians as T-Bone Walker, Bobby Bland, and Albert King.


5. The Handbook of Texas Music, tbd.

6. Ibid. 83. 64. See also author’s interviews with Debra Hanson, Gary Rodarte, and Danny Ornelas.

7. “Hey Baby, Que Pasa?” is one well-known example. This song is in a typical English-language rhythm and blues style.

8. For a detailed study of the impact of music on the San Antonio community, see the excellent work of Associate Professor of History David Adamo, “The University of Texas at San Antonio: A History of Culture and Community,” San Antonio. For a more recent study of the cultural influence of the University of Texas at San Antonio, see the excellent work of Assistant Professor of History Wayne D. Goins, “The University of Texas at San Antonio: A History of Culture and Community,” San Antonio.

9. See “San Antonio Taking Calm Attitude Toward Mixing of Races in Schools,” San Antonio Light, June 24, 1955, 15 A; “More San Antonio School Districts Integrate,” San Antonio Register, July 22, 1955, 1; and “Stop Political Quibbling on Integration,” San Antonio Light, August 28, 1955, 28. The Catholic schools in San Antonio desegregated the year before. However, blacks still faced segregation in the Alamo City at lunch counsels, movie theaters, and the annual policeman’s ball. What is striking is that these issues were settled peacefully and without much incident.


11. More open and frequent jam sessions were held at Club Ebony where Spot Barnett and the various combos he led there often invited Doug Sahm, Rocky Morales, Randy Garibay, and others to play with them.

12. The San Antonio Light ran a four-part series on the rock and roll craze, largely reiterating the fears that local authorities had regarding the genre. See the Light June 17- 20, 1956.


15. For an analysis of the cultural tensions between working and middle-class Tejanos, see Peña’s “The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock,” Journal of Texas Music History, Vol. 1, No. 1, 12-14. Reid notes that the best known musician to tire of Nashville and return to San Antonio was Flaco Jiménez.

16. Ibid. See also author’s interviews with Debela Hanson, Gary Rodarte, and Danny Ornelas.


18. Author’s interview with Jim Beal Jr., “Rockin’ S.A.: Local Scene Always had a Touch of Texas,” San Antonio Express-News, February 4, 2004, A2. See also, “More San Antonio School Districts Integrate,” San Antonio Express-News, June 10, 1955, 7; and September 23, 1955, 7. The city had never passed a segregation ordinance, but they tried to enforce the rules in order to maintain the existing order with more assertive methods that often were used elsewhere throughout the Deep South during this period.

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The latter four are current members of the West Side Horns. The West Side Horns still perform today, both as a band and as a back up group for such acts as Cats Don’t Sleep, Randy Garibay’s former band. Garibay’s brother, Ermie, now leads Cats Don’t Sleep, and Randy Garibay, who sang a soulful rendition of “At Last” on Invisible Society, also performs with the group and with the modern jazz group, Planet Soul. The West Side Horns also performed on the recent CD, I Heard it on the X by the eclectic Texas group Los Super Seven.

In 1998, Garibay managed to include his own CD, including his latest, Blame it on Love, and he recently played organ on Bob Dylan’s CD, Love and Theft. Although semi- retired, Flaco Jiménez still performs in the Alamó City and the surrounding area. Jiménez is a local Catholic music minister called Unidos that plays weekly in churches throughout San Antonio. Rodarte and his musical partner, Danny Ornales, also perform in small venues around the city.

The West Side Sound musicians made substantial, if largely overlooked, contributions to the development of Texas and American music. They are a remarkable people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds who made a conscious decision to transcend social barriers and share their culture with others. The city of San Antonio has long been a unique place, especially as a major cultural center in the South, and its uniqueness has allowed for a more pluralistic, multicultural environment to flourish. The West Side Sound is a dynamic musical manifestation of that multicultural present in San Antonio.

As a topic of scholarly research, the West Side Sound phenomenon deserves more attention. It should be recognized as a distinctly Texas genre that blends African-American, Mexican-American, Anglo-American, and even German-American musical influences in an American musical style. In a very real sense, the West Side Sound reflects the rich and diverse cultural influences that have made Texas music so unique and dynamic. As historian Gary Hartman notes, “Partly because of San Antonio’s relatively less strictly segregated than its northern counterparts, the city of San Antonio retained a more frontier consciousness across traditional lines of race and ethnicity, and its cultural mixing within a song ‘bimusicality.’” The West Side Sound represents the open acceptance of such diverse cultural backgrounds and goes beyond simple tolerance to actually embrace the best that each of these ethnic groups has to offer. (1985)

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2. Frank Hargrove, San Antonio’s The Jazzmen, (San Antonio: The Jazzmen, Inc., 1979), 44.
3. The Dobro chain offered prizes, such as free tickets to the show, 45 Roy Rogers buck horses, and 60 Roy Rogers pup tents.