

"Uno, Dos, One,

That count-off introduction to "Wooly Bully," the song that forever etched Sam Samudio into the institutional memory of pop as Sam the Sham, the turbaned hepcat who led his Pharoahs out of the east Dallas barrio to the big time, holds the key to understanding Tex-Mex and where it fits in the cosmos of all things rock and roll. The rest of the modern world may have perceived the bilingual enumeration as some kind of exotic confection, an unconventional beginning to a giddy rhythm ride of insane craziness. For Samudio, though, screaming "uno, dos, one, two, tres, cuatro" was just doing what comes naturally to a teenager growing up in two cultures in a place not far from the Rio Grande where the First World meets the Third World, and where the Tex meets the Mex.



Two, Tres, Quatro. . .” By Joe Nick Patoski

“Uno, Dos, One, Two, Tres, Quatro. . .”

It's been an ongoing process since Germans and Bohemians bearing accordions arrived in the Texas-Mexico borderlands fresh off the boat from Europe as early as the 1840s. Their traditions and instruments were quickly embraced by Mexican Texans, or Tejanos, who picked up the squeezebox and incorporated polkas, waltzes, the schottische and the *redowa* into their dance repertoires alongside *rancheras*, boleros, and *huapangos*.

The diatonic button accordion and bajo sexto twelve string guitar, which provided the bass line and was imported from the Mexican interior, became the cornerstones of sound known as *norteño* in northern *México*, and *conjunto* on the Texas side of the Rio Grande. Its pioneers, who enjoyed significant record sales beginning in the 1930s, were accordionists Bruno Villareal; Valerio Longoria; Santiago Jiménez; Narcisco Martínez, *El Huracán del Valle* (the Hurricane of the Rio Grande Valley), whose polkas were also marketed to bohemians under the pseudonym of the Polski Kwartet and to Cajuns as Louisiana Pete; and Lydia Mendoza, *La Alondra de la Frontera*, the (Lark of the Border), who became the first Tejana singing star with a string of hit recordings, including her sizzling put-down of bad men, “Mal Hombre,” that sold across the United States and Latin America.

The emergence of these artists coincided with gringos in Texas soaking up Mexican sounds and selling them to their audiences, such as western swing's Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys, who added standards such as “El Rancho Grande” and “Jalisco” to their dance cards. This tradition of borrowing and reinventing has been ongoing ever since. The story songs, or *corridos*, of Mexican *guitarreros*, for instance, inspired modern cowboy music and gave Marty Robbins something to croon about in “Streets of Laredo” and “El Paso.”

It took rock and roll to give Tex-Mex real currency. From the Tex perspective, Buddy Holly's distinctive *vaquero* lilt that epitomized “Heartbeat” and “Brown Eyed Handsome Man,” a styling later recaptured by El Paso's Bobby Fuller Four on “I Fought The Law,” and the saucy hip-shaking beat of “Tequila” by the Champs, an instrumental trio of white boys from Abilene, Texas, blazed the trail. The Mex half of the proposition was articulated to the world by Richie Valens, the pride and joy of East Los Angeles, California, who took a *son jarocho* classic from Veracruz state in Mexico called “La Bamba,” and revved and twanged it up into something new and completely different. It was no coincidence that Valens told Holly he wanted him to produce his next record just before both artists were killed in a plane crash in Iowa on February 3, 1959.

Before Valens stormed onto the charts, though, a handsome young man named Baldemar Huerta, performing under the name of Freddy Fender, was already honing a reputation in the Rio Grande Valley of deep South Texas as the Tex-Mex Elvis. Fender, also known as El Bebop Kid, played to his audience by singing rock and roll and blues in Spanish and English, and had already

broken into the mainstream with his 1956 Top 40 hit sung in English, “Wasted Days, Wasted Nights,” a guaranteed bellyrubber on the dance floor.

In fact, Mexican Americans all over Texas were doing their own interpretation of rock and roll, filtering it through an ethnic gauze that rendered the music slower and more rhythm-heavy, swaying and braying with backbeats that accentuated hip shaking and framed around a singer voicing sentiments forever sincere, my dearest darling, *con cariño*. Like all variations of early rock, black music provided the strongest influences—blues, rhythm 'n blues, doo wop, soul—only Tex-Mex threw those sounds back into the mainstream simmered in spice and salsa. Groups from San Antonio's El West Side, such as Charlie and the Jives and Sonny Ace y los Twisters, were just as fluent in Louis Prima, and just as prone to cover Bobby Blue Bland and Little Junior Parker as their white and black *compadres*, while doo-wop was the bread and butter of The Royal Jesters, Rudy and the Reno Bops, and Los Dinos. All of the above were regional stars, thanks to thriving recording scenes in San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and the Rio Grande Valley, and radio shows like Joe



Photo Courtesy of: Reprise Records
Freddy Fender

Anthony's Harlem Hit Parade in San Antonio, which devoted heavy airplay to South Texas acts. Their successes proved Mexican Americans were just as crazy about rock and roll in all its forms as anybody else, and affirmed how rock and roll transcended cultures and languages to become the first global music.

San Antonio's Sunny and the Sunliners became the first Mexican-American group from Texas to earn an appearance on television's American Bandstand with their 1962 hit “Talk to Me,” on which vocalist Sunny Ozuna emulated the vocal stylings of R & B singer Little Willie John. Ozuna's previous group, the Sunglows, already enjoyed some notoriety for their peppy instrumental polka, “Peanuts,” which was the Chicano answer to the Bill Doggett Combo's rhythm 'n blues stroll, “Honky Tonk (Part Two),” cowritten by Clifford Scott, the San Antonio saxophonist in Doggett's band who unwittingly influenced the Tex-Mex horn sound.

The same British Invasion led by the Beatles that put a damper on many American regional styles of music launched Tex-Mex into international prominence, led by Sam the Sham's “Wooly Bully” in

From The Collection of the Buddy Holly Center. Photographer Dick Cole, 1958.

1965 and followed by "96 Tears" by Mark and the Mysterians, a band of Mexican-American teens from Michigan with deep family roots in Texas. Both songs shared more than a few dynamic similarities to English bands, such as Manfred Mann and the Zombies.

Sometimes Tex-Mex is more subtle, as in the case of ZZ Top, who've paid tribute to Tex-Mex with songs like "Heard It On the X" and "Mexican Blackbird," touring with a mariachi as opening act, dressing up in sombreros on album covers, and wearing their hearts on their sleeves, down to the foldout photograph of a Tex-Mex Number Two Dinner as the inside cover of their 1973 breakout album, *Tres Hombres*. This, too, is Tex-Mex. So was Stevie Ray Vaughan, with mariachi outfits worn at Carnegie Hall.

But no single performer grasped the atmospheric of Tex-Mex quite like Doug Sahm, a white boy from San Antonio who was a child prodigy on the steel guitar and whose life changed when he saw Freddy Fender perform at a San Antonio drive-in movie theater in 1958. "She's About A Mover" by Sahm's band, the Sir Douglas Quintet, was produced by Houston indie Huey P. Meaux, who'd also overseen Sunny & the Sunliners' "Talk To Me." "Mover" bore a striking beat-on-top-of-the-beat resemblance to *Rubber Soul* vintage Beatles, a connection underscored by Meaux's crafty determination to dress up the group in Carnaby Street fashions and pass them off as English, rather than Texan. "Just don't open your mouths," Meaux advised his clients (which they didn't until they made an appearance on television's "*Hullabaloo*" and blew their disguise forever). The "beat-on-the-beat" may have sounded British, but any Texas aficionado could hear Augie Meyer's trademark roller rink Vox organ for what it was—a chili bowl synthesis of bajo sexto guitar backbeat and accordion riffing on a modified polka.

The SDQ fled Texas for the freedom of San Francisco just about the same time a Rio Grande Valley cat with an eyepatch named Steve Jordan covered the Vanilla Fudge's "You Keep Me Hanging On" with his button accordion, singing in both English and Spanish in a style identified on the 45 rpm version as "accordeon psicodelico."

Sahm returned to Texas in the early seventies, setting up shop in Austin up the road from San Antonio, paying tribute to his hometown roots by assembling an all-star band including Meyers and saxophonist Rocky Morales and El West Side Horns. One track on the record, "Wasted Days, Wasted Nights," was dedicated to Freddy Fender, "wherever you are."

His followup, *Doug Sahm and Band* for Atlantic, was hyped for its superstar lineup of supporting musicians, specifically Bob Dylan. While sales were negligible, the recording was noteworthy for introducing San Antonio accordionist Flaco Jiménez to the world, the first time the much-maligned instrument was prominently featured as a rock and roll ensemble piece since Bill Haley & the Comets. Jiménez's participation was not lost on musicologist Ry Cooder, who spent several months in Texas learning bajo sexto guitar while following Jiménez to *conjunto* dances and issuing the album *Chicken*

Skin Music to show what he learned—this some twenty years before Cooder "discovered" the Buena Vista Social Club and Cuban roots music. Peter Rowan, a folk roots rocker from California, followed in Cooder's footsteps and moved to Texas where he collaborated extensively with Jiménez, while Sahm's next album for Atlantic included an original, "Soy Chicano," that was embraced by Mexican Americans in Texas as an anthem of brown pride.

In 1974, Sir Doug's shoutout to Freddy Fender led to the rediscovery of the old Tex-Mex rocker, whose career ended when he did time in Angola prison in Louisiana for possession of two marijuana joints. Fender, who was working as a mechanic and going to night clubs, came out of retirement to perform with Sahm in Austin while Huey P. Meaux produced recordings that led to Fender's rebirth as a country pop crooner, topping the Billboard pop charts with two number one hits, "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," and a reworked version of "Wasted Days, Wasted Nights."

Meanwhile, Tejanos, the term most often describing Mexican Texans in the wake of Chicano awareness, were lifting elements of rock and roll into their own regional style which was aimed at Mexican-American audiences, led by Little Joe Hernandez of Little Joe and the Latinaires. Hernandez, too, left Texas to do his own west coast residency in the early seventies, emulating the Latin rock of Santana and Malo before returning home as Little Joe y La Familia and adding salsa, rock, and a raised consciousness to the Tejano mix, ultimately setting the stage for the crossover stardom of the singer Selena in the early nineties before her tragic death in 1995 at the hand of her fan club president.

On the Tex side, Sahm was followed in the eighties by Joe King Carrasco's "Jalapeno con Big Red" and his punked up version of Tex-Mex called Nuevo Wavo and Brave Combo's nuclear polka and Sahm's own reborn Border Wave sound. Then, on the heels of supergroups such as the Traveling Wilburys, Sahm hooked up with sidekick Augie Meyers, his mentor Freddy Fender, and Flaco Jiménez to form the Texas Tornados, the Tex-Mex supergroup who racked up a couple of Grammys and the biggest chart action for Tex-Mex since the mid sixties.

The process of border hybridization has continued unabated, from Randy Garibay's chicano blues; the Tex-Mex ska of Plastina Mosh from Monterrey, Mexico, and Los Skarnales from Houston; the Mavericks' (from Miami) Latinized take on country, the South Park Mexican's version of rap; and Los Super Seven following in the footsteps of the Texas Tornados in carrying on the supergroup tradition. Flaco Jiménez has gone on to record with the Rolling Stones, Santana, Linda Ronstadt, Dwight Yoakum, and Steven Stills, Tex-Mexing their respective sounds as it were. His most recent collaboration with country singer Buck Owens on Jiménez's album *Sleepytown*, a cover of the Beatles' "Love Me Do," brings the whole Tex-Mex link to the British Invasion, full circle.

A bit convoluted, perhaps, but Sam Samudio can tell you, it's really all as easy as counting "one, two, tres, cuatro. ■"