

MÚSICA TEJANA AND THE TRANSITION
FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN:
MANUEL “COWBOY” DONLEY
AND THE AUSTIN MUSIC SCENE

by

Evangelina Liza Fuentes, BA, MSIS

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Committee Members:

Jason Mellard, Chair

Katharine Salzmann

Dan K. Utley

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DEDICATION

for Lourdes Judith Garza Oropeza

also, known as Abuela, Lulu, MaryLou,

Lou and *Mom*

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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

“We do country. We do tejano. We do oldies. We do rock. We do *mariachi*. We do everything.” remarked Sunny Ozuna to the audience at the “Legends of Tejano Music” event as he expanded on a comment made by fellow panelist Shelly Lares regarding the versatility of tejano music artists.¹ This flexibility of vocal styles in multiple genres originated from live performances by *música tejana* artists in the 1950s in which these artists performed their standard repertoire of Spanish-language hits and also included rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and country to meet the growing appeal of those genres among Texas Mexican audiences.²

Texas Mexican music is a direct descendant of Spanish and Mexican music and is created in folk and popular forms. In his essay, “*Música Tejana: Nuestra Música*,” Guadalupe San Miguel explains that “*música tejana* comprises all the musical genres, forms, and styles that have existed in the Tejano community, at least since the nineteenth century.”³ He also refers to Texas Mexican music as encompassing a wide array of songs and dances.⁴ Current performances by tejano music artists include electric instruments and reflect advances in audio technology. Yet, before the integration of amplification,

¹ Idelfonso “Sunny” Ozuna and Shelly Lares are legendary performers in the tejano music genre. The “Legends of Tejano” panel sponsored by The Wittliff Collections at Texas State University on November 12, 2017, also included Little Joe Hernandez, Hector Saldaña and Ramón Hernandez.

² I use the terms tejano music, *música tejana* and Texas Mexican music interchangeably as the Spanish music created and produced by Texas Mexican communities in Texas, the United States and around the world.

³ Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., “*Música Tejana: Nuestra Música*,” *The Journal of Texas Music History* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

música tejana was performed with acoustic instruments. The first tejano musicians and ensembles to “go electric” originated a new music scene and altered the sound experience of their audiences.

This new scene develops after World War II as other music genres in the United States experienced similar sonic changes. Amplification moved the big band genre into rhythm and blues, while country music’s western swing turned into honky-tonk. The electric guitar and electric bass along with microphones brought the size of these large ensembles of nine to twelve members down to six to eight. The youth of the 1950s witnessed these collective transformations and actively altered the dynamics of popular culture at a fundamental level. A generational shift occurred, and all adults became old-fashioned. Rock and roll, electric guitars, and youth symbolized the modern.

Manuel “Cowboy” Donley is a trailblazer in tejano music who represents this moment. As the arranger, guitarist, and lead vocalist for *Las Estrellas* [The Stars], Donley transformed *música tejana* from a traditional acoustic sound into the modern electric sound that dominates tejano music today. As a 2014 recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship, Donley was recognized for his contributions to the ethnic American musical tradition of *orquesta tejana* [Texas orchestra]. According to Donley, the modern “tejano” sound experience is electric, loud, amplified, energetic, confident, and bilingual, and he asserts that these sonic markers are a direct influence from rock and roll. Donley’s use of the word “modern” for the change in sound experience from acoustic to electric provides another option to the current scholarship that describes “modern” *orquestas tejanas* in terms of performing a bimusical repertoire that combines English speaking and Mexican Latino musical

cultures.

The modern sound of *música tejana* is fundamentally electric guitar, electric bass, and loud drums. Donley used these instruments along with the alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, and trumpet when he established his amplified *orquesta tejana Las Estrellas* in 1955 and created a distinct sound from his acoustic predecessors. This period of transition in the *orquesta tejana* ensemble from acoustic to electric prior to the introduction of the electric organ represents a lacuna in the existing historical narrative that merits attention and research to credit the groundbreaking efforts of Donley and his contemporaries.

This research continues the scholarship on Texas Mexican music begun by the folklorist Américo Paredes. In his 1958 book “*With His Pistol in His Hand*”: *A Border Ballad and its Hero*, Paredes documented the musical origins of the Texas Mexican corrido through the analysis of “*El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*.” The next significant text with a dedicated focus on Texas Mexican music did not appear in an academic journal until 1982 with Jose Reyna’s “Notes on Tejano Music.” His descriptive overviews focused on instrumentation and orchestration of the two dominant groups, *conjunto* [group] and *orquesta* [orchestra] or *banda* [big band]. He explains *conjunto* as an ensemble with the accordion as the primary instrument followed by the bass, guitar in the form of the *bajo sexto* [a twelve-string guitar of Mexican origin], and drums, and *orquesta* or *banda* as similar to the North American swing band.⁵ He distinguishes the “Tejano flavor” of Beto Villa’s big band with their combined performances of American

⁵ José R. Reyna, “Notes on Tejano Music,” *Aztlan: International Journal of Chicano Studies Research* 13, no. 1–2, (Spring-Fall 1982), 82-89.

and Mexican stock tunes while also adding “the swing sound to popular Mexican music.”⁶ Reyna includes Isidro Lopez and Oscar Martinez as *orquesta* band leaders from the Corpus Christi area in the 1950s that implemented changes to the *orquesta* ensemble format established by Villa. Reyna assigns to Lopez the contribution of incorporating an accordion and *bajo sexto* into the *orquesta* and credits Martinez with the “definitive sound” of two trumpets, alto sax, tenor sax, guitar, bass, and drums as well as the successive “proliferation of similar bands.”⁷ Manuel Peña has contributed multiple significant works to the literature, some of which provide historical and musical surveys of Mexican American music in Texas while others describe specific themes. In his analysis of Texas Mexican music, he uses the framework of music-as-culture by separating music and its performance into organic, culturally meaningful performance based on use-value; and super-organic, commodity production driven by exchange-value. He also creates associations based on economic class in which the *conjunto* ensemble is described as working-class music and the *orquesta tejana* as middle class music.⁸ With *The Mexican American Orquesta: Music, Culture, and the Dialectic of Conflict*, Peña covers Mexican American *orquestas* in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California with examples of musical and dance practices done by *orquestas* from the 1800s to 1990s with a focus on Texas. He also includes a chapter on the Los Angeles tradition and another chapter on his own musical experiences as a member of an *orquesta* in Fresno, California.⁹ Guadalupe San Miguel also has several works including musical surveys and

⁶ Ibid., 89-90.

⁷ Ibid., 90-91.

⁸ Manuel H. Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: History of a Working-Class Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 8-14.

⁹ Manuel H. Peña, *The Mexican American Orquesta: Music, Culture, and the Dialectic of Conflict* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999), vii-10.

articles on topics such as music production and the radio industry. His book, *Tejano Proud*, contains descriptions of *conjunto*, *orquesta*, *banda*, *grupo tejano* [tejano group], and country bands and designates developmental time periods in the historical progression of the music. San Miguel affirms that *música tejana* is composed of more than *conjunto* and *orquesta* as other ensembles continue to gain popularity. He also connects the modern music style to a tradition based on Mexican roots and a Tejano culture.

Gender studies within *música tejana* have also added to the growing field of scholarship. In *Lydia Mendoza's Life in Music/La Historia de Lydia Mendoza*, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez delivers a bilingual oral history of legendary NEA National Heritage Fellow guitarist and vocalist Lydia Mendoza. Mendoza recounts in Spanish many aspects of her life story while Broyles-Gonzalez presents background information on Mendoza's musical performance life and an analysis of Mendoza's musical technique and repertoire. John Koegel's "Crossing Borders" chapter from the book *From Tejano to Tango: Latin American Popular Music* published in 2013 discusses the musical careers of some women in the Spanish-language music market. He writes on the musical activities of women and describes three groups of women including Mexicanas, Tejanas, and Chicanas with features on Lydia Mendoza and Selena Quintanilla. In *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda*, Deborah Vargas brings together an eclectic group of women under an umbrella of disrupting gender norms in the Chicano community. These women assist Vargas in providing an alternative interpretation of their musical careers in a way that sits outside of the traditional construction of gender in Mexican American society. Mary Ann Villarreal, in *Listening to Rosita: The Business of*

Tejana Music and Culture, 1930-1955, examines, in part, women entrepreneurs in the entertainment industry. Her research interest is motivated by the personal connection of her grandmother as operator of the Pecan Lounge in Tivoli, Texas.

This growing literature on *música tejana* does not speak to the generation of artists who developed the modern electric sound in tejano music. This stands in stark contrast to the exhaustive treatment of the electrification of guitar in blues, country, and rock and roll. Currently, the popular discourse regarding the “pioneers” of modern tejano music begins with the 1960s and fails to account for the contributions of musicians in the 1950s. In academic circles, the impacts on *música tejana* of the electric guitar and electric bass as well as the popularity of rock and roll hits such as “Rock Around the Clock,” “Maybellene,” and “*La Bamba*” have yet to be fully uncovered. Tejano music, like other ethnic music such as bluegrass, jazz, and blues, merits closer examination through its central position in the Texas music narrative and, by extension, the regional music of the Southwest and the national music of the United States.

This study crafts a new narrative of the modern electric tejano scene’s origins and its accompanying cultural phenomenon originating in the 1950s. Through the incorporation of electrified instruments, *música tejana* embarked on a progression that parallels developments in Anglo and African American popular music. Amplification produced a sonic distinction and separated the ensemble instrumentation into the categories of modern electric and traditional acoustic. Manuel “Cowboy” Donley introduced the electric sound to the *música tejana* scene in Austin, Texas, in 1955.

Chapter Two, “Culture, Youth, and Music in post-World War II Central Texas,” explores the demographics of midcentury Austin and its relation to cultural creativity

including music and dance. Urban and ethnic populations are discussed as well as the dynamics of the Mexican-Mexican American population as folklore groups according to Américo Paredes. In addition, this chapter takes an opportunity to identify the specific role of the youth population of the 1950s, their post-World War II characteristics, and how their media-influenced world of radio, television, and film determined their music tastes and preferences.

Chapter Three, “The *Música Tejana* Scene in Central Texas in the post-World War II Era,” examines tejano music scenes in Austin during the 1950s and the musical journey of guitarist Manuel Donley. In addition, the new modern electric sound performed by the *orquesta tejana* of Manuel Donley is described in comparison to its acoustic precursor.

Chapter Four, “The Business of *Música Tejana* in Central Texas in the post-World War II Era,” discusses musical culture in tejano music and how radio, dance halls, and record companies had a role in the creation and production of tejano music with a focus on Central Texas and Manuel Donley.

This thesis also underscores Central Texas as a major player in a conversation that has often focused on San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and the Rio Grande Valley. Peña relies on the Ideal Record label from Alice, Texas, to identify sonic characteristics, changes, and developments in *música tejana* which reduces the scope of all available sound recordings produced for the Mexican and Mexican American listening audience. The Austin urban area supplies *música tejana* with creators like guitarist and band leader Manuel “Cowboy” Donley and producers like Valmon Records. Little Joe Hernandez, the multi-Grammy-winning *orquesta tejana* icon from Temple, Texas, says of Donley, “He

certainly was one of my musical heroes.”¹⁰ Performing artists from major metropolitan areas of Texas such as Austin, along with the associated music industry, must be represented within the tejano music narrative.

This thesis also extends the significance of electrical amplification through intersections of music, dance, and youth. The Mexican American experience that is “modern” *música tejana* begins here at this pivotal point through multiple musical influences but with a direct connection to rock and roll through the use of the electric guitar sound when combined with the electric bass and the drums. The unison of a steady rhythmic tempo allowed the development of one beat to match one dance step to create the dance form known as the *tacuachito* [little possum] that is exclusive to the Texas Mexican community.

In 1955 when Donley electrifies *música tejana*, the switch reverberates throughout the entire genre in a revolutionary shift away from soft ballroom instrumentals to loud popular narrative music. This transition marks a milestone in the development and progression of *música tejana*, and at its center is Donley, a twenty-seven-year-old guitarist directly influenced by country music and rock and roll. As a product of the Austin tricultural soundscape, a bilingual Donley creates musical innovations within his Mexican American social construct in response to his lived experiences. In addition, he seized the rock and roll music of a generation in their teens and twenties and fused that electric and sonic energy with *música tejana*. This new music bursts onto the scene where it charts a new destiny as the popular form we hear today and

¹⁰ “Tejano Music Legend Manuel ‘Cowboy’ Donley, 87, Still Strumming.” NBC News, October 1, 2014. Retrieved February 24, 2018 from: <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/hispanic-heritage-month/tejano-music-legend-manuel-cowboy-donley-87-still-strumming-n215221>

as the originator, prepares the way for the tejano music explosion of the 1990s with performing artists and groups such as Emilio, Selena, *La Mafia*, and *Grupo Mazz*.

CHAPTER II:

CULTURE, YOUTH AND MUSIC IN POST-WORLD WAR II CENTRAL TEXAS

This chapter addresses the unique characteristics of specific populations in order to recognize the different social processes at work in the 1950s and begins with an exploration of the dynamic and complicated Texas Mexican population. Next, our study area of Austin is reviewed with census data for 1950 and 1960 and compared to San Antonio and Corpus Christi, followed by an examination of the role of teenagers and music in popular culture. The chapter concludes with a return to the Texas Mexican population and a discussion of ethnic identity.

The Multifaceted Mexican Origin Population

The Spanish were the first European-origin peoples to explore and colonize Texas. They brought the guitar, their songs, and dances. By 1821, Mexico had won its independence from Spain. In 1848, the end of the U.S.–Mexico War left thousands of Mexicans on the U.S. side of the border after the Mexican Cession. Américo Paredes, in his book *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero*, uses the term “Greater Mexico” to reference “all the areas inhabited by people of Mexican culture – not only within the present limits of the Republic of Mexico but in the United States as well – in a cultural rather than a political sense.”¹¹ Paredes continues to explore Mexican origin groups in the United

¹¹ Américo Paredes, *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 1995), xiv.

States when he describes a second Mexico as “*Mexico de Afuera*” (Mexico abroad) composed of all the persons of Mexican origin in the United States.¹²

Paredes describes at least three kinds of folklore groups of Mexican origin in the United States as the truly regional groups, the rural or semi-rural immigrants, and the urban groups.¹³ The truly regional groups consist of the descendants of the Spanish settlers to the northernmost points of New Spain. He explains the connection between the geography and the people, writing that parts “of northern Mexico are included within the boundaries of each. These regional folk cultures thus include regions of two nations.”¹⁴ The rural or semi-rural immigrants “are formed to a large extent by *braceros* (migrant workers) from the interior of Mexico, who began to enter the United States in growing numbers at the turn of the century.” The urban group “is found in the Mexiquitos of North American cities like Los Angeles, Chicago and San Antonio.”¹⁵ Regarding the significance of these groups, Paredes explains:

These three folk groups which make up *Mexico de Afuera* are constantly influencing one another at the same time that they are the object of all sorts of influences from Mexico as well as from the United States. They also exercise a certain influence in both Mexico and the United States. Mexican folklore, that is, like the concept of a *Mexico de Afuera*, knows no borders.¹⁶

These are the groups that listen, sing, play, and dance to tejano music. In addition, these groups are also consumers and producers of music as related to the various commercial industries that create, produce, and promote tejano music. Tejano culture creates *música*

¹² Américo Paredes, “The Folklore Groups of Mexican Origin in the United States,” [1979], in *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, ed. Richard Bauman (Austin, Tex: CMAS Books, Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1993), 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

tejana which thrives within Texas Mexican communities around the world as part of Greater Mexico.

Even though Paredes describes Mexican folklore as flowing outside of the republic of Mexico without borders, according to San Miguel, a separate Mexican cultural group began to receive recognition due to its existence outside of Mexico:

Although this culture was similar on both sides of the border, commentators soon began to make distinctions between the Mexican culture found in South Texas and the Mexican culture found in northern Mexico. The former eventually came to be known as Tejano culture, the latter as *norteño* culture. Both, however, came from one primary source—central Mexico. This phenomenon helps to explain the presence of similar cultural and musical forms on both sides of the border.¹⁷

Prior to increased security standards and screening procedures, the geographical border between the United States and Mexico was less defined, and music flowed back and forth. Before these restrictions, the music of the Mexican origin population on both sides of the river was mostly the same and consisted of rural, urban, and traditional styles. As law enforcement began to police the political boundaries of the United States, the complicated permissions of travel reduced the fluid movement between families and communities. Eventually, two sets of music began to develop: one on the Mexico side and one on the Texas side.

Texas Mexican communities create *música tejana* as folk songs and popular songs in both traditional acoustic and modern electric ensembles. The native Texas Mexican population listens, dances, and performs *música tejana*. Tejano music, the popular music heritage of Texas Mexicans, produces, manufactures, and promotes music within its own industry and music-related commercial activities.

¹⁷ San Miguel, “*Música Tejana: Nuestra Música*,” 5-6.

Austin of the 1950s and 1960s

Established in 1839, Austin, named after Stephen F. Austin, was to serve as the site of the capital of the Republic of Texas. In the summer of 1845, the annexation of Texas to the United States was approved, and Austin served as the temporary capital until a statewide election in 1872, which determined its permanence over other contenders such as Waco and Houston. The late 1860s and early 1870s witnessed the establishment of residential communities, business, churches, and schools, by the recently emancipated African American population. Around 1875, a Mexican American neighborhood began to develop near the mouth of Shoal Creek. Austin's presence as a leader in education started in 1881 with the creation of a public school system, the founding of Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute providing opportunities for African Americans, and as the newly selected location for the University of Texas. Segregation and discrimination typified city life by 1900. The city plan of 1928 reinforced these norms through the restriction of municipal services to East Austin only for the African American population. The Mexican American population faced discrimination as well, yet by 1940, their residences and businesses were well established in East Austin south of East Eleventh Street. Overall, the city developed multiple municipal construction projects and by the 1950s, the Lower Colorado River Authority had assisted in ending flooding, bringing hydroelectric power and creating water recreation areas in Austin. In addition, the area had benefited from the development of Del Valle Army Air Base (later Bergstrom Air Force Base).¹⁸

¹⁸ *Handbook of Texas Online*, David C. Humphrey, "AUSTIN, TX (TRAVIS COUNTY)," accessed February 24, 2019, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hda03>.

Austin as an urban place, according to the “Census of Population: 1950,” had a total population of 132,459, of which 13.4 percent were nonwhite (consisting of African Americans, Native Americans, Japanese, Chinese, and other nonwhite races) and 6.6 percent were over 65 years of age with a median age of 27.2.¹⁹ By comparison, its closest big city neighbor, San Antonio, had a population of 408,442, of which 7.2 percent were non-white and 6.2 percent were over 65 years of age, with a median age of 27.4. Interestingly, Corpus Christi was closer to Austin in population with a total of 108,287, of which 6.6 were nonwhite and 3.7 were over the age of 65, with a median age of 26.3.²⁰ All three cities had young populations with median ages under 30. Austin stands out for its higher percentage of “nonwhites” in being more than double that of San Antonio or Corpus Christi. Assuming that the majority of that population is African American, I put forth that in terms of sheer numbers the ethnic environment of Austin was more influenced by African American culture which makes it more of a tricultural city, with consideration that the Mexican origin population is included within whites, than either San Antonio or Corpus Christi which in turn will influence the musical soundscape with a tricultural effect.

A special report of the census for 1960, “Negro Population, By County: 1960 and 1950,” provides exact numbers as well as percentages. Using figures for 1950, Bexar County, which includes San Antonio, shows the African American population as 32,565. Nueces County, which includes Corpus Christi, shows the African American population

¹⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1950*. Vol. II, *Characteristics of the Population*, Part 43, Texas. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1952. The identifiers for ethnicity reflect the report as written for its historical time period. In addition, persons of Mexican birth or ancestry who were not definitely Indian or of other nonwhite race were classified as white in 1950 and 1940.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 43-55 and 43-56.

as 7,958. Travis County, which includes Austin, shows the African American population as 22,493.²¹ This data, while revealing a larger African American presence in San Antonio, should not distract from the larger percentage of the African American population in the Austin area over San Antonio or Corpus Christi.

Another special report, “Persons of Spanish Surname,” from the 1950 Census can also shed light on the Mexican origin population of native births and immigrants with data for five southwestern states. Data for Texas is available by county and denotes a total population inclusive of urban, rural nonfarm, and rural farm subsets. The listed county populations are: 176,877 for Bexar, 58,939 for Nueces, and 15,365 for Travis.²² While these numbers do not directly correlate to the urban places of San Antonio, Corpus Christi, or Austin, these county numbers can provide a possible approximation of the Spanish surname population as a potential estimate for percentages of the total population within those cities. Using this combination of numbers, an indicator of the possible Spanish surnamed population for San Antonio is 43.4 percent, for Corpus Christi is 54.4 percent and for Austin is 11.6 percent. This rough estimate can still be valuable in determining the relationships between the ethnic groups whether Anglo majority or Hispanic majority and the dynamics of *Mexico de Afuera* within the Mexican origin population.

The smaller Hispanic population in Austin experienced urban life differently from the larger Hispanic populations in Corpus Christi and San Antonio, where those

²¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1960. Supplementary Reports*, Series PC(S1)-52, “Negro Population, by County: 1960 and 1950,” U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1966, 53-56.

²² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1950*. Vol. IV, *Special Reports*, Part 3, Chapter C, Persons of Spanish Surname. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1953., 3C-65-3C-70.

communities may not have had the same amount of sustained contact with Anglo and African American populations. The Austin Hispanic community, on the other hand, would perhaps experience more significant cultural impacts from the larger Anglo and African American populations compared to the smaller Anglo and African American populations in San Antonio and Corpus Christi.

Teens and Music

The youth population is in a constant state of replacement, due to the aging process, by the next group of youngsters. David Leaver and Ruth Schmidt, in an article on popular music heritage, suggest that people form their music tastes during the emotional years of the late teens and early twenties. Music serves as a badge of identity in the extended self.²³ In the 1940s and early 1950s, before the rock and roll era, the music business largely developed music for adult listeners, ignoring the adolescent market as a distinct demographic. Middle-class adult tastes controlled popular music with artists such as big band leader Glenn Miller, jazz-influenced soloist Frank Sinatra, crooner Bing Crosby, and vocal group the Andrews Sisters among the most successful. The marginal musical styles were separated into rhythm and blues and country and western. The teens of the 1950s, with their available leisure time, separate generational identity, and disposable income, soon changed this adult-focused business model. Marketers developed “a range of distinct products including clothes, literature, and

²³ David Leaver and Ruth A. Schmidt, “Together Through Life - an Exploration of Popular Music Heritage and the Quest for Re-Enchantment,” *Creative Industries Journal* 3, no. 2 (July 2010): 109.

motion pictures for this new youth culture.”²⁴ The mainstream music of their parents presented little connection to teens in their everyday experience. Many teens listened to the “exciting sound” of black rhythm and blues on the radio.²⁵ The new youth culture had music at its center, and rock and roll relied on them for growth.²⁶ Among the first rock and roll stars were Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bill Haley, Bo Diddley, and Elvis Presley.²⁷ The Tejano community was not immune to these changes and also developed a youth culture that was connected to English popular music in the United States and Spanish popular music in Mexico and Latin America. Within the Tejano community, the youth population absorbed a soundscape of two languages.

According to the 1950 Census, teenagers are split in at least two age groups, 10 to 14 years old and 15 to 19 years old. In Austin for 1950, the 10-14 category numbered 7,656, and the 15-19 category numbered 11,171 for a total of 18,827 and 14.2 percent of the total Austin population.²⁸ This teen market shops, eats, and seeks entertainment. The Spanish surname section of this youth population in Travis county is 3,165.²⁹ This Tejano teen market lived and consumed in a bilingual, tricultural city. They watched Dick Clark’s *American Bandstand*; danced the twist, the swim, and the mashed potato; and discovered themselves through the lyrics and rhythms of pop songs.

²⁴ Mitchell K. Hall, *The Emergence of Rock and Roll: Music and the Rise of American Youth Culture*, Critical Moments in American History, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3-4.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 11-20.

²⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1950*. Vol. II, *Characteristics of the Population*, Part 43, Texas. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1952, 43-86.

²⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1950*. Vol. IV, *Special Reports*, Part 3, Chapter C, Persons of Spanish Surname. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1953., 3C-65-3C-70.

According to Leaver and Schmidt, a song's narrative can contribute to perspective in life experience and emotional need. This identification helps to create communities among music fans.³⁰ The communities continue to develop and grow as they are brought "together by a commonality of shared passion for a musical genre or artist, music fans are defined by their enduring level of involvement."³¹ Fans demonstrate their commitment through investments of time, energy, and resources and their engagement with the music starts through memorabilia and significant social sites and venues.³² When music tastes have a profound impact on youth populations "this can exert a lasting sense of affiliation shared with others of the same generation and preference group as well as the aging music stars themselves."³³ This phenomenon helps to account for music identification based on decades such as the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s or 1980s. Each of the corresponding generations continues its fealty to the music of its youth, having grown-up with a certain set of artists. Just as mainstream popular music has the Beatles in the 1960s and Nirvana in the 1990s, tejano music has Little Joe and the Latinaires in the 1960s and Selena in the 1990s. Manuel "Cowboy" Donley was a leading voice for Texas Mexican youth in Central Texas in the 1950s.

Music can also connect to the past. As Leaver and Schmidt argue, for "music fans, particular songs and music genres are inextricably linked with their own personal memories and the emotional states originally experienced. These are then readily evoked as a nostalgic echo by hearing the piece of music again."³⁴ The relationship between

³⁰ Leaver and Schmidt, 110.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 111.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

music, youth, dance, and place exists in memories that last a lifetime. As a child of the original MTV generation, my memories are influenced by place and formative youth music preferences. The music market power of youth through its consumption of music and music related products, due in part to the music industry and youth marketing changes of the 1950s, drives the music industry. Each cohort of youth ages, yet, the dominance of youth memory aligned to formative youth music remains.

Societies use music for multiple purposes including the strengthening of bonds and the celebration of traditions. In addition, music and dance are often a function of courtship and mating rituals, and form part of the search and discovery of a compatible partner with similar qualities, perhaps especially in the years of adolescence and early post-adolescence.³⁵ The life of a University of Texas student offers occasions for socializing with peers, and such a place was the Varsity Grill on Guadalupe Street. In 1950, Mexican Americans faced discrimination and harassment outside of their neighborhoods. Yet, Donley and his pre-*Estrellas* band Los Heartbreakers had a rare opportunity with a regular booking to entertain the predominately Anglo students at the Varsity.³⁶ With their unique combination of bebop, rhythm and blues, and *samba*, Donley shared with a smile, “the dancers were jumping all over the place.”³⁷ Los Heartbreakers’ repertoire included George Gershwin, Xavier Cugat, and Carmen Miranda.³⁸ As part of

³⁵ Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, (John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 12.

³⁶ Donley was twenty-two at the time. Juan Castillo, “At 83, Tejano Music Pioneer Still Playing.” *Austin American-Statesman (TX)*. Accessed from: <http://www.statesman.com/news/entertainment/music/at-83-tejano-music-pioneer-still-playing-2/nRTfy/>. Manuel Donley, interview by the author, December 4, 2011.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Sarah Wimer, “The Godfather of Tejano Music: The Long Musical Journey of Manuel ‘Cowboy’ Donley.” Accessed February 15, 2015, from: http://www.goodlifemag.com/index.php?option=com_flippingbook&view=book&id=17&Itemid=188

Donley's record collection, *The Dance Beat of Xavier Cugat* contains *mambos*, *rhumbas*, and *cha cha chas*.³⁹ No other young musical group played both swing and *samba*.⁴⁰ Los Heartbreakers were in an extraordinary position with their musical offerings based on the musical tastes of a youth population. With an appreciation for multiple styles, Donley was in a group that performed those styles for a population that seemed most interested in dancing to expressive Latin rhythms and not preoccupied with who was playing the music.

Manuel Donley: A Sound influenced by the Austin Soundscape

Donley is a cultural product of his geography, and his musical style reflects his lived experience. His family heritage is Tejano-Irish on his father's side and Mexican national on his mother's side.⁴¹ With his family's arrival in Austin during childhood, he became bilingual and bicultural, a resident of *Mexico de Afuera*. As a first-generation Mexican American growing up in East Austin, his Mexican American neighborhoods bordered African American neighborhoods.

Manuel Peña, in *The Mexican American Orquesta*, uses biculturalism to refer to a synthesis of two cultures, American and Mexican, in which the synthesis includes "the most dynamic of all bicultural practices—bilingualism and bimusicality."⁴² This concept has relevance for the experience of many Mexican Americans. Yet, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez's discussion of cross-cultural musical bonding and interethnic musical

³⁹ *The Dance Beat of Xavier Cugat*, Manuel Donley Papers and Record Collection.

⁴⁰ Donley, December 4, 2011.

⁴¹ Wimer.

⁴² Peña, *The Mexican American Orquesta*, 108.

conversations may be a better fit for the Mexican American population in Austin in the 1950s. Broyles-Gonzalez describes how “musical languages have frequently crisscrossed cultural, ethnic, class, and supposed national borders—a testimony both to the lived proximity of diverse cultures and to the transgressive magnetism of musical cultures across social boundaries of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and georegion.”⁴³ Another explanation that is inclusive of the African American cultural influences of a city like Austin on the music of a Mexican American like Donley is Jose B. Cuellar's concept of transculturation as “the complex combination of synchronizing and synthesizing processes that adopt and adapt, meld and blend, combine and fuse diverse cultural elements into somewhat new cultural expressions in innovative and inventive ways.”⁴⁴

Donley shared musical and geographical environments with Anglos and African Americans. The radio airwaves of Austin in the 1950s predominantly offered English-language programming, but Spanish-language broadcasting was also available on KTXN 1370 AM. Both radio and television broadcast a tricultural mix of Anglo and African American with Mexican-Latin music. The cross-cultural Austin soundscape influenced Donley’s guitar sound, and his position as a guitar-playing bandleader meant that he stood out in an *orquesta* scene where other band leaders such as Balde Gonzalez, Beto Villa, Isidro Lopez, and Oscar Martinez played saxophone, clarinet, or trumpet.⁴⁵ Donley

⁴³ Yolanda Broyles-González, and Lydia Mendoza, *Lydia Mendoza's Life in Music / La Historia De Lydia Mendoza: Norteño Tejano Legacies* (American Musicspheres. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 193.

⁴⁴ José B. Cuellar, “El Saxofon in Tejano and Norteño Music,” in *Collected Work: Puro Conjunto: An Album in Words and Pictures—Writings, Posters, and Autographs from the Tejano Conjunto Festival En San Antonio (1982–1998)*, eds. Juan Tejeda and Avelardo Valdez (Austin: University of Texas (Center for Mexican American Studies, 2001), 136.

⁴⁵ Peña, *The Mexican American Orquesta*, 150, 140, 158. Oscar Martinez, *Tejano Music Talk*, OSMART, July 2009, 28-29.

lived a tricultural experience drawing on influences from Anglos, African Americans, and Mexicans.

Anglo Cowboys, Mexican Cowboys, “Cowboy” Donley

How did Manuel Donley come to be called “Cowboy,” and what might the moniker tell us about mid-twentieth century Texas? On the most basic level, the ranching and agrarian life in Texas links Anglos and Mexicans. Donley was raised in an urban area with strong connections to nearby rural spaces. Both *orquesta* band leaders and *conjunto* accordion players recognized his skill as a guitarist.

In *Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, Peña separates the Texas Mexican *conjunto* ensemble from the *orquesta* by class divisions citing perceptions that *orquesta* was more “sophisticated.” With its use of *bolero* and *danzón*, *orquesta* began to be associated with the middle-class, while *conjunto* maintained its working-class identity with *música ranchera* [country music] as “the existence of hacienda and rural life.”⁴⁶ Broyles-Gonzalez discusses *música ranchera* as songs that signify “that rural place of origin, known as ‘el rancho,’ where we lived before we moved to the cities and where the people can trace their deepest roots: the land.” In that geographic space, communities were bound together by the subsistence farming of corn, squash and beans and life in little houses.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Peña, *Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, 9-14.

⁴⁷ Yolanda Broyles-González, “Ranchera Music(s) and the Legendary Lydia Mendoza: Performing Social Location and Relations,” *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*, Norma E. (ed. and introd.) Cantú and Olga (ed. and introd.) Nájera-Ramirez, U of Illinois P, 2002, 188.

Yet, I extend that the “*rancho*” is not just a sociocultural origin but a life that is indivisible from music. Ranch living connects to lifecycle rituals built on a soundscape that accompanies birth, adolescence, courtship, marriage, and death. Birth has the *mañanitas* [morning songs]. Courtship has *serenatas* [serenades], and death has *la despedida* [goodbye song].⁴⁸ The songs of this life are not just *rancheras* [country songs] they are also *romanticas* [romantic songs]. Even the most masculine of *caballeros* [horsemen] can get lonely on a self-sustained ranch, and their thoughts will turn to love and companionship. The archetype of “*El Caballero*” of knightly legend that protects his home, his family, his community and falls in love with beautiful *dama* [maiden] encompasses both the themes of *ranchera* and *romantica*.

So, the music of Donley’s youth combines the *ranchero* and *romantico* under the larger archetypes of “*El Músico*” [The Musician] and “*El Caballero*” within “The Hero” subtype of “*El Charro Cantor*” [The Singing Charro] represented in Mexico by Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante and in the United States under the hero archetype of the “Singing Cowboy” represented by Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. A *charro* [Mexican horseman] differs from a cowboy in the *charro*’s participation in the *charrería*, the equestrian sports of Mexico upon which the North American rodeo is built.⁴⁹ The film careers of these men were presented in a parallel cultural iconography that was available to Donley in two languages. The popularity of their films made movie stars of Negrete,

⁴⁸ Vicente Mendoza in his classification of lyrical Mexican songs categorizes *mañanitas*, *serenatas* and *despedidas* as fulfilling a specific purpose or in relation to the particular time of day in which they are sung [“*Segun el uso a que se destine or la hora en que se cante*”], Vicente T. Mendoza, *La Canción Mexicana: Ensayo de Clasificación y Antología*, Tezontle, (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica (FCE)), 1998 [1982], 69.

⁴⁹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, María-Cristina García, "CHARRERIA," accessed February 23, 2019, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/lc04>.

Infante, Autry, and Rogers. Relevant to Donley's formative years are Infante's *Los Tres García* [The Three Garcías] in 1946 where he sings a version of "Cielito Lindo" [Lovely Piece of Heaven], followed by Negrete in 1948 with *Allá en El Rancho Grande* [Out on the Big Ranch] with a performance of the song of the same name.⁵⁰ The compelling similarities of ranch life brought the Spanish "Cielito Lindo"⁵¹ and "Allá en el Rancho Grande"⁵² into the singing cowboy repertoire as documented in *Songs of the Wild West* and *For a Cowboy has to Sing*, respectively. Three of Autry's films, *Rancho Grande* (1940), *Down Mexico Way* (1941), and *The Big Sombrero* (1949)⁵³ have relevance with their inclusion of Mexican tunes and English versions of the Mexican *boleros* "Solamente Una Vez" ["You Belong to my Heart"] and "Maria Elena" ["Maria Elena"].⁵⁴ Rogers in his film *Song of Texas* has "Cielito Lindo" among other western standards such as "Mexicali Rose."⁵⁵

Donley shared his own memories, "Of course, I love cowboys, you know. I'd go to the movies. . . . Cowboys were my heroes, you know. . . and I start playing the guitar because, because I love cowboys and they would always have a guitar and sing to a *señorita*. . . . Then I started playing the guitar and attracting girls." When asked to remember a song that one of those cowboys would sing to a *señorita* [a single young

⁵⁰ Rogelio Agrasánchez and Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cine Mexicano: Posters from the Golden Age, 1936-1956 = Carteles de La Época de Oro, 1936-1956*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, c2001., 2001), 73, 77.

⁵¹ Alan Axelrod and Dan Fox, *Songs of the Wild West*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, c1991., 1991), 47-51.

⁵² Jim Bob Tinsley, and Weiss family, *For a Cowboy Has to Sing: A Collection of Sixty Romantic Cowboy and Western Songs, Covering the Fifty-Year Golden Era of Popular Standards between 1905 and 1957*, (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, c1991., 1991), 130-134.

⁵³ "Gene Autry – Actor." Accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000810/#actor>.

⁵⁴ "Gene Autry – Soundtrack." Accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000810/#soundtrack>.

⁵⁵ "Roy Rogers – Soundtrack." Accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001678/#soundtrack>.

woman], Donley started strumming and singing, “Deep within my heart lies a melody a song of ole San Antone. . . rose of San Antone.” He continued, “I used to love country music. . . and I have the guitar and ‘Hey, leave that thing at home,’ oh no I love to carry the guitar around. I was about 14 or 15 and I start singing. They start ‘*postero*,’ cedar chopper, you know, *postero*, hillbilly, all kinds of different names, you know, but heck I didn’t care I loved the guitar and songs.”⁵⁶ I am not sure how many famous singing cowboys sang “San Antonio Rose” when it became popular, but what is certain is that Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys became “national figures in American music” in 1940 (Donley would have been twelve) when their recording of “New San Antonio Rose” received a gold record and their style began to be called western swing.⁵⁷

The story of how a teenage Donley received his moniker “Cowboy” makes perfect sense because none other than a singing cowboy would walk the streets of Austin with a guitar in hand:

I was standing in front of Cisco's bakery on 6th street and with a guitar and Del Martinez came, “Manuel you turn right there” and he said “Cowboy” (in a loud voice) because of my guitar you know. All the people looked around and the guy said “Cowboy?” “Cowboy?” “Cowboy?” because of the guitar. You know Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and all that, they all had a guitar. And that was the beginning of the name “Cowboy” Donley, right there on 6th and Comal.⁵⁸

While Peña attributes the “*rancheroization*” of the *orquestas* to their inability to separate themselves from their working-class roots and a symbolic and stylistic alignment of *ranchero* in *orquesta* closer to *conjunto* in the late 1950s to Isidro Lopez, I present Manuel Donley with his singing cowboy stage presence and *caballero* archetype as

⁵⁶ Donley, interview by the author, February 17, 2019.

⁵⁷ Charles R. Townsend, *San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills*. Music in American Life, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986, c1976., 1986), 193.

⁵⁸ Donley, interview by the author, October 27, 2018.

superseding previous separations between working-class and middle-class and *canciones rancheras* and *romanticas*. Isidoro Lopez, a long-time Austin-area disc jockey, explained the moniker and change in music scene in a 1998 article,

You cannot underestimate what that did. That [performance] style made it more loose, made [Las Estrellas] more accessible to the public. It also helped break down the stereotype of *orquesta* music being rigid. You have to remember, we were all working people, blue collar workers—it was a question of attitude and perception.⁵⁹

The Tejano community of Austin embraced “Cowboy” Donley through the undeniable mass appeal of the troubadour who tells his tales of home and love through song in dance halls, bars, and ballrooms. Today, ranching traditions and cowboy images continue as a source of creativity in *música tejana*.

Tejano Music and Tejano Identity

In many ways, tejano music has come to represent the Texas Mexican community around the world. For the Mexican origin folklore groups that listen to tejano, the music represents a part of their identity. Donley came along at a pivotal time in the music’s evolution. His electrical amplification of guitar constituted one innovation, but his adoption of cowboy imagery also served to help secure an element of the genre’s performance persona. Common among modern recording artists is the visual representation of a cowboy hat, boots, and leather jacket or vest with many album covers featuring the outfits, which are also used at performances. The uniqueness of the two

⁵⁹ Belinda Acosta, “Beautiful Songs and Good, Heavy Sounds,” *Austin Chronicle* (Austin, TX), November 11, 1998.

primary tejano musical groups, the *conjunto* based on the accordion as the lead instrument and the *orquesta* adapted from Anglo big bands, has become “a strong source of cultural identification and pride for the Tejano.”⁶⁰ The Tejano community sees tejano music as part of Tejano culture.

Many Mexican Americans in Texas identify with tejano music as a formative and memory experience. The music is part of the life cycle rituals of *quinceañeras*, wedding ceremonies, and funeral practices. In addition, the importance of the Spanish language in the music cannot be denied. According to San Miguel, “Spanish-language music is the most important means for preserving Tejano culture in the United States.”⁶¹ The Tejano community also supports the music by attending dances, performances, and festivals. They also consume music through the purchase of sound recordings in physical and digital format. San Miguel emphasizes a bilingual and bicultural Tejano identity.

Tejano music is the only means currently available within the English-speaking Tejano population that promotes Spanish. For this reason, this music has become a crucial instrument for preserving the community’s link to its cultural heritage in a country that is rigidly assimilationist and non-appreciative of ethnic differences.⁶²

For the Tejano community, the Spanish language is an expression of birthright and legacy.

Tejano music also experienced a new level of ethnic identity with a growth in community empowerment and political awareness. The Civil Rights movement of the late

⁶⁰ José R. Reyna, “Tejano Music as an Expression of Cultural Nationalism.” In *Collected Work: Puro Conjunto: An Album in Words and Pictures—Writings, Posters, and Autographs from the Tejano Conjunto Festival En San Antonio (1982–1998)*, eds. Juan Tejeda and Avelardo Valdez (Austin: University of Texas (Center for Mexican American Studies, 2001), 191.

⁶¹ San Miguel “*Música Tejana: Nuestra Música*,” 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*

1960s and the 1970s witnessed a change in the names of the groups to mirror “the consciousness of Chicanos.”⁶³ Little Joe and the Latinaires became Little Joe y *La Familia* [The Family]. Other groups used cultural values and symbol as their names such as The Mexican Revolution, *La Patria* [The Nation], *La Onda Chicana* [The Chicano Wave], and Tortilla Factory. Musical groups also performed for Raza Unida Party rallies and other political benefits. The *movimiento* [movement] was also reflected in songs such as “*Soy Chicano*” [I am Chicano] and “*El corrido del Chicano*” [The story of the Chicano].⁶⁴ In contemporary *música tejana*, the musicians and the songs continue to reflect the lived experience of the Texas Mexican population and to express Texas Mexican folkways.

Tejano music continues to be vital to the Tejano community with annual events that provide national and international recognition to tejano musicians and opportunities for fans. The Tejano Conjunto Festival in San Antonio, Texas, sponsored by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, is a multi-day event with various financial supporters. The Tejano Music Awards, also in San Antonio, sponsored by the Texas Talent Musicians Association, is an awards ceremony for various categories in the tejano music industry. These examples show that the “concerted efforts of Texas Chicanos to establish and promote their music is a distinct phenomenon, and reflects nationalistic sentiments not unlike those of full-fledged nations.”⁶⁵ The *ranchero* iconography continues today when official event announcements choose to begin with the traditional formal greeting,

⁶³ Reyna, 195.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 195-196.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 196-198.

“Bienvenidos damas y caballeros [Welcome maidens and horsemen]” which links the Tejano community back to the ancestral lands.

CHAPTER III:

THE MÚSICA TEJANA SCENE IN CENTRAL TEXAS IN THE POST-WORLD WAR II ERA

This chapter discusses academic approaches to the analysis of “music scenes” and applies those models to the Austin tejano music scene of the 1950s. This chapter also documents the initial musical career and emergence of tejano music legend Manuel “Cowboy” Donley and begins to establish the significance of his role as one of the originators of today’s modern tejano sound.

An Overview of Music Scene Descriptions

Joseph Kotarba, Jennifer Fackler, and Kathryn Nowotny, in their study of Latino music in Houston, focus on each emerging scene through a description of the scene, followed by the music and the artists, then the audience, and finally sense of place. In their conclusion, they determine that a music scene is “a *gathering* of like-minded spirits.”⁶⁶ The dimensions of music and artists, audience and place provide interesting avenues of exploration for this study. In the case of Austin, the youth will serve as our “like-minded spirits.”

“Places” for socializing and entertainment come in a variety of shapes and sizes and are distributed in various ways among rural areas and urban centers. Howard S.

⁶⁶ Joseph A. Kotarba, Jennifer L. Fackler, and Kathryn M. Nowotny, “An Ethnography of Emerging Latino Music Scenes,” *Symbolic Interaction* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2009), 330.

Becker in his “Jazz Places” suggests that location affected the repertoire of jazz performance during his time in Chicago during the 1940s and early 1950s. He also explains “place” as a physical place, whether a building (or part of one) or an enclosed place in the open air in combination with its social function as “defined by its expected uses, by shared expectations about what kinds of people will be there to take part in those activities, and by the financial arrangements that underlie all of this.”⁶⁷ In addition, the greater social environment “both provides opportunities and sets limits to what can happen.”⁶⁸ Becker and his fellow musicians performed or “worked” at multiple types of locations (commercial entertainment venues) for various types of engagements including “private parties” such as weddings and bar mitzvahs, and “steady jobs” or “gigs” for owners of establishments whose patrons were buying liquor (bars and clubs).⁶⁹ I suggest that this level of participation helps to define who is in a music scene.

As part of their “work,” Becker explains that sometimes at neighborhood bars when an audience member asked for a song “we then had to play it so it could be recognized.”⁷⁰ So, the realities of public musical performance seemed to dictate that, “Most of the time we played what the 'place'—the combination of physical space and social and financial arrangements—made possible.”⁷¹ Overall, he describes his own experiences as a musician and that of fellow musicians like himself as playing “commercial music, meant for dancing (at a party or in a club or ballroom) or as background noise in a bar or club.”⁷²

⁶⁷ Howard S. Becker, “Jazz Places.” In *Collected Work: Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*. (Nashville, TN, U.S.A.: Vanderbilt University, 2004), 20.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 20-24.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁷¹ Ibid., 26.

⁷² Ibid., 26.

I have often heard *conjunto* music referred to as *cantina* [bar] music, which for many allows them to equate this style of music with the working class. However, using Becker's model, I suggest that a *cantina* is generally not meant for dancing but for listening, and the physical size of the bar limits the number of musicians that can perform which makes it inhospitable to bands of larger sizes. In fact, in his concluding sentence, Becker warns against “too facilely substituting a classification of people for one of activities.”⁷³ So while Peña may assert class distinctions between *conjunto* as working class and *orquesta* as middle class, the two separate but equally important larger economic environments at play may be the physicality and social context of the venue and the proficiency of the musician.

English literary critic Raymond Williams also offers a useful model for thinking through historical shifts in music genres as cultural formations, as he argues that any cultural moment witnesses an overlapping of dominant, residual, and emergent forms. The residual elements of culture contain characteristics of the past, while the dominant maintains the present, and the emergent puts forth new ideas.⁷⁴ This framework can be applied to *música tejana* and our discussion of the *orquesta* ensembles. The *orquesta tejanas* were a product of their post-World War II time and emerged to replace the dominant *orquesta típicas* [typical orchestra] of the late 1930s and early 1940s. This tejano form of the *orquesta* then dominated the scene and influenced *música tejana*, leaving the *orquesta típica* in the residual past. Then in 1955 with the introduction of the electric guitar—Donley’s moment—the modern electric *orquesta* emerges. As the

⁷³ Becker, 27.

⁷⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford [Eng.]; New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127.

modern electric rises to the dominant culture, the traditional acoustic *orquesta* falls into the residual space. This process of emergence and dominance for musical groups in *música tejana* that I am proposing disrupts the periodization that dominates the literature on Texas Mexican music, most notably the works of Manuel Peña and Guadalupe San Miguel, who identifies the major eras as “Post-World War II Developments, 1946-64” and “Before the Arrival of the Major Record Labels, 1964-1989.” Following the Williams model, Donley and his contemporaries that originate the modern electric sound constitute a distinct era, a period from 1955 to 1964 during which they grew from the emergent to the dominant. The next newcomers, Little Joe and Sunny Ozuna, have their breakout hits in the tejano music market with “*Por Un Amor*” [Because of a Love] and “*Cariño Nuevo*” [New Sweet Love] in 1964, respectively. Little Joe continues his rise to dominance culminating in his biggest hit “*Las Nubes*” [The Clouds] in 1972.⁷⁵ Their dominance endures through 1977 when Mazz emerges with the release of their first album with Cara Records.⁷⁶ So, two timeframes turn into four which more accurately reflect musical innovations while making space for the trailblazing efforts of the 1950s.

Musical Ensembles in *Música Tejana*

San Miguel discusses the various musical ensembles of *música tejana* including *orquestas*, *conjuntos*, *grupos*, and country bands.⁷⁷ In the nineteenth century, *orquestas* were primarily string instrument ensembles with occasional brass or wind instruments. In

⁷⁵ Peña, Mexican American Orquesta, 243.

⁷⁶ Guadalupe San Miguel, *Tejano Proud: Tex-Mex Music in the Twentieth Century*, (College Station: Texas A & M University Press), 2002, 69-74, 86-87.

⁷⁷ San Miguel, “*Música Tejana: Nuestra Música*,” 8.

his assessment, after World War II, the modern *orquesta* emerges with the importance of the saxophone followed by the organ and electric guitar in the 1960s and 1970s forming the popular music known as “*La Onda Chicana*” [The Chicano Wave].⁷⁸ This study contends that the incorporation of the electric guitar into *orquesta tejana* begins in the 1950s and that the musical innovations of the 1950s originate the sound of today.

Prior to 1955, Austin had a long history of *orquestas típicas* followed by *orquestas tejanas*. Peña gives a brief definition of the *típicas* as ensembles of five to seven instruments arranged with the violin as the lead.⁷⁹ Chris Strachwitz in his liner notes for the compilation *Orquestas Típicas: The First Recordings* provides an explanation of the precursor to *orquesta tejanas*,

These *orquesta típicas* could be heard at every sort of occasion from private, *quinceañeras*, fiestas to Sunday concerts in the park. They also performed a remarkable variety of music to please every strata of border society and had to be prepared for every kind of request, which might well be for a *paso doble*, *danza*, one-step, waltz, mazurka, *huapango*, polka, fox trot, march, schottische, tango, or *danzón*.⁸⁰

This explanation relates to Donley’s father, Ramón Donley, a violin player, and leader of an *orquesta típica*. According to Mike Amaro, at the restaurant *El Charro* on Eleventh Street where the “big shots” went to eat, Ramón Donley would play and sing with a group of musicians that included Johnny Prieto (guitar), Nick Reyes (stand-up bass), and another gentleman on mandolin with occasional help from Monico Reyes, a stand-up bassist who would also play for Enrico Caruso when Caruso was in Austin.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁹ Peña, *The Mexican American Orquesta*, 80.

⁸⁰ Chris Strachwitz, liner notes to *Orquestas Típicas (1926-1938): Pioneer Mexican-American Dance Orchestras*, Arhoolie Folklyric 7017 (1996), 2.

Ramón Donley's group could be heard playing *flamencos*, *paso dobles*, *tangos*, and *corridos de toro* [bullfight fanfares].⁸¹ Manuel Donley grew up around these musicians and as a twenty-seven-year old youngster and guitarist in 1955, when electric rock and roll came into popular music, he may have decided that all acoustic styles had become "old-fashioned."

In the liner notes for the Strachwitz compilation *Tejano Roots: Orquestas Tejanas, The Formative Years (1947-1960)*, Peña explains the progression in Texas from *orquesta típica* to *orquesta tejana* as,

The Texas-Mexican *orquesta*, like its bicultural creator, inevitably took on a dual (bi-musical) character. By performing music associated with Mexico and Latin America (including that of the *conjunto*) *orquestas* kept alive the *tejanos*' ethnic roots; by performing music associated with American dance bands, they satisfied the middle-class desire to assimilate American Culture. Thus, from Mexico and Latin America came the *bolero*, *guaracha*, *rumba*, and other genres; from the United States came the boogie, swing, and foxtrot.⁸²

The defining separation in these descriptions of *típica* and *tejana* appears to be swing and boogie which are closely associated with African American popular music. Exposure to African American musical culture within Mexico may have been limited so the musical progression in Texas and by extension the United States seems to be a connection to rhythms and dance forms that were gaining popularity on this side of the border from innovations in African American culture. This separation musically may fall into the same time period that San Miguel references the geographic separation taking place between *norteño* culture and Tejano culture.

⁸¹ Mike Amaro, interview by the author, November 18, 2018.

⁸² Manuel Peña, liner notes to *Tejano Roots: Orquestas Tejanas The Formative Years (1947-1960)*, Arhoolie CD 368 (1992), 4.

Manuel “Cowboy” Donley – “The Hottest Guitar in Texas”⁸³

Donley was born in Durango, Mexico, in 1928, and moved to Austin with his family when he was seven. His father, Ramón Donley, had a musical career in Mexico as a violinist with the Durango municipal symphony. In Austin, his father was a barber and a musician.⁸⁴ His mother, Dolores Quiñones, loved opera, and her sister performed it.⁸⁵ By age eleven, he had taught himself to play the classical guitar⁸⁶ and then later the *requinto*, a guitar tuned a fourth higher than a standard guitar for use in introductions and interludes as a lead instrument in a *bolero* trio ensemble invented by Alfredo Gil of trio *Los Panchos*.⁸⁷ Church festivals and street fairs were his performing venues with his brother Robert when he was seventeen.⁸⁸

The *bolero* trio genre is of particular interest to this study, with Donley’s primary instrument in his formative guitar stage being the *requinto*. He also credits the early development of his *requinto* guitar stylings to the mentorship of the members of *Trio Latino* [Latin Trio] that included Tomás Rivera, Ike Puente, and Trini Estrada.⁸⁹ This group mostly covered songs by trio *Los Panchos*, a *bolero* trio formed in 1944 in New York City by Mexicans Jesús “Chucho” Navarro and Alfredo “Güero” Gil, and Puerto

⁸³ “Display Ad 75 -- no Title.” *The Austin Statesman* (1921-1973), May 15, 1959, 22.

⁸⁴ Belinda Acosta, “Beautiful Songs and Good, Heavy Sounds,” *Austin Chronicle* (Austin, TX), November 11, 1998.

⁸⁵ Wimer.

⁸⁶ Acosta.

⁸⁷ J. Richard Haefler, “Requinto,” *Grove Music Online*, 2016, accessed February 23, 2019. Daniel Party, “Los Panchos,” *Grove Music Online*, 2014, accessed February 23, 2019.

⁸⁸ Acosta.

⁸⁹ Donley, 2011.

Rican Hernando Avilés.⁹⁰ Yolanda Moreno Rivas recognizes the profound impact of *Los Panchos* commenting, “*El año 1948 marco la aparicion de Los Panchos y el principio del apogee de los trios. El predominio de las suaves voces masculinas, las guitarras y el inflatable requinto creo un nuevo tipo de bolero y de cancion romantica* [The year 1948 marked the appearance of Los Panchos and the beginning of the rise of the trios. The prevalence of soft masculine voices, the guitars, and the inflatable requinto created a new type of bolero and of romantic song].⁹¹

In 1949, Donley formed Los Heartbreakers and performed mostly instrumentals until a gig at *Parque Zaragoza* in Austin. A reluctant Donley sang “*La Mucura*” [The Earthenware Jar], a popular Colombian cumbia, for a demanding crowd. He shared with Juan Castillo, “There I became famous, but I never wanted to be a vocalist. The guitar, that was my passion.”⁹² In his text, *La Canción Mexicana*, Vicente Mendoza remarks that “*el instrumento favorito para el acompañamiento de la cancion es la guitarra y así debió de ser desde los principios. . .* [The favorite instrument for the accompaniment of the song is the guitar and it has been that way since the beginning. . .].”⁹³ After Donley’s breakthrough performance, he played with as many bands as he could while still being available for Los Heartbreakers.⁹⁴ He could be found sitting in with the Ruben Perez *orquesta*, *Conjunto Cielito Lindo*, and the Brazos Bar musicians.⁹⁵ It was during this time that Donley “bought an old pick-up in a second hand shop and put it on acoustic guitar

⁹⁰ Party.

⁹¹ Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Historia de La Música Popular Mexicana*, (Los Noventa. México, D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA)), 1995, 132. Translation by the author.

⁹² Castillo.

⁹³ Mendoza, 41. Translation by the author.

⁹⁴ Castillo.

⁹⁵ Donley, December 3-4, 2011.

and made it electric.”⁹⁶ His association with a variety of ensembles reveals Donley's enthusiasm for his instrument and eagerness to advance his guitar musicianship. In addition, this diversity of genres demonstrates that he is performing outside the socio-economic class distinctions of middle-class *orquesta* and working-class *conjunto* put forth by Peña.

This shared interest in multiple genres connects Donley to the electric country guitarist and famed Nashville producer Chet Atkins, through a mutual attraction towards numerous finger-picking guitar styles inclusive of classical guitar techniques.⁹⁷ Donley followed Atkins's career closely, accumulating albums, music books, and the Atkins biography *Country Gentleman*. Among those albums in Donley's collection is *The Other Chet Atkins*. The album is an interesting choice, and symbolically rich. In *Instruments of Desire*, Steve Waksman describes *The Other Chet Atkins* album cover as “an act of masquerade that literalizes his capacity to move in different musical realms” through Atkins's depiction “with dark features, dressed in the suit of a Spanish gentleman, standing in a courtyard with a piercing gaze and a nylon-string acoustic guitar poised beside him.”⁹⁸ Waksman connects these images to Europe, however, upon my review of the song choices, including “Siboney,” “Streets of Laredo,” and “Maria Elena,” I suggest that instead this album cover with its nostalgic sepia tones is more representative of *haciendas* throughout Cuba, Mexico, and parts of the Southwestern United States than a Spanish *villa* of the Mediterranean. I also offer that Atkins in this portrayal demonstrates his deep affinity for Latin American culture and presents his alter-ego as a *trovador*

⁹⁶ Donley, December 1, 2018.

⁹⁷ Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 76.

⁹⁸ Waksman, 104.

[troubadour] with his classical guitar as opposed to the possible more common view of Spanish songs performed by *mariachi* singers dressed in *charro* costumes. The songs on this album, such as “Peanut Vendor” (“*El Manisero*”) and “Yours” (“*Quiereme Mucho*”), would have been well known to Donley as a guitarist performing in *orquesta típicas* years before the album’s release in 1960.

Atkins played finger-style guitar which “creates the sense of more than one guitar being played at a given time.”⁹⁹ Donley, like Atkins, employs a finger style that involves the thumb plucking out the bass accompaniment while the other fingers project the melody to deliver a fuller guitar comprised of both lead and rhythm sounds. Donley’s decision to switch over to electric guitar is attributed to his skill on the *requinto* and the opportunity to display his flair, “No one else could do all the pickin’. They would strum.”¹⁰⁰ Donley explains the effect on *orquesta tejana*, “A new sound. . . just the guitar with vocalist and lead on the guitar, you know. . .they considered me a monster.”¹⁰¹ In Donley, tejano music welcomes its first electric guitar hero.¹⁰²

The modern electric guitar appears as early as 1890 when George Breed earned the first patent for an electric guitar design. In 1932, the Ro-Pat-In Electro A-25 “Frying Pan” became the “first successful commercially produced electric guitar.”¹⁰³ The Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Manufacturing Company issued the ES-150 in 1936, and its use by such

⁹⁹ Waksman, 88.

¹⁰⁰ Donley, December 3-4, 2011.

¹⁰¹ Donley, December 1, 2018.

¹⁰² The twelve-string classical guitar virtuosity and extensive sound recording career of Lydia Mendoza is well-established. See Dale Miller, “Lydia Mendoza: The Lark of the Border,” *Guitar Player*, 1988; Michael John Simmons, “12-String Power: The Master Players and Makers of the Double-Course Guitar,” *Acoustic Guitar*, November 1997; Lydia Mendoza, Chris Strachwitz, and James Nicolopoulos, *Lydia Mendoza: A Family Autobiography*, Houston, TX, Arte Público Press, 1993.

¹⁰³ Brad Tolinski and Alan Di Perna, *Play It Loud: An Epic History of the Style, Sound, and Revolution of the Electric Guitar*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2016), 328.

famous guitar players as Eddie Durham and Floyd Smith contributed to its popularity. The solid-body electric guitar then began to take shape sometime in 1939 when Les Paul started work on the “Log.” The Travis-Bigsby solid-body came out in 1948 followed by the Fender Electric Instrument Company’s Broadcaster in 1950 (later renamed the Telecaster). In quick succession, Gibson delivered the Les Paul model in 1952; Gretsch introduced the Duo Jet in 1953; Fender returned with a new model, the Stratocaster, in 1954, and Gretsch presented the Chet Atkins 6120 in 1955.¹⁰⁴

Donley “made his first electric guitar using a single-edge razor to carve the body and attaching the fret board from a broken instrument.”¹⁰⁵ While not an exact match to Les Paul’s story behind the creation of his electric guitar, “the Log,” which was made of a 4” by 4” strip of wood, an Epiphone guitar neck, and pickups, both stories demonstrate a capacity on the part of the musician for “do-it-yourself” construction.¹⁰⁶ When asked why he constructed his first electric guitar, Donley’s response was economic in nature: “Because Fender guitars started at \$300.”¹⁰⁷

Donley was also passionate about rock and roll with Fats Domino, Little Richard, Bo Diddley, and Chuck Berry as his favorites.¹⁰⁸ Fats Domino appeared on the pop chart in 1952, and by late 1956 “Blueberry Hill” climbed to number two. Domino recorded his own songs and arranged pop, big band, and country songs into his style.¹⁰⁹ Donley made his own musical arrangement of “Blueberry Hill” for live performances.¹¹⁰ Little Richard's hit “Tutti Frutti” came in early 1956. Bo Diddley featured the syncopated

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 328-330.

¹⁰⁵ Wimer.

¹⁰⁶ Waksman, 48.

¹⁰⁷ Donley, December 3-4, 2011.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Hall, 11-12.

¹¹⁰ Manuel Donley, “Blueberry Hill”, Papers, Austin, TX.

percussive rhythm known as the “hambone” rhythm in his “Bo Diddley” in 1955. Chuck Berry's “Maybellene” became a number one hit on the rhythm and blues chart and number five on the pop chart in 1955. Berry authored songs for teenagers with stories of school, automobiles, and love, and his electric guitar solos set a new standard for all who came after him.¹¹¹ In the 1950s, young people were drawn to musical groups about their same age that voiced their experiences and developed an intimate bond with the music.¹¹² Donley also enjoyed Bill Haley and Larry Williams, and popular songs like “C. C. Rider” and “Mop Rag Boogie.”¹¹³ Bill Haley's “Rock Around the Clock” in 1955 was the first rock and roll song to reach number one on the pop chart which marks rock and roll as mainstream music. He also had five songs on the rhythm and blues chart which supports the view that rock and roll as a genre broke down social barriers during the 1950s.¹¹⁴ The unique concentration of early rock and roll stars and their hits in 1955 as Donley's favorite rock and roll songs point to a strong radio and youth influence not to mention the interesting timing for the establishment of his own *orquesta*.

On Friday, May 15, 1959, Austin's new Crescent record label debuted Donley's first recording with them and advertised him as “The Hottest Guitar in Texas.” The record release party with one hundred free records, including one each to the first one hundred girls at the City Coliseum, was titled “PAN AMERICAN FIESTA-DANCE AND FROLIC.” Donley and “Las Estrellas” orchestra were billed as “2 BANDS IN ONE, Playing Rhumbas, Mambos, Cha Cha Cha, and a Long Selection of ROCK AND

¹¹¹ Hall, 12-16.

¹¹² Ibid., 24.

¹¹³ Donley, December 3-4, 2011.

¹¹⁴ Hall, 15-16.

ROLL.”¹¹⁵ The advertisement also includes the address for Car-Val Studios as 906 1/2 Congress Avenue along with ticket information. Donley, billed as the “hottest” guitar in Texas in 1959, emerged onto the Texas music scene as an artist to watch.

Donley made the Crescent recording for Irene Couravallos, who owned a studio on Congress Avenue. According to Donley, she contacted representatives from New York, and they brought the sound recording equipment necessary to create 45 revolutions per minute (rpm) records. She is listed as the songwriter for the *bolero cha cha*, “*Lluvia en Mi Corazon*” [Rain in My Heart] with the flip side listed as the polka, “*Quizas Tenga’s Razon*,” [Maybe You’re Right] written by Fred Salas. The label also designates the publisher as Car-Val Pub.¹¹⁶ However, the Crescent recording was not Donley’s first experience in a studio. In 1953, he recorded with *Conjunto Cielito Lindo* which consisted of Julio Ramirez on accordion, the Flores brothers—Cresencio “Chencho” on guitar and Frank on bajo sexto, Gaitano Rodriguez on upright bass, and Donley on requinto. They traveled to San Antonio for a session with Manuel Rangel, Sr. at Corona Records.¹¹⁷

While Austin may have had a rock star in Donley, he had contemporaries elsewhere engaging in similar fusions of rock and Mexican music. Baldemar “Freddy Fender” Huerta and Ritchie Valens were other Mexican American rock and rollers in the post-war music scene. In the mid-fifties San Benito, Texas, was listening to the guitar sounds of a teenage Huerta. After his time in the Marine Corps, he began his recording career with Falcon Records. According to liner notes for *Canciones de Mi Barrio*, Huerta explains that he “was always trying to do something in English. That was my thing since

¹¹⁵ “Display Ad 75 -- no Title.” The Austin Statesman (1921-1973), May 15, 1959. 22.

¹¹⁶ Donley, December 3-4, 2011. Donley Papers and Record Collection.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

1957 when I started recording with Falcon Records. I wasn't doing the conjunto stuff. I was doing rock and roll and ballads, just like I'm doing now, and rhythm and blues."¹¹⁸

Huerta's older material on 78 rpm with Falcon Records appears in the Frontera Collection and features Spanish translations of rock and roll and popular music hits including "*No Seas Cruel* [Don't Be Cruel]." The four records have "Rock" or "Rock and Roll" listed as the genre, and the songs do represent the musical elements that Huerta discusses in the liner notes. The unsung heroes of these tunes are his accompaniment, with credits to "*Los Romanceros* [The Romancers]" and "*Xavier Michell y su Quinteto* [and his Quintet]" which provide the loud drums, backing vocals, and piano-horn arrangements.¹¹⁹

Rock and roll was still relatively new in the mainstream when Richard "Ritchie Valens" Valenzuela was sixteen, in high school, and performing with the Silhouettes in the San Fernando Valley of California in 1957. Compared to the other bands of the area which continued to focus on the big band sound with *boleros* and *cha cha chas*, the Silhouettes, with Valenzuela as their electric guitarist, could now offer "some Little Richard stuff, the real fast-up-tempo stuff with that new back beat sound."¹²⁰ In May of 1958, Valens caught the attention of Bob Keane of Del-Fi Records. In his short recording career that tragically ended eight months later in a plane crash that also killed Buddy Holly and J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson, Valens had hit songs with "Come On, Let's Go," "Donna," and "*La Bamba*."¹²¹ His success as a Mexican American musician in

¹¹⁸ Liner notes to *Freddy Fender: Canciones de mi Barrio*, Arhoolie CD 366, 1993, 3.

¹¹⁹ "Baldemar Huerta," The Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings. Website.

¹²⁰ Molina, 12.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

mainstream rock and roll gives an indication of how fluid the ethnic lines of rock and roll were at this nascent stage. With Valens's death occurring in February of 1959, I can only speculate that part of the advertising strategy behind "The Hottest Guitar in Texas" and "a Long Selection of ROCK AND ROLL" in May of 1959 may have been for Austin to deliver Donley as his replacement. Yet, Donley would have been the elder statesman at thirty-one years old with ten years of performing professionally compared to the younger Huerta and Valens.

Establishing Las Estrellas and the Creation of a New Music Scene

Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, Austin had multiple *orquestas tejanas* that reproduced a big band sound with a soft rhythm section and acoustic string instruments. These *orquestas* included: the E.R. Flores *Orquesta*, Ruben Perez *Orquesta*, Laurence Salas *Orquesta*, Nemecio Carmona *Orquesta*, Chano Carmona's *Orquesta Caribe* [Caribbean Orchestra], Catarino Rios *Orquesta*, Matias Velasquez *Orquesta*, and Nash Hernandez *Orquesta*. Most of these *orquestas* used stock big band arrangements.¹²² Some of these groups traveled to the Acosta Music Company in San Antonio to purchase popular music performed by orchestras in Mexico.¹²³

In photos from the Texas Music Museum, both Donley and Emilio Villegas (with drum set that includes bass, snare, high hat, cymbal and possibly toms/bongos) are members of the Ruben Perez *orquesta* in 1953. The picture shows one microphone and additional band members in the back row, Andrew Cantu (trumpet), Manuel Espinosa

¹²² Donley, December 3-4, 2011.

¹²³ Andres Zuniga, interview by the author, December 2, 2014.

(trumpet), Mike Espinosa (stand-up bass) and in the front row, Manuel Sifuentes (sax), Ruben Perez (sax) Ernest Perez (sax), and Carmen Perez (*maracas* and vocal). Donley is also pictured as a guitarist with the Carmona *Orquesta* (with one microphone) whose band members include Salvadore Reyna, E.R. Flores, Victor Lozano (all on trumpet), Chris Carmona, Chano Carmona, Nemecio Carmona (all on sax), with Macario Carmona (bass drum, snare, possibly more), Albert Amezcuita (piano), and Mike Carmona (unable to determine).¹²⁴ Donley and Villegas as members of *orquesta tejanas* were participants in the acoustic *orquesta* music scene and not only witnessed the transformation into the electric era but were instrumental in the creation of the new *orquesta amplificada* [amplified orchestra] sound and style.

In 1955, Donley formed his own *orquesta*, *Las Estrellas* [The Stars], driven by his new electric guitar sound. The self-taught guitarist also studied musical theory and wrote most of the group's musical arrangements. The original *Las Estrellas* were Rudy Sanchez (tenor sax), Joe Sanchez (alto sax), Andrew Zuniga (trumpet), Emilio Villegas (drum set), and Mike Amaro (electric bass).¹²⁵ They were also self-taught and knew how to read music. The musical knowledge of the group allowed Donley to create expressive horn and saxophone arrangements for traditional Mexican *rancheras*, polkas, *boleros*, and ballads using American influences from big band, rock and roll, and rhythm and blues.¹²⁶ Donley also changed the instrumentation of *orquesta* by “plugging his guitar into an

¹²⁴ Texas Music Museum, “Austin Tejano collection.”

¹²⁵ Donley's formation of *Las Estrellas* predates the establishment of Oscar Martinez's *orquesta* by three years. The Oscar Martinez band was organized in 1958. Martinez, 29.

¹²⁶ Acosta.

amplifier, replacing the stand-up bass with an electric one and brush drums with drumsticks.”¹²⁷

Donley’s musical ensemble follows San Miguel’s description of post-World War II *orquesta tejana*. However, Donley stresses the difference of his incorporation of amplification of the guitar and bass as the distinguishing sonic markers compared to the continued acoustic sounds of the contemporaneous *orquestas* of Beto Villa and Isidro Lopez. The use of electric guitar in his own band allowed the opportunity to convert to electric bass explaining that the stand-up bass “would not produce the clear note to make a harmony with the electric guitar.”¹²⁸

According to Mike Amaro, a guitarist who first met Donley in 1945, Donley approached him about playing the upright bass for *Las Estrellas*, but without any knowledge of the upright bass Amaro declined. Then, it was suggested that he consider helping them out by purchasing an electric bass since there were electric basses already available. Amaro agreed and went to J.R. Reed Music Company, where he financed an electric bass and amplifier. Prior to joining *Las Estrellas*, Amaro had performed trio style with Donley for occasional gigs. In teaching himself the electric bass, Amaro applied his guitar knowledge relating the four strings of the bass to the top four strings of the guitar just tuned different, explaining, “So I just put it in my mind that I’m going to play it like it’s a guitar.”¹²⁹ In discussing the function of the bass, Amaro shares that “the bass is driving the music. . . it’s driving the music. . . the dancers and all that.”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Castillo.

¹²⁸ Donley, December 3-4, 2011.

¹²⁹ Amaro.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Donley's fans adopted the new loud, modern sound, and soon they were in demand across Central Texas. As word spread, other bandleaders came to see them and incorporated Donley's ideas into their own acts.¹³¹ Among these bandleaders from other cities were Manny Guerra from San Antonio and Johnny Canales from Corpus Christi.¹³² The band's fame grew, and so did their tours of the state, from Dallas to the Rio Grande Valley.¹³³ Beto Villa himself even contracted *Las Estrellas* to perform for New Years' Eve in 1958 and 1959 at the Beto Villa Ballroom in Falfurrias, Texas. As his musical career progressed, Donley eventually had youngsters such as Sunny Ozuna, Freddie Martinez, Juan Perez, Oscar Martinez, and Johnny Herrera as his opening acts¹³⁴

Mike Carmona, while not an original member of *Las Estrellas*, performed with Donley in the early years. As a music historian, Carmona affirms that Manuel "Cowboy" Donley and *Las Estrellas* started the root of modern tejano music by shifting the *orquesta tejana* paradigm to a unified rhythm section built on the electric guitar, electric bass, and drums. Carmona also attributes the key elements of modern tejano music to Donley y *Las Estrellas* through the distinct guitar style of Donley, the shortened separated bass notes of Amaro, and the high hat/snare combination of Emilio Villegas and positions this sonic arrangement years ahead of Little Joe y *La Familia*, the iconic *orquesta tejana* of the 1960s.¹³⁵

David Gutierrez, who performed with Donley from 1964 to 1970, explains that "the *rancheras* of Jose Alfredo Jimenez with *mariachi* and the *boleros* of Trio *Los*

¹³¹ Castillo.

¹³² Donley, December 3-4, 2011.

¹³³ Castillo.

¹³⁴ Donley, December 3-4, 2011.

¹³⁵ Mike Carmona, interview by the author, December 22, 2014.

Panchos were converted to *orquesta* style.” Music was changing from the old style of instrumentals, *danzónes*, and waltzes to the new style of vocals, polkas, and *rancheras*.¹³⁶ Rudy Sanchez, the original saxophone in *Las Estrellas*, first noticed Donley’s singing voice when he sang the hits of Fats Domino and Little Richard.¹³⁷

In addition, Carmona extends Donley’s innovations beyond *orquesta tejana* to tejano music in general by differentiating multiple characteristics between his band and other groups. Beto Villa, Balde Gonzalez, and Isidro Lopez used fifteen to twenty members, the stage delivery of the big band era with musicians sitting down, long versions of instrumental music, predominantly ballroom dance rhythms such as *danzón* and waltz, and American music such as Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey. Donley used six members, the stage delivery of country and western performers with musicians standing up, radio versions of popular music, predominantly social dance rhythms such as polka and *bolero*, and American rock and roll music.¹³⁸ I suggest that by having the musicians stand and move out from behind their chairs they can project their sound straight into the audience or a microphone making *Las Estrellas* not just “loud on the upbeat” but loud in general.

When asked about the competition from other *orquestas* in Austin regarding Donley’s new sound of electric bass, electric guitar, and drum set, long-time friend and former dance promoter Leon Hernandez shared,

Everybody picked it up. All the bands. Fred Salas, I mean Laurence Salas, even the *conjuntos* that were around. The people that were playing in the bars, ‘cuz there was fifteen bars downtown, each one of them had a dance every Saturday night. They all had their bass guitars, their drums, guitar and accordion and they

¹³⁶ David Gutierrez, interview by the author, December 17, 2014.

¹³⁷ Rudy Sanchez, interview by the author, December 4, 2014.

¹³⁸ Carmona.

all picked it up quick. . . . *Conjunto* was only the, it didn't have no drums, it didn't no have guitar [electric], it only had the accordion, it didn't have no bass. It was accordion, guitar and *tololoche* [stand-up bass] the three, that was a *conjunto*.¹³⁹

So, at least in Austin, amplification of the guitar and bass seems to have moved from *orquesta* to *conjunto* in combination with the drum set which also means that by extension the new “loud on the upbeat” made the transition to *conjunto* music as well since there would be no need for a drum set without implementation of the kick drum on the downbeat and the high hat/snare combination on the upbeat.

While prior to the 1950s, *orquestas* [big bands] may have existed on both sides of the US-Mexico border, Reyna discusses factors such as music education in public schools and lack of financial resources as reasons for the lack of development of the same type of *orquesta* to develop in Mexico. The equivalent of the modern *orquesta tejana* does not exist in Mexico which makes them a musical ensemble distinct to the Tejano community.¹⁴⁰ Donley and his contemporaries originated a music form uniquely Texas Mexican and by extension unique to the music of Texas, the Southwest, and the United States.

The “places” of the Austin Tejano Music Scene

The late 1950s offered unique entertainment for Latino music fans. The popular bands would compete at different venues for the crowd's affection in battle dances. Donley's *Las Estrellas* participated in these contests and were often victorious. A particularly significant battle dance took place at the Skyline Club in 1957. The country

¹³⁹ Leon Hernandez, interview by the author, October 27, 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Reyna, 195.

venue on North Lamar at Braker Lane (infamous as the site of the last concerts of both Hank Williams and Johnny Horton) was known to host Mexican dances on Sunday nights. This particular battle dance featured the popular *orquesta* of Isidro Lopez from the Corpus Christi area in alternating songs with “Cowboy” y *Las Estrellas*.¹⁴¹ The Lopez musical ensemble consisted of four saxophones, four horns, piano, upright bass, brush drums, and soft electric guitar.¹⁴² *Las Estrellas* were comprised of an alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, trumpet, drums with sticks, electric bass, and Donley on loud electric guitar. In the first round, the groups were evenly matched, playing *ranchera-ranchera*, polka-polka, *bolero-bolero* and singing in Spanish. After intermission, *Las Estrellas* started singing in English with a rock and roll song. Lopez could not compete since he did not have any rock and roll material prepared. *Las Estrellas* won the battle.¹⁴³ From this moment on, *música tejana* would never be the same.

The influence of rock and roll demanded the incorporation of loud drums with sticks and an emphasis on the upbeats, metal mouthpieces for the saxophones, and amplification for the guitar and bass. The performance style of *Las Estrellas* also had to change from soft and shy to loud and happy. They created, “*un ruidaso* [a huge noise] that attracted the teenyboppers.”¹⁴⁴ Compared to the loud electric sound of *Las Estrellas*, Isidro Lopez with his sophisticated soft ballads and soft rhythm sections appeared outdated and old-fashioned.

¹⁴¹ Wimer.

¹⁴² This battle dance may have taken place prior to Lopez adding the accordion and *bajo sexto* to his *orquesta* ensemble.

¹⁴³ Donley, December 3-4, 2011.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

With the establishment of this new tejano music scene, members of *orquesta tejanas* experienced the transition from a traditional acoustic to a modern electric sound as did the Mexican American population of Austin. Del Martinez, the local promoter that gave Donley his moniker, arranged for them to perform at the Skyline Club which would coincide with the Sunday night theme of Spanish-language performances.¹⁴⁵ Lalo Campos would make the arrangements for Club Avalon.¹⁴⁶ They also made appearances at the City Coliseum and a place near Round Rock called “The Barn.”¹⁴⁷ While the country-western Skyline and Barn venues may be for an English audience, Mexicans and Anglos give their allegiance to the same dance nation in the united beats of the polka, waltz, and foxtrot and a one night per weekend offering to Spanish-language patrons means a captive audience.

Just as Donley’s music began to raise a “*ruidaso*,” youth social dance styles based on modern rhythms such as rock and roll, honky-tonk, and rhythm and blues began to usurp traditional, adult ballroom styles. By way of live song performance of popular hits in English, these 1950s *orquestas amplificadas* may be the precursors of the English dominant recordings by artists of the 1960s Chicano Soul genre. Donley and his *orquesta* are also the beginning of the all-in-one modern dance band in tejano music. Donley’s combination of electric guitar, electric bass, and drums in his ensemble gives him the flexibility to duplicate a varied repertoire in English that follows the multiple popular music charts while continuing to adapt Mexican and Latin American popular hits into his

¹⁴⁵ Amaro, Donley, December 4, 2011, Donley Papers, Calendars for 1963 and 1964 with performance dates.

¹⁴⁶ Amaro, Donley, December 4, 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Amaro, Donley, December 4, 2011, Donley Papers, Calendars for 1963 and 1964 with performance dates.

tejano aesthetic. The genius of Donley lies in his ability to relate and connect to a bilingual, multicultural Mexican American teenager or young adult that listens to the diverse radio station offerings of an urban Texas city all week through his performance of those songs at the dance halls over the weekend.

Amplification and *Música Tejana*

According to Donley, “Amplification changed everything.”¹⁴⁸ This statement does more than capture a moment in time. The single largest benefit of amplification is the increase in volume produced by the musicians especially in a dance hall filled with noisy patrons in which the new “*sonido moderno*” [modern sound] could easily be twice as loud with half the previous number of musicians. In addition, the volume now produced by electronics allowed the size of the band to be reduced, which has advantages for conducting the band’s business and organizing travel. Additionally, Amaro’s electric bass performance may have made tejano music history. Amaro remembers that “they told me that I was the first electric bass player, *Mexicano* [Mexican] *aqui en* [here in] Austin.”¹⁴⁹ Donley and *Las Estrellas* made the switch and went “electric.” Amaro also points out that “We were lucky. People liked it the way Manuel changed it. The small group doing big things, you know.”¹⁵⁰

Carmona recalls that “Manuel was a sensation – The Rolling Stones of Tejano.” *Las Estrellas* placed the spotlight on the lead singer and generated entertainment in the

¹⁴⁸ Donley, December 3, 2011.

¹⁴⁹ Amaro.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

form of a show. Many older *orquestas* could not keep up with *Las Estrellas*, and some retired. Younger *orquestas* either adapted to the new standard created by Donley or gave up. Fans and supporters liked the new music and stopped following the old sound.¹⁵¹ While Donley innovated in his incorporation of African American influences, he also continued to deliver *música en español* [Spanish-language music] as the majority of his playlist, adapting versions of *Los Panchos* and Jose Alfredo Jimenez hits into an *orquesta amplificada* format. The complete appropriation of black styles happens later in the 1960s when some Mexican American musical groups embrace black soul music and abandon the Spanish-language.

The incorporation of the electric guitar into Mexican American *orquestas* can be seen as the next step in a long line of music that has continuously featured string-led melodies and harmonies stretching back to Mexican folk traditions. The amplified “voice” of the electric guitar breathes new life into those traditional acoustic *mariachi* standards which often showcase violin or harp and it also finds new modern creative expressions through processes of cross-cultural musical bonding, interethnic musical conversations, and transculturation. The entire youth nation sings the lyrics of a *son jarocho* [jarocho song] folk song that highlights an *arpa jarocho* [jarocho harp] from Veracruz, Mexico, with the rock and roll version of “*La Bamba*” by Ritchie Valens. Donley is hearing electric sounds from both Anglo and African American communities and plugging those sounds into the *canciones rancheras* and *romanticas* that are part of his repertoire as an experienced *orquesta tejana* guitarist and reinterpreting them in his own modern electric style. Yet, a case could also be made that the appropriation of black

¹⁵¹ Carmona.

musical styles in the 1950s was completely economic. The demand for the most popular music by dance venue patrons requires that musicians accommodate their requests by performing songs that may be outside their ethnic community because the “place” dictates the style of music. As Leon Hernandez commented, the *conjuntos tejanos* adopted amplification to maintain their viability in a music market with a finite number of bars. In this blossoming moment of rock and roll hitting the mainstream, the lines of influence are fluid and dynamic. In a time where the previous set of rules regarding genre separation have seemed to disappear under the new unifier of the electric guitar, the music is being communicated to the masses through television and radio and broadcast far and wide.

CHAPTER IV:

THE BUSINESS OF *MÚSICA TEJANA* IN CENTRAL TEXAS IN THE POST-WORLD WAR II ERA

This chapter explores musical culture in *música tejana* through Spanish-language radio, the entertainment venues that host public dances, the dissemination of music as groups travel for performances, and music production in record companies with Manuel Donley as a trailblazer.

Spanish-Language Radio and Media

The pioneering artists made their music first on 78 rpm records and later on 45 rpm records. An entire industry and culture developed from these first consumer products. According to Suisman, the introduction of sound recording transformed musical culture:

Music thus developed as a commodity in two distinct registers. In its primary markets music was produced, marketed, and sold directly to consumers. In ancillary markets, it circulated as capital that could be used by other industries, either as supplement or as indispensable raw material for other “producers,” including vaudeville, dance halls, department stores, cafes, radio, and movies. A complete account of the rise of the music business and its consequences must integrate both dimensions of the new musical culture and recognize the dynamic interrelations between them.¹⁵²

¹⁵² David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 10.

Radio broadcast sound recordings, and through the airwaves became a mass media form of *música tejana*. In the United States, San Antonio's KONO was the first station to broadcast in Spanish in 1928, through its sales of less lucrative blocks of time for "foreign and ethnic programming."¹⁵³ Previous to the music-driven format of today's stations, radio produced segments of programs similar to the schedules of television broadcasting.¹⁵⁴ Vicki Mayer describes current Latino media as "mass media texts that are produced principally by Latinos for a Latino target audience."¹⁵⁵ She uses the history of media production in San Antonio, Texas, to categorize the relationship between Latino media producers and their imagined audiences into four constructions: segmentation, massification, pan-ethnicization, and fragmentation. Segmentation refers to catering to an elite segment of the population as in the case of *La Prensa* newspaper in San Antonio. Massification describes the expansion of radio broadcast opportunities to produce Spanish-language programs with direct contact between advertisers and listeners that led to television opportunities. Pan-ethnicization increases the media market by bringing in multinational investors with global media interests.¹⁵⁶ Fragmentation occurred when "producers of all ethnic backgrounds began targeting niche segments of Latino consumers, bridging the global, national, and local in fragmented ways."¹⁵⁷ Radio stations like KEDA in San Antonio with fifty-three years in the business have served the Tejano community by broadcasting Mexican and tejano music.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Tony R. DeMars, "Buying Time to Start Spanish-Language Radio in San Antonio: Manuel Davila and the Beginning of Tejano Programming," *Journal of Radio Studies* 12, no. 1 (May 2005), 75.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Vicki Mayer, "From Segmented to Fragmented: Latino Media in San Antonio, Texas," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2001), 291.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 292-296.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹⁵⁸ DeMars, 78-79.

Radio is also a medium for the dissemination and promotion of tejano musical groups. In the post-World War II era, a recording industry began and evolved into a market that supplied the growing number of Spanish radio stations. The broadcasting of tejano music along the Texas-Mexico border was met with appreciation by some Northern Mexicans and has become another example of Tejano “cultural nationalism.”¹⁵⁹ Tejano musicians have also toured in Mexico with great success and one artist, Freddie Martinez, promoted himself as “*El Embajador Tejano*” [The Tejano Ambassador].¹⁶⁰ The Mexican roots of tejano music, as “*musica de Mexico de Afuera*,” [music of Mexico abroad] sustain the cultural link between Mexico and Texas while generating an autonomous space for Tejano culture.

According to Eric Rothenbuhler and Tom McCourt, Frank Stewart bought Austin radio station KTXN in 1949 with the intent to deliver a “Mexican-Negro advertising medium” in an area where the groups were “34.8 percent of the total population.”¹⁶¹ By catering to these populations and their markets, “the vendor is able to secure saturation distribution in the area covered by his advertising.”¹⁶² A sample from the “Airways Program” of the *Austin Statesman* in 1954 lists a Spanish-language program beginning the day at 5:30 for KTXN with a change in programming for African American listeners at 6:30 with “Blues Before Breakfast,” followed by “Sweet Chariot,” and then a continuation of Spanish-language programming. Some of the shows with a musical theme

¹⁵⁹ Reyna, 192-193.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁶¹ Eric Rothenbuhler and Tom McCourt, “Radio Redefines Itself, 1947-1962,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, edited by Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 372.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 375.

included “*Guitarras y Ritmos* [Guitars and Rhythm],” “*Musica Alegre* [Joyful Music],” “*Tropicanas* [From the Tropics],” “*Melodias Favoritas* [Favorite Melodies],” “*Musica Para El y Para Ella* [Music for Him and Her],” and “*Noche de Fiesta* [Fiesta Night].”¹⁶³

Local radio stations with a reliance on local advertising operated as a hub for gatherings and business for “radio station owners, salespeople, deejays, local store owners, musicians, nightclub owners, promoters, and record company personnel.”¹⁶⁴ Through these relationships, radio then had an effect on commerce and culture.¹⁶⁵

The Mexican origin folklore groups referred to by Paredes have access to Spanish-language radio in Texas. Since Donley’s first language was Spanish, he may have been more likely than other Mexican Americans to listen to Spanish-language music. Only as he grew into adulthood did he become English dominant in his conversation.

Music for Dancing

Música tejana should not be discussed in isolation without consideration of popular social dance. In fact, we use the names of dance rhythms to identify several Spanish-language genres. Jose Limón describes the musical ensembles of *conjunto* and big band (*orquesta*) as playing polkas, *boleros*, *cumbias* and *rancheras*, dance rhythms one and all.¹⁶⁶ These groups would perform at commercial dance halls, local civic

¹⁶³ Other 18- No Title. *The Austin Statesman (1921-1973)*: Sep 23, 1954.

¹⁶⁴ Rothenbuhler and McCourt, 378.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ José E. Limón, “Texas-Mexican Popular Music and Dancing: Some Notes on History and Symbolic Process,” *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana*, no. 2 (1983): 233.

centers, weddings, and cantinas.¹⁶⁷ These venues are locations associated with tejano music scenes and community cultural practices.

In *Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, Peña dates the institution of public, paid-admission ballroom dance to 1948 in interviews with *conjunto* accordion legends Narciso Martinez and Pedro Ayala. While these dances were available previously, their proliferation in this post-World War II era established the public dance in Texas Mexican musical culture and created an economic system that was based on Texas Mexican music that spread throughout Texas into the Southwest and followed the Tejano diaspora into the Midwest. The success of these dances produced an effect that allowed many performers to transition into music as their economic livelihood and facilitated the distribution of *conjunto* and *orquesta* music through relationships between dance and record promoters.¹⁶⁸ Musicians with the talent and the financial stability to practice and hone their craft were able to generate a continued income from their musical skill and creativity. The dependability of public dances adds another dimension to an expanding tejano music industry in a commercial cycle of production and consumption. Tejano music is created and produced for a Tejano community that consumes the music by purchasing records, listening to the radio, and attending public dances. The ancillary markets of radio and dance halls discussed by Suisman merge for *música tejana* in the post-World War II era.

Peña also discusses the developments in *conjunto* music that characterizes its progress, including a dance form called *el tacuachito* [the little possum] which “forever

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 234.

¹⁶⁸ Peña, *Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, 79.

changed polka dancing among Texas Mexicans.”¹⁶⁹ The dance style, which Peña attributes to San Antonio, takes its name from the physical gliding movements of the *tacuache* [possum] and becomes the standard by which all polkas are danced. Previously, polkas were danced in association with European styles which were danced *de brinquito* [by jump step].¹⁷⁰

I submit that the polka in the style of *el tacuachito* finds its way into the repertoires of *orquestas tejanas*, their associated public dances, and among the members of its dancing public. Although Peña acknowledges a common ethnic identity in the relationship between *conjunto* and *orquesta* which he then separates into class divisions, I contend that the relationship between *conjunto* and *orquesta* is more complex and refers back to the ideas of Paredes on the folklore groups, of Broyles-Gonzalez, of Cuellar, and of Donley himself with the incorporation of rock and roll and rhythm and blues elements into tejano music.¹⁷¹

The sound Donley describes as “loud on the upbeat” with the incorporation of drums and electric bass is referred to by *conjunto* players as the use of the drums to “settle down” the tempo and to “keep time.”¹⁷² Peña credits the new role of the drums in *conjunto* to Tony de la Rosa in the middle 1950s along with the introduction of “the electric bass and the electrified *bajo sexto* into the dance hall, two developments that completed the transformation of the conjunto style.”¹⁷³ Peña then broadens the stylistic musical changes stating that for “audiences the drums added a much more solid pulse that

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 80.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 144-145.

¹⁷² Ibid., 87.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

in my estimation had much to do with hastening the adoption of the new dance style of *el tacuachito*.”¹⁷⁴ As the sonic example of these changes, Peña provides de la Rosa’s instrumental version of the song “*Atotonilco*” recorded in 1956.¹⁷⁵

In fact, the possibility exists that movement changes to the polka were already underway back in 1927 when Bob Wills, the creator of western swing, lived in Roy, New Mexico. His band consisted mostly of Mexicans, and with so many Mexican fiddlers available he often played drums since no one else would. In *San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills*, Charles Townsend describes the New Mexican style of dancing as “an unusual dance, much like that of a prairie chicken,” which seemed to elude Wills at first. However, he eventually found a way to “fit the music to their dancing.”¹⁷⁶ The experience in Roy not only provided Wills with a composition that he later titled “Spanish Two-Step,” which was ultimately rearranged into his hit song “San Antonio Rose,” but added Spanish or Mexican music of the Southwest as a “third folk music” that, along with frontier fiddle music and African American blues, are his elements in western swing as the “*mariachi* sounds” of “New San Antonio Rose” indicate.¹⁷⁷ So, by the time Wills recorded “Spanish Two-Step” in 1935, the polka dance form may have transformed into a gliding skip that more closely resembles the quick-quick-slow motion of the two-step.¹⁷⁸ While the two-step is smoother than the jump step polka, the steps continue to follow the on-beat-off-beat-on-beat pattern which keeps it connected to its traditional folkloric cousins. The common musical bonds shared between *conjunto* and

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹⁷⁶ Townsend, 28.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Townsend, 112-114. Pauline Norton, “Two-step,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001, accessed February 27, 2019. Ralph G. Giordano, *Social Dancing in America: A History and Reference*, (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 2007), Vol. 1, 264.

orquesta means that as *orquesta* takes on popular music traits such as amplification and heavy dance beats derived from rock and roll and rhythm and blues, so does *conjunto*. With all these changes in mind happening in the same time period in both *conjunto* and *orquesta*, I assert that a larger convergence of musical forces is at work in *música tejana* that influences both the music and the dance in this post-World War II period, making the music “modern.”

I propose that the dance style known as *el tacuachito* is part of the “modern” experience of *música tejana* and that this new polka dance form takes its cue from rock and roll. So, it’s not swing, it’s sway. The steadied tempo and slower beats per minute allow the development of the smooth, swaying movement of the feet barely off the floor that is *el tacuachito*. The folkloric jump or hop-skip step disappears from dance floors replaced by a single step to a single beat movement that is unique in the polka’s overall development.

Both the *orquesta* and *conjunto* prepared the way for the *tacuachito* with the emphasis by the electric guitar and snare drum/hit hat combination on the upbeat which smoothed the tempo, and when that tempo slowed down, the hop-skip associated with folkloric polka was no longer relevant as each step could now fall on the beat. I offer that this musical change in *música tejana* is directly connected to rock and roll and rhythm and blues—the changes Donley initiates in Austin—where the accents are on the second and fourth beats of the music and the heavy repetitive beat of the bass, guitar, and drums give the music its modern form.¹⁷⁹ While the electric guitar may be the lead instrument of rock and roll, which only occasionally makes its way into *música tejana*, the

¹⁷⁹ Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, Vol. 2, 141.

amplification of instruments and accents on the upbeat were clearly adopted by tejano musicians by the 1950s and in the growing time of the “universality of the hit song,” Tony de la Rosa’s “*Atotonilco*” and the accompanying *tacuachito* move beyond the working class *conjunto* to renditions in *orquesta*, including Donley’s.¹⁸⁰

Like other changes in this time period, the *tacuachito*’s development may be difficult to pinpoint. Another possible connection may be the Latin rhythm of *merengue* that found popularity in the United States during the 1950s. The lively songs are danced on-beat in 4/4 time, without syncopation or chasses, as a single step to one beat of music. This dance does allow for variants and turns as well as stylization and improvisation. The simplicity of dancing on-beat makes the *merengue* as well as rock and roll easy to learn.¹⁸¹ Yet for me, the *tacuachito*’s progression comes from an extended family tree of multiple traditional and popular forms where the parents may very well be Mexican ballet *folklorico* [choreographed folk dancing] and Mexican ballroom styles. Both of these styles are well accustomed to choreographed and improvisational patterns. The various folk dance forms familiar in the *sones*, *huapangos*, and *jarabes*, and the various ballroom and social dance forms familiar in the waltz, fox trot and *danzón*, are married under the easy glide of the single one step to one beat of the slowed-down polka.

In the 1950s, modern social dancing also connects the rhythms of the Mexican *bolero* and the Texas two-step. With an increase of on-beat dance tunes, social dancers began to adopt casual dance styles instead of continuing with the formality of rigid body and torso placement associated with ballroom dance.¹⁸² In the late 1930s, Agustin Lara

¹⁸⁰ Donley Papers, “*Atotonilco*.”

¹⁸¹ Giordano, Vol. 2, 132-133.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 132.

modified the Cuban *bolero* to a 4/4 meter with accents on beats one, three and four.¹⁸³ By 1941, his *bolero*, “*Solamente Una Vez*,” [Once in a Lifetime] and other *boleros* such as “*Besame Mucho*” [Kiss Me Endlessly] by Consuelo Velasquez followed the same pattern.¹⁸⁴ The accents on one, three, and four give the Mexican *bolero* a dance form similar to the fox trot in which the step rhythm follows slow-slow-quick-quick. In country music, by 1956, Ray Price’s hit “Crazy Arms” solidifies the development of honky-tonk’s own modified foxtrot in the Texas Two-Step following the quick-quick-slow-slow pattern.¹⁸⁵ In fact, Donley records a slowed-down Spanish version of “Crazy Arms” entitled “*Brazos Locos*” for Texas Records. Since both the Mexican *bolero* and Texas two-step are derived from the fox trot pattern, these two ethnically different song forms are danced similarly and performed in a related fashion.

In being neither African American nor Anglo American, Texas Mexicans select cultural influences from both of those communities while still maintaining their own identity. The music and dance foundation is inherently Mexican which is already a mix of European, Native American, and African, with connections to the Caribbean and Latin America. Dancing on-beat is not outside the dance performance framework. If rhythm and blues and rock and roll emphasize musical accents on every beat of music, then incorporating those rhythms into social dancing activities would not be unusual. In fact, it would be counter-intuitive to dismiss such a highly danceable music and to deny placing

¹⁸³ Adela Pineda Franco, “The Cuban Bolero and Its Transculturation to Mexico: The Case of Agustín Lara,” (*Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 15 (1996)), 125.

¹⁸⁴ Moreno Rivas, 131. Pineda 125, 119-130.

¹⁸⁵ I suggest that the “shuffle beat” sound referred to by Malone parallels Giordano’s description of the Texas two-step. In addition, in my review, it appears that not just the musical accompaniment but also the rhythm of the lyric itself often follows the quick-quick-slow-slow pattern of the Texas two-step which may account for the immediate popularity of the song and the flourishing style. Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 289. Giordano, Vol. 2, 290.

its most significant patterns inside the Mexican music-dance construct. Modern *música tejana* begins in the 1950s at the peak of multiple musical influences created by the amplification of electric guitar and in synchronization with changes in social dance technique.

On a practical business note, these relaxed tempos are a win for everyone. The musicians do not tire as quickly, which also applies to the dancers and means patrons stay longer at the dance hall which is a win for the owner. In the realm of Texas Mexican cultural practice, the continued dominance of the *tacuachito* dance style signifies its emergence as the beginning of the modern era of tejano music, and its widespread adoption by Mexican American youth in many ways eliminates class distinctions through a democratization of the dance floor.

The new sound performed by *Las Estrellas* was in demand out of town as soon word spread of their amplified, modern style. When Abel Gutierrez joined *Las Estrellas* in 1958, “Cowboy was very hot. Friday, Saturday, Sunday was standing room only.”¹⁸⁶ As their popularity grew, *Las Estrellas* headed south along interstate 35 to Cuauhtemoc Hall in San Marcos and the Wishing Well in Pearsall. Going southeast, Genaro Tamez organized their dances in Corpus Christi. On highway 59, the Club Westerner with Manuel Villafranca in Victoria also hosted their share of dances. Going east on 71, Manuel Vallejo in El Campo coordinated radio interviews and dancehall dates. The Pan American Ballroom in Houston requested regular bookings. Just forty-five minutes away, the Cotton Bowl in Taylor was a recurrent venue.¹⁸⁷ Tours going north included Waco,

¹⁸⁶ Abel Gutierrez, interview by the author, December 17, 2014.

¹⁸⁷ Donley, December 4, 2011.

Dallas, Fort Worth, Abilene, Midland, and Lubbock.¹⁸⁸ Tejano musicians all across the state duplicated Donley's instrumentation and amplification, often shortly after one of *Las Estrellas*' frequent visits to these far-flung Texas communities.

While outside of our initial timeframe of the 1950s, calendars with performance dates and wedding events for 1963 and 1964 demonstrate the years in which Donley and his *orquesta* dominated the tejano music scene in Central Texas. Regional small towns such as Kyle, New Braunfels, Seguin, Lockhart, Kileen, Rockdale, Georgetown, West, and Temple appear frequently in these touring schedules, hosting their fair share of dances.¹⁸⁹ It is notable that this last town, Temple, is the home of Little Joe Hernandez, who would emerge himself in 1964 with the release of his first tejano album, *Por Un Amor*.¹⁹⁰

Manuel Donley as a Recording Artist

In the two decades following World War II, local companies developed for the primary purpose of recording the musical talent of the Tejano community. Many independent record labels developed throughout the state with Ideal Records in Alice (1947), Falcon Records in McAllen (1948), and Corona Records in San Antonio (1947) as the earliest. Armando Marroquín and Paco Betancourt founded Ideal as a joint venture that not only recorded artists but also eventually began pressing their own records. Arnaldo Ramirez launched Falcon Records after some success in home recording.

¹⁸⁸ David Gutierrez.

¹⁸⁹ Donley Papers, Calendars for 1963 and 1964 with performance dates.

¹⁹⁰ San Miguel, *Tejano Proud*, 74.

Manuel Rangel started the Corona Records imprint in San Antonio to produce local and regional talent. His business flourished through the 1960s and 1970s and was continued by his son, Manuel Rangel, Jr.¹⁹¹ Corona carries the distinction as the first label to record Valerio Longoria, the accordionist to which credit is given for incorporating “modern dance band drums in a conjunto.”¹⁹² In a later period of record industry expansion, Austin-based Valmon Records owned by Benjamin Moncivais recorded Little Joe in 1963 with a cover of the popular rhythm and blues song, “The Dog.”¹⁹³

With Austin as a focus for this study and Donley as the trailblazer of the new modern sound in the 1950s, I will be referencing his recordings made with record labels in Austin and San Antonio. My main source of information is The Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings website which catalogs information on over 110,000 recordings.¹⁹⁴ With a reliance on the Ideal Record label from Alice, Texas, to identify sonic characteristics, changes and developments in *música tejana*, Peña omits many of the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s contributors to *orquesta tejana* from Austin and San Antonio with recordings on Corona Records and Valmon Records.

With our current knowledge of his discography, Donley has twelve Corona sound recordings, or six 45 rpm records, with his *orquesta Las Estrellas* available through the Strachwitz collection database. While these recordings happened in the early 1960s, they

¹⁹¹ Alex LaRotta, “Música Tejana Recording Pioneers,” in *Cowboys, Cops, Killers, and Ghosts: Legends and Lore in Texas*, edited by Kenneth L. Untiedt (Publications of the Texas Folklore Society: 69, Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2013), 117-121.

¹⁹² Peña, *Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, 82-84.

¹⁹³ LaRotta, 123.

¹⁹⁴ The Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings, University of California Regents & The Arhoolie Foundation, 2015, accessed February 2, 2019, <http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/>.

would be the most relevant to our time frame of the incorporation of the modern sound into tejano music and would provide indicators as to how the sound was documented in these initial recordings while Donley is still in his emergent stage. Of the elements described as the modern sound of electric guitar, electric bass, and loud drums, a review of the songs does demonstrate the use of loud drums on the upbeat which is most distinguishable at times during the vocals when the horns are silent. Electric guitar picking and strumming, which can be heard above the horn arrangements due to amplification, is used throughout the songs with embellishments for introductions, middle instrumentals between choruses, and sometimes endings. Electric bass can be heard on downbeats with note progressions that follow changes between verse and chorus. With “*Ojitos Verdes*” [Green Eyes] as the example of the modern electric sound, the plucked bass string and kick drum drive the downbeat while the guitar strum and snare/high hat combination provide the emphasis on the upbeat.¹⁹⁵ This rhythm section is a direct incorporation from rock and roll.

As with many creative people, Donley spent the majority of his time on his musical craft by listening, writing, arranging, and performing. The details of the music business and the planning necessary to ensure a musical legacy were left to someone else or not attended to at all. The lack of a recording studio in the mid-fifties in the Austin area also complicated the documenting of Donley’s sound. Groups from San Antonio with access to Corona Records may have duplicated Donley’s live modern electric sound in the studio almost immediately after hearing it in 1955.

¹⁹⁵ “*Ojitos Verdes*,” by Manuel Donley y su *Orquesta Las Estrellas*, The Strachwitz Frontera Collection.

While Donley's recordings with Valmon during the mid- to late 60s are outside our 1950s-time frame, it is possible that many of the songs were performed live prior to their documentation on vinyl. As the case with the duplication of his big electric sound, Donley was still late to the recording studio even with one in Austin. Raymond Vasquez Jr. and his *orquesta* were first to record Donley's arrangement of Roberto Cantoral's *bolero*, "El Reloj [The Clock]." ¹⁹⁶ Donley's origin story of the song's arrangement reveals how he incorporated the Austin soundscape into his Mexican music construct to create a tejano interpretation:

I got that idea from the University at one o'clock, they had, the University, they had the chimes, the clock (plucks the guitar strings to the melody of the chime when the clock strikes one from The Tower) I was listening to it, I was going by the University, and, that gives me an idea, (plucks again) *reloj* [clock]. ¹⁹⁷

Others to use the clock tower chime reference as part of their introduction include Alfonso Ramos and Sunny Ozuna. ¹⁹⁸

In 1965, Donley recorded "Flor Del Rio" with Valmon Records which becomes his biggest hit and legend has it encouraged many fathers to name their daughters "Flor." ¹⁹⁹ This hit signifies the height of his musical career in his ten-year ascent to the top. Donley's version is in waltz tempo, and the song written by Victor Cordero, known for his *corridos* [epic ballads] like "Gabino Barrera" and "Juan Charrasqueado," is

¹⁹⁶ "El Reloj" by Raymond Vasquez Jr., Valmon Records Catalog Number VN-1-023-A. Donley's version also appears in Valmon but later Catalog Number VN-1-167-A, Strachwitz Frontera Collection.

¹⁹⁷ Donley, December 1, 2018.

¹⁹⁸ "El Reloj" by Alfonso Ramos, El Zarape Records, Catalog Number ZLP-1005, Strachwitz Frontera Collection. "El Reloj" by Sunny & The Sunliners, Tear Drop Records, Catalog Number TDLP-2006, Strachwitz Frontera Collection.

¹⁹⁹ Juan Castillo, "At 83, Tejano Music Pioneer Still Playing." *Austin American-Statesman (TX)*. Accessed February 27, 2019 from: <https://www.austin360.com/entertainment/20120924/at-83-tejano-music-pioneer-still-playing>.

lyrically a tragic story.²⁰⁰ Donley's interpretation reinforces the *Charro Cantor* archetype as a troubadour telling a tale of love and loss.

The business of music poses a highly complicated web of relationships between radio, entertainment venues, sound recordings, and of course, the listening audience. Austin in the 1950s offered a predominantly Spanish-language radio station, KTXN, which delivered mass media through the airwaves. The Mexican American community could access radio programming that emphasized the Spanish-language and their cultural heritage which in turn allowed for the development of a youth population that was growing up with radio broadcasts in Spanish and English. These same youngsters, of which Donley was a part, also attended public dances, and as the new sound of rock and roll gained popularity so did the demand to hear those songs performed live. As the rock and roll elements of amplified guitars and loud drums on the upbeat fused with tejano music, the *tacuachito* dance form developed as the new standard for dancing to the polka beat. The dissemination of all these advancements occurred as Donley and his contemporaries toured the state with their live performances and the modern sound followed by the dance emerged onto the scene. For Donley, the sound recording part of the music business may have in many instances eluded him as his electric and modern combination as well as his musical arrangements were documented by others prior to his own recordings in the studio leaving him without a clear demarcation that credits his musical innovations.

²⁰⁰ “*Flor Del Rio*,” by Manuel Donley y Las Estrellas, Strachwitz Frontera Collection.

CHAPTER V:

CONCLUSION

When music was first performed, all instrumentation was acoustic. With the invention of electrified equipment and instruments, music took on an amplified sound and ushered in a new modern electric era. The native Texas Mexican population has developed its own musical aesthetic in both traditional acoustic and modern electric ensembles. Tejano music, the popular music heritage of Texas Mexicans, produces, manufactures, and promotes music within its own industry and music-related commercial activities. Sound recordings featuring tejano performing artists and musicians travel the airwaves through mass communication radio stations.

In 1955, Manuel “Cowboy” Donley reduced the large *orquesta tejana* to six members to get at the heart of what became the new modern sound of *música tejana*: the use of electric guitar paired with electric bass and loud drums. The smaller ensemble produced a new sound with lyrical, rhythmic and sonic changes. This shift away from soft ballroom instrumentals to loud popular music marked a milestone in the development and progression of *música tejana*. The combination of electric guitar, electric bass, and loud drums with an emphasis on the upbeat begins in this timeframe and is distinctive from previous ensemble instrumentations. Donley, by continuing to use the term *orquesta tejana* to refer to his style, sees himself as a descendant of Beto Villa and the other *orquestas* of the previous scene. In fact, he arranges his own version of one of Villa’s

biggest hits, “Monterrey Polka,” which Villa recorded in 1949.²⁰¹ However, his sound by virtue of amplification is new and modern, and his focus on popular music from the radio attracts a young audience.

As previously mentioned, the acoustic sound diminished and when the older bandleaders like Beto Villa and his contemporaries retired, their music stopped being performed for live audiences. Unlike the Anglo and African American orchestras of the immediate post-World War II era that continued to give performances in tribute to those iconic band leaders such as Glenn Miller and Duke Ellington, *música tejana* does not offer the equivalent for Beto Villa and his contemporaries. The acoustic sounds of Beto Villa only survive now in historic sound recordings. Donley explains that the “electric guitar was playing lead, you know, and then singing and the big bands went out of business.”²⁰² The days of instrumental *danzónes* with a lead saxophone are long gone. In addition, Donley’s new amplified and streamlined ensemble cut the trumpet section in half sometimes by two-thirds and the saxophone section by at least a third. Amplification allows for a reduction in the numbers of members while still producing a big sound. Prior to amplification, to be louder actually required more instruments.

The modern electric sound has completely dominated the live performance and sound recording market, moving into *conjunto* and later tejano ensembles, and the potential for recreating those historic acoustic performances seems doubtful due to lack of interest on the part of musicians and the Tejano community. The “unplugged” sounds and the ballroom dance forms exist only in the memory of the few of that generation of

²⁰¹ Donley Papers, “Monterrey Polka,” Papers, Austin, TX.” Peña, liner notes to *Tejano Roots: Orquestas Tejanas*, 12.

²⁰² Donley, December 1, 2018.

youngsters from the 1950s that are still with us. Today's musicians are unlikely to know how to play that music, and the audience is unlikely to know how to dance to it.

In the Tejano community, the time to advocate for the preservation of the generations born in the 1920s and 1930s is upon us. Many of the youth who experienced these transformations have passed on. Some of the remaining are in poor health. Others struggle with memory loss. The few that are able to tell their stories must be documented especially in light of the current neglect by popular Tejano culture of historic sound recordings. This omission in cultural memory requires a broad preservation and conservation of these musical roots before they are lost to future generations.

A further consideration regarding a call for preservation action is an analysis of the U.S. Census in 1980, 1990, and 2000, showing that self-identification as Mexican American is shrinking. Alba and Islam suggest the shift in identity by Mexican Americans can be attributed to two factors: conventional assimilation and pan-ethnic character with other Latinos or Hispanics.²⁰³ Some Mexican American parents may choose to raise their children through conventional assimilation or pan-ethnic character with other Hispanics or Latinos. These children may not identify as strongly with tejano music. Consequently, the music heritage of the Mexican origin population may be in danger. Tejano music needs an orchestrated preservation campaign that will serve multiple purposes including instruction, conservation, research, and performance.

With the transformation of musical culture that accounts for music as a commodity in mind, the initial documentation of the stories of the musicians and recording artists will need to be expanded. The music cannot be studied in isolation, and

²⁰³ Richard Alba and Tariqul Islam, "The Case of the Disappearing Mexican Americans: An Ethnic-Identity Mystery," *Population Research and Policy Review* 28, no. 2 (2009), 109.

interviews with radio station staff members, record label owners, and record collectors will need to be conducted along with promoters, dance hall owners, music and record shop owners, and fans to generate a better understanding of the entirety of Tejano culture. Regarding the musical innovations of the artists, gaining access to the numerous record label archive collections would provide momentum for documenting the sound recordings of these transitional artists along with the sonic changes they incorporated. The depth and complexity of music associated with this time frame produced a rich legacy that has yet to fully surface.

All of the factors in transition, from ballroom stock arrangements to popular music version, from instrumental pieces to narrative song, from prolonged notes to single staccato notes, from formal dance styles to vernacular dance styles, coalesce to create the modern tejano scene with its origins in the 1950s. The electric influences of rock and roll, country, rhythm and blues, and the multiple Mexican genres make the amplification of the 1950s the universal sound in tejano music. The previous separation of working-class and middle-class as distinctive audiences is now blurred by the newly established youth music market. The fresh electric sounds come to dominate both *orquesta* and *conjunto* styles where hit songs are now determined by adolescents and not the adult parents.

This period in *música tejana* history between Beto Villa and Little Joe y *La Familia* requires more attention. As Little Joe, himself, expressed, “I feel he [Donley] has not gotten all due him.”²⁰⁴ This approximate ten-year span from 1955 to 1965 witnessed a surge in record labels and music production powered by advances in sound technology and sound recording equipment. Musical creativity also flourished among musicians due

²⁰⁴ “Tejano Music Legend Manuel ‘Cowboy’ Donley,” NBC News.

in part to their mutual admiration and their willingness to explore multiple popular genres simultaneously. The youth subculture took over the primary music market, and their impact is additionally felt in other ancillary music markets.

In the 1950s, tejano artists initiated technical and stylistic innovations that advanced the sound and rhythm of the entire genre which in turn effected the participatory dance movements of the audience. Donley explains the switch to a modern sound saying, “Well, nobody else was playing electric guitar, they were all playing acoustic, you know, and I came out with the electric guitar and that put a whole new sound into orchestra and I got electric bass, electric guitar, and a loud drum.”²⁰⁵ Donley and his contemporaries incorporated an amplified sound into their ensembles with the use of electric guitar and bass similar to developments in Anglo and African American popular music and introduced new musical configurations in their ensembles which represents a sonic distinction separating the tejano music historical timeline into traditional acoustic and modern electric. They originated a new music scene, and it is the scene we have today.

²⁰⁵ Donley, December 1, 2018.

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